

CHAPTER 35 – DUNGEON DELVER

The closer Luke got to the dungeon, the faster the [Dungeon Key] pulsed with mana. It felt strange being able to sense mana outside his body. It was almost like his ability to sense shadows.

Wait, maybe that's what I've been doing this entire time. Sensing the mana in shadows, Luke wondered.

It was difficult to discern the difference. As he strained his senses, there did seem to be a subtle similarity.

However, the longer he concentrated on the mana from the key and the surrounding shadows, the more it all slipped through his grasp, like he was straining an unused muscle.

He let go of it hastily and returned his focus to finding the dungeon. It was why he bought the key, after all. Luke yearned for the loot and rewards a Dungeon offered.

Luke allowed himself to be guided by the key without trying to second-guess where it was taking him. He took more confusing turns than he would have thought possible in the labyrinthine corridors until he was beyond hopelessly lost.

Just as he was about to check on the key to see if it was somehow broken, it pulsed so powerfully to his right that he found his body obeying before his brain registered what was going on.

That's odd, Luke thought. *The key was pulling me in a different direction just a second ago.*

Turning to what he had been *sure* was a slab of dressed stone just a moment ago, the likes of which adorned these corridors in all their bland glory, Luke found a door instead.

A portal would be more accurate. It was too stately and grand to be simply called a “door”, it was the sort of door all lesser doors aspired to.

The shift was concerning. He had been sure that the key was leading him deeper in, but it had abruptly shifted to this door, which he was increasingly certain hadn't been here a moment ago.

Having a change of scenery would be nice. He was tired of the perpetual, multilayered stink of the sewers. As his cloak had been recently upgraded, the reek hadn't penetrated it that deeply yet.

A Dungeon didn't exactly promise a sweeping vista of an ocean, or anything pleasant, but it probably couldn't be any worse than his present location.

Scowling, he pinched the bridge of his nose. *I better not have just jinxed it*, Luke thought in frustration.

He reached forward to touch the black wrought iron door handle. A deep sense of foreboding overcame him, but he pushed through it and forced his hand to grip the surprisingly warm metal.

With a shove on the door, it opened with an ominous creak onto an utter black void. This was not darkness. Luke could see in darkness.

This was the absolute absence of anything. A void of primordial origin.

Luke stared into the emptiness, straining to pick out any details and watching for any waiting threats. But nothing sprang out at him.

The door, fully open, began to slowly close. Steeling his nerves, Luke made a snap decision, though every bone in his body told him that he should flee this place and never look back.

He slipped through the closing door and vanished completely. Despite the dread pressing in on him, he was eager to discover what this Dungeon had to offer.

Glenn paced back and forth, grumbling to himself. He hadn't meant to get so heated about the whole thing.

Luke had explained, more calmly than Glenn would have thought possible, about what happened to him. He was entirely forthright, as far as Glenn could tell.

He didn't even know there had been 3 murders, but it backed up what he had heard Jimmy grumbling about.

The potential that Glenn was working for the "bad guys" wasn't an easy pill to swallow. Sure, Luke could be lying. Who was "good" and who was "bad" would always be subjective.

Luke would think Marcy and Henry were bad considering his past with Marcy, not to mention the murder attempt.

Why would Henry and Marcy try to kill him, though? Surely they thought they had a good reason, but it wasn't the sort of thing Glenn could come out and ask.

Especially after he came back empty-handed and alone from hunting down Luke.

Man, this is going to look bad. Glenn shook his head ruefully.

He was going to come back, much higher leveled, with a brand new Hunter class evolution and nothing that suggested he had actually tried to avenge his comrades or kill Luke.

Glenn realized it might look like he killed his whole group. Would he be treated the same way as Luke?

The Hunter had nowhere to return to anymore. He needed to find a new place in this reality.

Besides, there was no real way to be sure of the truth. And if he couldn't be sure of either side, why go after Luke anymore? If anything, Luke ended up helping Glenn more than hindering him.

And then there was the elephant in the room.

If Luke was telling the truth—a big if—then he was vastly stronger than Glenn. To the point that Glenn wasn't even sure if anything he bothered to do to Luke would even hurt him.

He'd seen the way he went to work with those two blades in his hands. They moved as if they were one. He never saw anybody do anything close to that. The Rogue fought in constant motion, treating combat like some sort of dance.

Glenn didn't have many moves to make anymore. Feeling solemn and a bit of a jerk about how he had handled the conversation with Luke, he followed the Rogue with his tracking skill. In Glenn's hands, he held his box of rations. Maybe he could use it as a peace offering.

The least he could do was share them as a gesture of apology. *And human decency, too. There hasn't been enough of that going around lately,* Glenn thought with a rueful shake of his head.

The upgrade to his tracking skill that Hunter granted him made it much easier to track targets. And since he still had Luke targeted from before, it was a simple affair to follow the faint purple-black trail that wafted through the air wherever Luke had been.

It was difficult to get used to, but it was much better than having a vague directional sense, as he had before.

Luke was either trying to lose Glenn or on the trail of something himself, because he double-backed multiple times and took different passages.

Which made no sense. He could have just taken a different corridor, couldn't he?

But the crisscrossing trails didn't lie.

Unfortunately, Luke must have had more tricks up his sleeve than Glenn knew about. Once he finally tracked him to the end of the trail, he was met with nothing but a slab of cold stone.

Glenn was *positive* that Luke was last here. There was no mistaking it.

Placing his hand on the rough stone, Glenn pressed, just to make sure it was real. “Just what are you, Luke?”

He seemed to have an odd affinity for shadows, and these areas were so dark they were like an abyss. Even with his enhanced vision, Glenn struggled to see more than faint shadows and many rooms were utter voids in his eyes.

A man could easily die down here and never be found.

Pressing his forehead against the stone, Glenn let out a soft sigh. His father had always told him he spent too long thinking and not enough time acting.

In the time he was trying to determine what action he should take, Luke had managed to disappear. Something that should *not* have been possible.

Not with Glenn in possession of his blood for tracking.

But the System did not lie, not as far as Glenn knew. It would seem his tracking skill had a limitation.

That, or Luke found a way to turn immaterial and pass through solid matter. Something Glenn doubted very much. Even if his power over shadows almost verged into that territory at times.

“I’m sorry,” Glenn said to the stone, feeling he needed to get it off his chest.

There was more to say, but Luke wasn’t here to hear his words. Although, something else might be. Glenn’s sensitive ears could pick up scratching noises in the dark, careful and secretive.

He wanted to leave some rations behind as a gesture of goodwill, but it would just be taken by the creatures that dwelled in this dark place. There was no guarantee Luke would even return this way, either.

Guess you were right, dad. Shaking his head, Glenn turned to leave, fingertips trailing across the gritty damp stone.

Luke was gone. Jimmy was gone. His entire group was gone.

All he had gotten for his troubles was more confusion than before he went into all this mess.

One thing was certain. Luke could have killed him at any moment and instead chose to help him and bring him along. Maybe he needed him for that tense series of battles on the bridge, but he wasn't so sure.

The idea had been Glenn's, but he had his suspicions that Luke might have been able to do his shadow thing and just waltz past all those monsters.

They had been enemies. If the tables were reversed, would Glenn have done the same thing that Luke did?

He would have liked to think so, but he wasn't sure.

"Don't die," Glenn said to the empty stretch of stone. He made a fist and gently tapped it against the stone where Luke's trail ended.

His feet carried him away, silent and cautious now that he was on his own. Thoughts swirled in his head as he tried to sort out what he should do now.

Getting back to Henry and Marcy would be a herculean task unto itself if he still wanted to. Staying and waiting for Luke was a fool's errand and would make him look like some sort of pathetic little kid.

So what else was there?

He could move on. Go on his own like Luke was, maybe team up with him later as two independent contractors as it were. Henry and Marcy wouldn't like that, but more than likely, they would think he was dead.

On balance, that seemed better than the alternative.

If he was even able to make it back to the bridge, without Luke's head, or something that suggested he had fought and failed, he knew how it would look.

Either Luke managed to turn him, or he had chickened out and left his group to die. Neither of which was exactly true, but why take the risk?

Besides, he was stronger now, and after talking with Luke, he was coming to the same decision he had made.

The farther out from the initial towers you went, the stronger the monsters were. The only way to get strong was to keep pushing the envelope.

Glenn had gotten more levels in less time with Luke than he had while Henry was training them.

The only choice was to go forward, let Henry think he died along with the others.

Maybe that'd give him pause in roping more people into his feud with Luke.

It was better than the alternative, and maybe he could help Luke out at the same time by keeping his location secret. Wherever he was, it was clear that he didn't want to be found again.

A low scraping sound pulled Glenn from his thoughts and plans. He paused, straining his hearing. The sound was too slow and deep to be a creature scratching.

He turned the bend to see an open doorway. Its great slab of a door began to ease shut. Unwilling to make the same mistake twice in short order, Glenn surged forward with as much speed as he could manage.

Sliding on his knees, Glenn made it past the door and into a place of odd warping corridors and twisting passages that resembled the strange spaces behind a stage.

Ropes and pulleys vanished up into the ceiling. Ties and cleats holding sandbags overhead lined the twisting corridors as the door behind Glenn slammed shut with finality. Off to the side, a red velvet curtain started to rise.