

# CHAPTER 68 – THE SIEGE OF HAVENHOLM

Luke mentally swiped through the notifications until he came to the two important ones.

**Level Up! Your [Thief] Class has reached Level 36.**

**Stat points earned: +4 Strength, +6 Dexterity, +2 Perception, +2 Vitality, +2 Free Points.**

**Level Up! Your [Human (F-Grade)] Race has reached Level 25.**

**Stat points earned: +3 All Stats, +1 Fate, +2 Free Points.**

Luke waited with bated breath, expecting something more from hitting Human level 25, but there was nothing that followed. For some reason, he was holding out hope that his next grade advancement would be at level 25.

“They are not identical between races, or even between individuals of any given race,” Alfair told him when Luke brought it up. They sidled through the next hallway full of columns that rose up from infinite darkness.

Slicing pendulums blocked their way, forcing them to accurately time their jumps from one narrow ledge around a column to the next.

Yindferl, with her ability to teleport from one shadow to the other, simply appeared at the far end, waiting for them. She groomed her large shovel-sized paw, feigning disinterest while watching them like a mother watches her cubs.

“It’s Marks again, isn’t it?” Luke asked, hopping just as the bladed pendulum swung past.

“You’re learning,” Alfair said, clinging to his column and taking considerably longer to time his jump. “As I’ve told you, Marks act as modifiers for everything. The more you have, the more opportunities you have. People with a lot of Marks advance through their grades sooner than those with less.”

“So when did you hit E-Grade?” Luke asked.

“I was a level 32 Elf, but again, we are different races.”

As much as Luke enjoyed getting more levels, he was unfortunately getting them in the wrong category. His profession gave way more stats than Thief. If he had been able to focus solely on runegraving, he would probably have a lot more stats even if he gained fewer levels.

Of course, the stats would be nearly all he received. Any skills he received as a Shadetouched Runegraver would be limited in scope or totally useless in combat.

Meanwhile, each new Thief skill was another tool to his kit that he was able to work into nearly every fight.

The next three rooms were oddly bereft of the typical hordes of monsters. Two ambushes were all they suffered, and those were easily countered by Luke and Yindferl working together.

Luke was able to get the most uses out of his [Sneak Attack] when working with Yindferl. Combined with [Divest] to enhance the stacking vulnerability, he could drastically increase the damage the shadow drake could do.

The creatures melted before the duo, and that was before counting Alfair’s potent magic safely cast from the back line.

Everything seemed to be going exceedingly well until they reached a small room that resembled the library Alfair used as his base of operations.

Though it resembled the library, it was about a tenth of the size. Crammed from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, scrolls, and all manner of writing utensils, there was a single obelisk in the center of the room.

It was a pale stone slab shot through with whorls of scintillating gold. A shimmering orb of light rested within a hole carved into the stone just below its peak.

At its base was a well-appointed skeleton of a corpse, its hand outstretched toward the obelisk.

Alfair wailed with soul-wrenching despair only a moment behind the keening cry of Yind. They both surged forward toward the corpse just as Luke grabbed Alfair's wrist and looped an arm around Yind's large, black-scaled neck.

"No!" he shouted. Because while the others were lost in their grief at finding Master Frendlebren's body, Luke had seen the runic scribble the man had scratched onto the floor with his last dying moments: DANGER.

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Dexter Banks raised his [Ruins Kite Shield] and slammed it against a screeching, barnacle covered Deep monster. His [Shield Bash] skill sent the crazed humanoid tumbling back into his fellows.

In full plate armor with a [Tower Shell Shield] that was taller than Henry himself, the big guy charged into another Deep monster, shoving it into the growing pile of enemies.

Arrows and spells flew out in force, raining upon the grouped up monsters.

Things hadn't been going well for a while. It had been weeks since his group of coworkers had decided to join Marcy and Henry's fortress. It was supposed to be for survival, and to cobble together the pieces of humankind into something cohesive.

Not necessarily better than what Earth had been, but at least a reflection of modern times that didn't devolve into the Dark Ages.

Unfortunately, the Dark Ages was what they got in Dexter's sour opinion.

People were turning into zealots. Some were chanting fanatical phrases like "We love the Company!" to each other while dancing in circles, and others were doing anything they could to prove themselves to their leaders.

Some took the Company more seriously than others. Many preferred to serve those who were directly in front of them, like Henry and Marcy.

This was turning less into a band of survivors and more into a cult.

It all took a drastic turn for the worse when the King of the Deep targeted the Havenholm faction. Buried far below the surface, the King was slowly but surely climbing his way up through the caves and rock beneath the fortress's ruins.

Even if anyone in Havenholm knew how to take the fight to what was obviously an awakened boss monster, their fortress was under siege from the Deep monsters. They were pouring out in droves.

People were dying. When Dexter joined the faction, there were hardly more than 20 people strong. Though their ranks had swelled since then, less than half of the original members were still around. Most of them being part of the "forward group" that was Henry and Marcy's personal retinue.

The only upside to this whole mess was that more people wanted a piece of the reward that came with defeating the King of the Deep. They joined up, manned the walls, and defended every entrance.

Only the group that was currently locked in battle with one of the fabled Four Kings could gain the faction-based rewards. And since the New Sun was in utter disarray, that made Havenholm the

second-strongest faction and one that was poised to reap huge rewards.

All they had to do was survive.

There were alliance proposals being sent to Henry and Marcy every single day. Runners bearing news and swearing allegiances that would allow Havenholm to grow its ranks and provide additional rewards to others.

Unfortunately, despite the waterfall of experience and LP being gained by all involved in the conflict, the shop was closed. It had shut down the moment Havenholm was targeted.

It was a sinister effect that emanated from the King in the Deep. Even if they wanted to, they couldn't buy a [Bastion Crystal].

That was the first missive they received from the reclusive Sentinels of Steel: get a [Bastion Crystal].

The protective wards they provided would have been a great boon.

But by then it was already too late. The quest and the conflict that it resulted in locked the shop. And not just for Havenholm, the *entire assessment* was locked out of the shop.

The only reason Havenholm hadn't fallen already was that it was in a highly advantageous position and the King in the Deep had not appeared yet.

Apparently, it took plain old greed—and taking away the shop—to band humanity together. Although not all of it. None of the other factions had shown up to pitch in. Obviously, they weren't going to get anything out of it. Quite a few of them were sending watchers who clearly were looking for an opening.

Dexter couldn't understand why they didn't want to help. Not until he overheard some of the cabinet members discussing the situation.

While many people were switching allegiances to Havenholm, there was a growing core of people who thought destroying Havenholm would bring back the Company Shop.

In a brief reprieve during all the fighting, Dexter checked the quest that started it all again.

### Quest: Depths of Despair

*Your settlement has been targeted by one of the Four Kings. Without a Bastion Crystal, your group is defenseless against the King in the Deep's vast power. Brace yourself for battle, because the King in the Deep is coming and he will bring his armies of the Deep. He will not stop until Havenholm is destroyed or his attention is brought elsewhere. Should you survive, the rewards for Havenholm will be great. But should you slay the King, your rewards will be beyond measure.*

More than anything, Dexter missed video games. With a lamenting sigh of spending long hours in front of a glowing screen, he whirled his blade and cut a fishman's wooden spear in two before skewering him through the middle.

Dexter kicked the deranged monster off his blade, clearing the way for another Deep creature to charge in.

At first it had been monsters attacking the walls, and then it was the Deep Ones after the catastrophic outbreak beneath the fortress. Things were looking dire, and without the shop, nobody could buy rations to feed their people.

The food you could find in the ruins was slim to none. Most of the edible monsters were dead, their meat long-since spoiled.

Dexter had never felt more like an extra on the Walking Dead until that moment.

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“Are you well?” Alice asked, checking in on Marcy.

“I would be better if I could go out there and defend my home,” Marcy snarled, surprised at her own vehemence. That wasn’t like her. She looked at Alice’s hurt expression and modulated her tone. “I did not mean to snap at you. I... I’m doing as well as I could expect, I suppose.”

Marcy looked out of her window from the room she shared with Henry on the penultimate floor of the Havenholm tower. She had admittedly panicked at the quest about the King in the Deep. Work groups were dispatched around the clock to destroy all passages that would allow *any* creature from the storerooms and sewers below into Havenholm.

It had worked, but it had been a near thing.

They had been collapsing the last set of tunnels when the fish monsters flooded into the room, carving and killing indiscriminately.

Marcy nearly died protecting the secret she hid from everybody, even Henry. She needed to keep a lid on it a little longer.

But now with the siege and nearly all of her escape routes cut off, Marcy was thinking about pulling the ripcord on this whole thing.

Her broken leg would take at least another two days to heal. A far cry better than the months it would take on Earth, but still an interminably long time to be bedridden.

If she fled, the King in the Deep wouldn’t target her. She wouldn’t be part of Havenholm anymore. She could take her cabinet with her. They were loyal, and if not fully loyal, then at least they were competent and she needed that.

The rest of the flock would be a decent screen to cover their retreat.

That was what the Old Marcy would have done without batting an eye. But for once she had *built something*, and for some reason that mattered.

She didn't want to abandon it anymore. Even if that was the most logical choice.

Alice fussed with her blankets and rolled up clothes that acted like pillows. "Do you mind?" she asked, reaching her delicate hands forward but not presuming to touch her.

At Marcy's nod, Alice brought her fingertips to the younger woman's temples and concentrated. A cold shiver ran through Marcy's body.

"It's healing nicely," she said with forced cheerfulness. Alice looked like she had been through the wringer. Twice. As one of the few Healers in Havenholm and the assessment as a whole, her services were in high demand.

Henry could no longer keep her held back for just the forward group. Not only would Alice oppose the grotesque waste, but they all knew that even with the new bodies seeking glory and riches, Havenholm would fall without every abled-bodied person doing their part.

"You should get some rest," Marcy said, putting a hand gently on Alice's wrist. "You will be no good to anybody if you pass out from exhaustion."

The ex-HR manager nodded tiredly. "Would you like me to get Henry?"

"Yes, and the rest of the cabinet. I need to speak with them."

When the door clicked shut, Marcy turned her attention back to the pillars of smoke rising from the wall that cut off Havenholm's settlement from the bulk of the ruins.

If ever there was a time for Jerry to come back bloated and reporting a successful job well done, it was now. He may be like dropping a 10-ton bomb in the middle of a crowded city, but at least he would kill all the Deep Ones.



It couldn't be a higher casualty rate than they were currently experiencing.