

## CHAPTER 44 – SINGULARITY WELL

Before Luke could be fully drawn into the darkness, a hand gripped the back of his neck and yanked with such force that he was surprised his spine didn't crumble.

“What do you think you're doing here?” the voice bellowed at him.

Luke immediately recognized who it was, but not as the waifish kid he had just seen. This was the Discordant Dragon in all his rage-filled glory.

There was a hint of the world-weariness he had seen in his later years, but now he was incensed by Luke's trespass.

There were any number of things to say. The first things to pop into Luke's head were oaths of fealty and groveling, but he managed to shut his mouth before the words leaked out.

It wasn't that Luke *wanted* to be subservient. Far from it. The overwhelming force of the Dragon's soul commanded strict obedience and loyalty, even from Luke.

The Dragon let go of Luke's cloak and stepped back. They stood together in swirling darkness. A glittering starscape wheeled around them, but in the immediate vicinity there was nothing but darkness.

Yet Luke could see the Dragon in the same way that he knew the Dragon could see him.

“You resist. Interesting. Speak, I will not compel you to swear to me. What is your name, human?”

Luke felt the pressure on his soul ease. “Luke. Luke Solus.”

The Dragon chuckled. “Solus.” He tasted the word slowly. “That is exactly the sort of humor the Precursors had.” Luke could hear the

importance the Dragon heaped on the word. He could practically see the capital “P” in Precursor now.

“A man of light becoming a creature of shadow and crushing darkness,” the Dragon continued, shaking his head.

“I’m afraid I only have the shadow,” Luke said with a chuckle of his own. He looked around, understanding dawned on him. “Why am I not being destroyed?”

“Because you are connected to me, and for the duration of that connection, you are given a portion—a very *small* portion—of my power. Else you would be... what is the term your people use? Ah, yes. Spaghettified.”

“So we’re really standing in the heart of a black hole.”

“A supermassive black hole, to be precise.”

“You’re hiding.” Luke winced as he spoke. He didn’t mean for it to come off as an accusation, but he could hear it now that the words were out of his mouth.

“You’re an insolent one, aren’t you?” The Dragon strolled a few steps away and waved his hand. The darkness receded until they were back in that stone room with the well of darkness. “You can hear the voices.”

It wasn’t a question, but Luke nodded all the same. From within the darkness of the well, an admixture of voices rolled forth, like an auditorium full of people quietly talking to one another.

“And you avoided the auditor’s attentions,” the Dragon went on, his tone turning thoughtful. He clasped his hands behind his back and circled the well, never taking his golden gaze from Luke. “What would you have me do, Luke of clan Solus?”

“Just Luke.”

“Very well, ‘Just Luke’.”

“Don’t dad joke me.”

Something tightened behind the Dragon's eyes. He seemed to search Luke for something, didn't find what he was looking for, and relaxed infinitesimally.

Luke had the horrifying feeling that if the Dragon had seen what he was looking for, their conversation would have ended abruptly. All the Dragon had to do was pull his protection away.

"How is all of this possible?" Luke asked.

"Manipulation of gravity leads to many interesting side effects of reality, not to mention being a god. Add the two together, and I am capable of quite a few uncanny feats. But you have not yet answered my question."

Luke hunched his shoulders and shrugged. He wanted to know what was in the well, to see it firsthand with his own eyes instead of having it cut short. And he said as much without realizing it.

The Dragon snorted. "You think you want this, but the Precursor blood that now runs in your veins is compelling you. It wants to be complete. You are a shadow of a shadow, Luke."

"And you?" Luke couldn't help but ask.

The Dragon looked taken aback, then gave him a feral grin of guarded respect. "I could not carry the bloodline to its inevitable conclusion. It is cursed, you know."

"Would it matter if I did?"

"Hm. I suppose not. You are already cursed no matter what you do now."

Luke took a step closer to the well but kept his eyes on the Dragon. "Then I might as well use all the tools available to me, shouldn't I?"

"Spoken like a true dragon."

Luke felt like he had just been given a monumental compliment. Feeling it deserved an answer in kind, he reached into his cloak and

pulled out the miniature obelisk. “I think you dropped this in the... er, past.”

For the first time since he had seen him, either through the various visions of the past or in person, the Dragon was truly surprised. He reached out gingerly for the obelisk, hands trembling slightly.

The air crackled with heat between them as the Dragon took the obelisk and held it in his hands, peering intently at it. “You have no idea what you have just given up, do you?”

“I didn’t bring a housewarming present.”

The Dragon glanced up at him from his observation. “Your irreverence will be the death of you if my fellow gods catch hold of you.”

“I can’t stop being who I am.”

“One day, you will wish that was not so,” the Dragon told him. “Yet again, you have failed to answer my simple question. So let me try another: why are you here?”

“Because I want to know the truth of what lies in my blood,” Luke answered truthfully. “I want to know what it is that I have inside me. Who are the Precursors? What is the System, and why are the two seemingly at odds?”

“Big questions.”

“I find it best to get them out of the way early.”

A dark throne spun itself out of stone and darkness. The Dragon sat upon it, towering over Luke and the well. “Perhaps the Precursor echoes in your blood have led you to me so that I might sup on your soul to make my own powers complete.” He cast a sardonic glance Luke’s way. “Most people are not so stupid as to blindly follow magical voices and strange dark powers.”

“Their loss.”

“I’m not sure if you’re just brain-dead stupid or possibly brave.” The Dragon leaned his elbow on the throne’s arm and cupped his chin in his palm. “Then again, you did make it here. You would have had to face some trials that would only be possible if you were ready...”

“Ready for what?”

The Dragon continued as if Luke hadn’t spoken. “Your command of your bloodline is nascent at best, but to get this far so early is a testament in and of itself.”

“Ready for what?” Luke repeated more insistently.

“You tangled with an auditor not once, but *twice*, and lived to tell the tale. That’s more than most can say, believe me.”

Luke took a breath, ready to ask his question again, when the Dragon raised a hand. “I heard you, Luke. I heard you. Go look into the well. Tell me what you see. Do not lie. It would spoil our rapport.”

*Why do I feel like I’m being tested yet again?* Luke thought as he went to peer into the well, bracing for the surging torrent of darkness.

Instead, he saw a placid, oil-dark surface reflecting his face. It looked intently at him, reached out of the way, and then brought its hand back, showing a coin with a conspiratorial wink.

Luke followed the action as best he could, reaching down out of view where he thought the reflection had. His fingers found a loose brick. As he wiggled it free, never taking his eyes off the encouraging reflection, he found a single coin behind the brick.

“Well, you’re not completely hopeless,” the Dragon told him. “Go on, toss it in. There’s a price that must be paid. See you on the other side, kid.”

Luke looked at the silver coin. Like the well, it was pitted with age and corroded so badly he couldn’t make out any of the markings.

Flicking it with his thumbnail, the coin spun in the air over the inky blackness and was snatched by an oil-slick hand that broke the surface.

Another hand reached out and grabbed Luke around the back of his neck, then pulled him into the well.

Gravity flip-flopped and he was suddenly rising *out of the well* instead of falling into it. The circular room was replaced by a study of warm wood. There were several bookshelves stuffed with leather-bound tomes, scrolls, and even a few ancient stone tablets.

Luke's feet hit the ground. He stumbled around looking for the Dragon, but instead only found the rather mundane looking room. There was no well either. The floor was completely flat where he was sure just a moment ago was an ancient well of Precursor power.

“Dragon?” Luke called, feeling silly for not knowing his actual name.

Seeing that the room was little more than a comfortable study filled with books, a desk, couch, and a leather armchair that'd seen better days, Luke crossed to the door in search of a way back.

He came out into a hall, a surprisingly normal looking hall. If you were a hobbit.

The hallway was rounded and wide, with plaster walls painted a pleasant off-white color with just a hint of brown. There was wood trim everywhere and if it looked a little disused, it didn't seem to be in a state of disrepair as he would have expected.

Luke muttered under his breath, “Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort.”

It certainly did appear to be warm and comfortable.

Looking up and down the hall, Luke counted 7 doors. Three on each side and one at the far end. To his right, the hallway terminated in a flat plastered wall.

Feeling a little itchy, like somebody was watching him, Luke placed a hand on the hilt of a sword as he gingerly checked each room, one at a time. First for threats, then out of sheer curiosity.

The first two rooms were surprisingly mundane. There was a small bedroom whose main purpose seemed to be nothing more than sleeping. There was just enough room for the narrow bed, a trunk at the foot of the bed, an armoire to hang clothes he didn't have in, and a nightstand.

It was all surprisingly modern compared to the deplorable conditions he was used to outside. Though the bed wasn't an innerspring, it was decently stuffed with something that made him think of memory foam only lumpier.

The bed shaped itself around him, though if he rolled over, he was going to fall onto the floor. It was somehow narrower than his dorm bed back at college.

In fact, the room was about half the size of his dorm room, which was a feat in and of itself.

The next room nearly had Luke in tears. It was a *bathroom*. It was tiled with large pale blue-gray tiles and set with a large claw-footed bathtub, modern-ish toilet, sink, and even a shower.

Luke couldn't resist turning the faucet.

He nearly shouted for joy when he felt the warm, clear water flowing out of the tap.

Hand on the ratking's dagger, Luke spun at that exact moment, poised to throw. He was expecting that this was all some sort of trap and that at the moment he lowered his guard, he would be attacked.

Nothing was there.

As much as he desperately needed a shower and to use a bathroom that wasn't just a ditch, a bush, or a hole in the ground, Luke wanted to make sure this place was clear.

Something still didn't feel right.

The more Luke explored, the more he realized this hobbit-hole inspired place was a *residence*. Somebody had lived here, though it seems as if they vacated some time ago based on the musty cooped-up smell.

There were two studies, though the second one seemed to have a number of tables with strange magnifying glasses on brass telescoping contraptions.

It even had a small kitchen, stocked with a surprising amount of food. Off to the side was a storage room of some sort with all manner of crates, barrels, and miscellaneous items.

The final room, the door at the end of the hall, Luke had saved for last.

Luke was sure that if there was somebody else here, then they were in this room. He eased the ratking's dagger free of its sheath and barged into the room with the blade poised.