

CHAPTER 75 – DEPTHS OF DESPAIR

Tumbling through the air, Luke plummeted into the yawning abyss of darkness. He bumped and skidded off the side of the massive pit, sending rocks and dirt flying, before he slipped entirely out of reach of the wall.

Luke strained to concentrate on his gravity powers. He had attached to that ledge entirely by accident, without even thinking.

For a moment, his fingers buzzed with bluish gravity mana before the energy broke apart into dark motes before his eyes.

He struggled to summon it again with the wind whistling in his ears and his heart thumping maddeningly.

The last time he had nearly fallen to his death was day one of the assessment test. If so many things hadn't been intent on killing him at the time, he wouldn't have survived.

And now, there weren't any flying monsters going after him.

It was just Luke flailing, the pit of darkness, and the bone-breaking ground rushing to meet him. He repeated his mantra again, sending out his shadow sense and getting a lay of the rapidly blurring land rushing all around him.

Twisting around, Luke managed to right himself and once that was done, he fixated on a half-intact pillar. He reached out and *strained* a hand toward it. His fingertips brushed the stone, abrading his climbing gloves heavily, but the enchantment held and he slowed his fall minutely.

A large jut of stone slammed into his hand and nearly broke his finger. Luke was forced to pull his hand back in a spasm of agony.

Fear and concern were immediately replaced by anger. Luke was not going to let *falling* be the way he died. It nearly happened once, and it wasn't going to happen again.

Snarling, he reached out and commanded the pillar to bridge the gap. As he concentrated, a swirling orb of blue heaviness appeared in his palm. It stretched, forming a connection between Luke and the pillar.

Like a bungee cord, once he lashed the stretching orb of darkness to the pillar, it slowed his fall and finally arrested it. Then it began to pull him toward that same spot with gathering speed, almost as if all the force of falling was being reversed.

Luke began to shoot towards the spherical gravity well with surprising speed. He struggled to temper its inexorable pull on his body, and then quickly switched tactics.

A red orb appeared in his other hand, and he felt a repulsing force, like two magnets with the same poles facing one another.

As Luke neared the blue gravity well he had placed, the red orb held in his other hand slowed him down until he was floating.

He had found an equilibrium where, balanced by two opposing forces, his weight was canceled out. The blue orb, tethered to the pillar, and the red orb in his hand, kept him in place long enough for him to find a foothold and dismiss both.

For a few surreal moments, Luke floated there weightlessly, marveling at the feeling of zero gravity.

And then his hand found purchase on the pillar, and he eased himself back to the world of mortals who had a healthy respect for gravity.

Luke glanced at his mana and cursed. Quietly, in case anything was nearby.

That little stunt had drained a full tenth of his mana. Despite it being such a short use, it was clear to Luke that he needed to work on his skill before he relied on them heavily.

Wielding gravity powers rapidly devoured his MP. Suddenly the [Antique Sapphire Ring] boosting his MP an extra 25% didn't seem as massive as it once did.

Luke's [Climbing Gloves] and his superhuman Dexterity allowed him to climb down the rest of the way. As he became more comfortable, he started to get more reckless, leaping from a crumbling stone edifice to a drunkenly leaning pillar.

Had he not been focusing entirely on the task at hand, he would have marveled how he could now move like a cross between Spider-man and a character from Assassin's Creed.

His Echo wouldn't be vastly better than him anymore.

As much as he wanted to try them out, his gravity powers were shelved for the time being. They were too much of a drain for him to waste his MP this early on.

Something was bugging him, like a buzzing at the back of his mind, but there were no notifications he had missed out on, which was what he usually associated with the feeling.

Luke finally made it down to the large set of stairs that spanned a darkness so complete that even his shadow senses couldn't penetrate. Luke landed lightly on the outside of a circle of magic so powerful he felt like he was standing next to a nuclear reactor.

The air warped with a faint bluish tinge, and he knew if he stepped inside the ring of protective sigils, he would be killed just like those exsanguinated bodies within.

But that was nothing compared to the infinite darkness of the massive gate beyond. Luke's words failed him as he looked at the massive portal. You could have driven several tanks side by side through it stacked ten high, and still had room to maneuver.

Whatever was on the other side immediately sent shivers down his spine and blocked his ability to sense the darkness within.

Monument Discovered: The King in the Deep

New Assessment Quest: The Four Kings

Hidden to all but those with a gift for plundering the deepest depths and exploring every nook and cranny, the Four Kings reside in the places of their ancient birth. The First, born in ash. The Second, hidden in the deep. The Third, steeped in rancor most foul. The Fourth and final, filled with the wrath of the heavens. Defeating all Four Kings yields a prize unlike any other, but the risk is great. They are Kings for a reason. Few have stood against them and lived. Awakening one of the Kings will drastically change the assessment test and cause untold collateral damage.

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The Third King, the King in the Deep, has awoken. With his powers of darkness, befouling, and despair, the following assessment modifiers will take effect until the King's death or the end of the assessment:

Assessment Modifier: [Darkness Below]

Visual range is drastically reduced. When the King is within sight, visual range is reduced further. Darkness reigns while the King is near, swallowing light and hope in equal measure.

Assessment Modifier: [Befouling Air]

The King in the Deep's coming is presaged by a toxic miasma that flows out from his resting place, soaking the land and staining the air. The King in the Deep possesses a powerful aura of poison.

Assessment Modifier: [Curse of Despair]

The Third King, also known as the Lord of Despair, brings sorrow and woe wherever he trespasses. The Company Shop will be inaccessible for as long as the King in the Deep reigns.

Luke stared at the quest, then at the portal. “That must be one big king,” Luke muttered to himself. He couldn’t even fathom the size of something that used that for a doorway.

Looking at the bodies in the circle, with his greater understanding of magic, he could see the faint designs of what had happened. Somebody had sacrificed dozens of people to open this door, which only made whatever had been behind it—now long gone—even more unsettling.

“Not my problem,” Luke said to himself, turning to find a way out. He wasn’t going to go poking around in that infinite darkness.

He only made it two steps down the highway-wide stairs before another notification popped up.

Havenholm is now the focus of the King in the Deep’s ire.

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.

Stunned, Luke slowly mouthed the words of the quest in disbelief. There was a lot there for him to unpack.

The System considered Luke a part of Havenholm, which he could only assume was Marcy and Henry’s settlement. He supposed, begrudgingly, he never *formally* left.

Then again, he guessed that people trying to kill him would have sent the same message. Maybe the System didn't understand the subtlety of a knife in the dark?

And then, as he processed the rest of the quest, the disgruntlement abated. They had tried to kill him, multiple times at that.

Luke blew out his cheeks in a gusty sigh. "Either I help them and get rewarded, or I don't and they are destroyed, but I don't get any additional rewards."

It seemed somewhat of a lose-lose situation. He didn't want to *help* Marcy, but letting the whole settlement get destroyed would also mean getting John and the others killed. While he didn't know where he stood with them, they had never tried to personally harm him.

He couldn't consign them and anybody else Marcy deceived to a grisly death simply because they chose safety over constant death and disease, like Luke did.

Not so long ago Luke had been one of those people. He knew how good Marcy was at manipulating people and preying on their insecurities.

When the world ended and nothing was safe anymore, a person like Marcy would go very far indeed. Who wouldn't want to believe that the pretty girl who smiled and said all the right things really did have your best interest at heart?

This presented another greed-laced opportunity. Even without that quest, if Luke slayed the King in the Deep, he would more than likely drop some of the most valuable loot in the assessment test and an incredible amount of LP to boot as well.

As much as Luke wanted to take a crack at the four kings quest, he didn't see how it was possible in the time remaining. With less than 24 hours to go, there was no way he could find the others. Not with the skimpy riddle they gave him.

So that's how one of these Kings is awakened? Luke wondered, eyeing the bodies in the magic circle. It appeared to be a grim enough affair to do the job.

Either way, he needed to find some monsters to rake in the LP. The shop might be closed, but he could still climb the leaderboard. He was far stronger than when he went in.

He was also much deeper in the sewers than he had ever been. If monsters were in their 30s high above him, what level were they down here?

Following after the King in the Deep seemed as likely as a direction as any. Kings usually had armies, and the armies would not only provide a nice boost to his LP but also lead him right to the King in the Deep himself.

He wondered what would happen to this place after the assessment test was done. What if the Company just left humanity here?

He would still have to fight the King in the Deep.

There was no telling if those modifiers would ever go away. Luke wasn't particularly fond of the possibility of residing in a cursed land because humanity failed the Company's test.

There was no telling for sure, but that grim fate could turn out to be real.

As he quick stepped down the stairs, Luke cracked a dark grin. The least Havenholm could do was include him in their incredible rewards. So what if they also were rewarded? Luke was willing to bet he would get the bulk of the rewards for killing the King himself.

Adding regicide to his list of accomplishments would be fun.