

CHAPTER 31 – ENEMY MINE

Glenn gingerly stepped forward onto a rickety platform in the gloam filled darkness lit by pinpricks of warm light. Torches on various distant scaffolds were perched over the darkness that seemed to go on forever in all directions.

There was no light elsewhere, suggesting that he was still underground. The space was so expansive that Glenn struggled with the concept of an underground area so vast it seemed like an open plain.

Albeit one with gruesome creatures, some humanoid, that patrolled around the shoddily constructed platforms and scaffolding.

Even to Glenn's Archer-enhanced eyes, he couldn't help but feel drawn back to his visit to NYC, where every building seemed to have metal scaffoldings around it.

This felt like a pale mockery of that, only far more rustic. Many of the planks shifted and creaked under his feet. And if he stood still long enough, he swore the whole platform subtly rocked like a ship at sea.

None of this bothered him much because he had just spotted his quarry. The Rogue was below him on a lower platform, fighting some hideous monster that resembled a person in shape alone.

The creature looked like a burn victim, all blotchy skin and weeping sores. It moved with such aggression that it couldn't be in that much pain, suggesting something even worse to Glenn's mind.

He tracked the fighting, moving as silently as he could. Without a skill to enhance his stealth, all he had to rely on was his stats.

The Rogue was incredibly fast. Despite the torchlight illuminating some of the crude platforms, he managed to disappear at times.

Almost as if the shadows themselves were being commanded to wrap around him. Glenn's Perception did next to nothing to pierce those.

Glenn wasn't the only one confused by the shadows. The creature the Rogue faced down seemed to lose him even easier than Glenn did.

When the Rogue suddenly appeared, his twin blades flashing in the guttering torchlight, the creature was caught off-guard.

The Rogue kept this hit-and-run tactic up to surprising effectiveness. He killed the creature with what seemed like practiced ease, making Glenn more than a little nervous about facing him again.

The Rogue had both close and long-range combat covered. With his supernatural ability to disappear into darkness, the Rogue had an even greater advantage in fighting. Even if Glenn attacked first, the Rogue could easily close the distance just by using those shadows.

At this angle, he couldn't get a bead on the Rogue, but he could follow him at a distance. The Archer did so as he walked out on the rickety planks nearly 30 feet above the Rogue's head. He kept his bow close, an arrow at the ready.

For a tense moment or two Glenn wondered about knocking out some of the supports he noticed stretching up from the darkness and around his own series of platforms.

While he was no civil engineer, he knew enough that if he messed with the supports, it could easily be his platform that sunk into the nether below.

Glenn resolved to watch him until he spotted what the Rogue missed.

On Glenn's level, several torches sprang up as creatures carrying primitive bows, blow darts, or burning pots began to emerge onto distant platforms separated by a chasm of darkness.

They were easily visible to Glenn, but the planking and platform the Rogue was fighting on masked the emerging threats. They hadn't seen Glenn. Their eyes were only for the Rogue below. He had evidently killed enough of the monsters to draw their enmity.

One of them fired a crude missile of bone and wood from what Glenn would charitably call a bow. From their angle, the monsters had a clear but difficult shot at the Rogue.

A difficulty that they were apparently ill-equipped for.

Not that it mattered. Eventually, one of the attacks would hit and then it would be over. Glenn could go back to his group, head held high.

Glenn relaxed the tension between his shoulder blades and eased his grip on his bow. He would be more than happy to let the monsters kill the Rogue. It would serve him right.

When the burning pot-bearer chucked his projectile, Glenn saw that the danger the Rogue was in may very well be greater than he realized.

Worse, it would now include him.

There was nothing he could have done or said, apart from killing the distant threat before it flung its pot of burning oil.

Though the Rogue easily danced out of the way, the pot splashed against the upper platform and set it ablaze. The flames weakened whatever paltry support the frame had.

In a conflagration of sparks and smoke, the Rogue's platform collapsed along with the creature he was fighting.

A small, dark part of Glenn's mind told him this was his chance to finish the Rogue off once and for all. Ignoring the threat to himself, Glenn darted forward and nocked his bow, ready for a killing shot.

The supports beneath Glenn's platform, weakened by the fire pot below, creaked ominously and Glenn was forced to leap to the lower floor.

A shower of burning timbers chased him down. Glenn tucked and rolled to weather the worst of the impact, but he had misjudged his leap and rolled right into the hole the Rogue had fallen into.

The Rogue was on his feet incredibly fast, but so was the lanky monster he was fighting. Glenn was up on his feet in an instant. He leapt over burning planks and weaved through cascading chunks of wood falling from the upper level.

He managed to narrowly dodge a beam breaking his neck, but it hit his calf. He heard a sickening *snap*, like somebody breaking a stalk of celery.

Glenn's scream of pain was hidden by the horrific sound that rumbled up through the soles of his sneakers. It caused even more agony, but also drew his eye to the terrible conflagration behind him.

The way back was cut off, and now the ranged attackers had seen him.

Limping forward, Glenn raised and fired his bow at the nearest creature. The arrow flew true, and the creature sprouted a black-fletched arrow in its neck.

Another arrow joined it soon after and it went down.

You have defeated [Ghoulish Thrower - Level 9]. Extra experience gained for slaying an enemy above your level. 4 LP obtained.

Glenn goggled at how fast he had taken it down. Though he knew hitting vulnerable points meant significantly increased damage, he didn't think he would have been able to 2-shot it.

Getting closer to the Rogue and the monster he was facing meant that Glenn would need to take out a few more ranged attackers.

They were all under level 10, making them easy prey for his accurate shots.

As he finished off the last one, he took aim at the Rogue's back, who was preoccupied with the lanky burned creature in front of him. He was having trouble doing his shadow trick with the increased light and the constant harrying of the ranged attackers.

An arrow to the back would finish it. These monsters were significantly stronger than anything he faced before, but if they were all level 10, then that meant the Rogue wasn't much stronger than him.

He had gotten lucky, Glenn told himself.

It wasn't until he examined the monster the Rogue was fighting that the truth sank in.

[Blighted Ghoul - Level ??]

One of the few things that Jimmy had imparted to him was that if he ever ran into a monster that didn't have a level, he was to run very fast, very far, and to not stop until he was absolutely sure it was gone.

Because, as Jimmy told him, if a monster had no visible level, then it meant it was so far above your own level that you couldn't get a gauge on it. Nobody knew exactly what the limitation was. Jimmy seemed to think it was at least 10 levels above your own, though it could be higher.

If that was the case, and the Rogue was going toe-to-toe with it... then Glenn had just severely misunderstood the situation. A glance behind him at the crawling wall of heat and fire as the platform burned told him that there was only one way out of here.

It was too bad that he hated the very idea. "Hey, Rogue!"

Luke danced to the side as an arrow of bone streaked through the spot he had just been a moment ago.

The burning fires made it harder for him to use his shadow manipulation. Fortunately for him, the space between the main bridge and the platforms where the archers were firing at him was thick with darkness.

His extrasensory shadow powers told him the angle, direction, and speed of the arrow as it flew through. He was good enough to extrapolate where it would be from there.

It wasn't a premonition exactly, but it was fairly close. He wished he could have eyes in the back of his head instead of relying on shadows, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

His progress with his shadow powers was coming along much faster now that he was putting them into active combat practice. Training them was all well and good for a baseline, but it was clear that putting them through the fires of battle would temper them far better.

He was gaining a deeper understanding of his powers by leaps and bounds as opposed to the steady drip while he was training.

The more danger his life seemed to be in, the faster he adapted. Luke cranked up the heat even further and pushed himself right up to the razor's edge.

A shout behind him had Luke stumbling to the side as the ghoul nearly took off his head with that horrifying serrated whip. He lined up a strike but had to duck out of the way at the last moment. A stone the size of a melon sailed inches over his head and would have caved it in if he hadn't dodged.

Ever since the platform he had been on collapsed, he couldn't get more than one or two weak strikes in on the ghoul. He spent most of his time dodging.

Luke's surprise was complete when he saw what had shouted at him. It was the Archer from before. He immediately recognized his dark skin and the green cloak, though it now looked as stained and horrible as Luke's black one.

"I'm a little busy right now!" Luke yelled back, drawing the ire of the ghoul. It twisted around, a faint green aura flaring around its body as it spun like a top, bringing the serrated whip with it.

As fast as Luke was, he wasn't fast enough to avoid being nicked by the whip. A burning pain spread out from his shin as he jumped out of the way just as the creature got up to full speed. He looked a bit like a drill, blurring with deadly speed.

Luke tossed one throwing knife after the other at the creature, landing 1 out of every 5. The rest were deflected by the spinning whip as it coiled supernaturally around the creature.

"Truce?" called the Archer.

"You're the ones who came after *me*," Luke told him. He dodged aside as a burning pot of oil splashed at his feet, which forced him to back up even farther from the Archer and the creature between him.

Without answering, the Archer nocked an arrow, took aim, and shot one of the ranged attackers. They were just out of range of Luke's knives, but apparently not that of the Archer's bow.

It took him two shots to fell the creature, but when he did, the implication was clear. "You take care of the brutes, and I'll take care of their little friends, deal?" the Archer called out.

Brutes? Luke thought. He risked a glance over his shoulder and realized that more of the ghouls were coming. He couldn't deal with them *and* the archers at the same time. He struggled not to think of them as "adds" or "minions" as he would in a game.

But if the Archer could relieve the pressure from the ranged attackers, he could focus entirely on the ghouls. They might be able to make it through.

Luke glanced at the distant fire backlighting the Archer.

If the fire didn't catch up to them first.