

Brandon looks thoughtful when he steps away from the cave's entrance. "Okay, this will be interesting. I didn't expect there were any unexplored dungeons left. Even if this one's far from anything."

"Shouldn't we leave it alone, then?" Helen says, although not in the usual 'I'm going to go against anything you suggest, Brandon,' tone. This is caution that I should feel is reasonable, but come on; my first dungeon.

Brandon's grin matches how I feel. "And have these two miss on that experience bonus? No way."

"Really?" Now, her tone's sarcastic. "You're going to claim you want to do this for them?"

"Unless we make it to the end, which we won't. You and I aren't going to feel the bonus. We're too high level. They'll be the one benefiting."

"Why don't you think we'll make it to the end?" Silver asks.

"Okay, here's a dungeon primer," he says in the tone he uses when he teaches me. "Dungeons aren't infinite. There is an end point, and it's going to have the best rewards. But, before you get too excited, dungeons get tougher the further you go. It's usually progressive enough you won't notice it until you're almost overwhelmed. Also, how far the end is depends a lot on how old the dungeon is. This one could be young enough we'll be done before nightfall, but I doubt it. It's also likely it'll get harder than even me and Hel can deal with before we're close to the end. So you can stop it with the dreams of riches and power. We won't be getting that here."

"I'm just looking forward to the skill boosts dungeon gives," I say, eager to start.

"Skill boosts?" Silver asks, looking at me.

"Yeah, dungeons speed up the learning of skills. Didn't you know that?"

"How do you know?" she replies, slightly defensive.

"There's a dungeon about two hours North of Court. Every other month there's an expedition. It's a lot of guards and combat classes because most of it is about going as deep as they can, but a lot of crafters also go so they can do their trades and raise their skills faster."

"So...it's a thing dungeons do? Like a straight up bonus to learning, like with a teacher?"

"No," Brandon says. "It's the danger that boosts the learning. It's on the same level as us raising our combat skills faster when we fight for real versus when we spar."

"It's got something to do with feeling the danger," I add, then continue at Brandon's raised eyebrow. "It's something they did when I traveled with the caravan. They sent me to fight off a batch of level three or four monsters that were at the edge of the camp. They had no intention of letting me be hurt, but they didn't tell me that. Just said it would be easy for me, and it was good training. It got pretty hectic, and I was sure they're leave me to die when Max shot the one over me and the others dealt with the rest. I actually got a couple of levels out of that, and they explained the reason after. It also only works once."

"That means," Brandon continues, "that those crafters who go in have to be left at a point where they're always worried an attack might come and that whoever is left with them might not be able to protect them. The moment they realize they're safe, they bonus goes away. And it also slows the higher level you are."

“Every Treen, or so,” Helen says. “After level twenty-six, is what the research shows. I’m surprise you don’t know that.”

“Never bothered researching dungeons,” Brandon says. “Too extensive a subject for how rarely I’ll encounter them. Ruins don’t have dungeons.”

“Really?” I ask. “I’d think they’d be the perfect place for them.”

“You’d think, but there isn’t one on record. You’ll find some around them, but never within the ruin itself.”

“And it’s going to be safe?” Silver asks.

“Nope. That’s the point of dungeons. To pit yourself against something out to kill you.”

“But you’re going to keep us safe, right?”

“You really that me answering that and defeats the skill bonus?”

“I’d much rather feel safe,” she answers.

Brandon looks at me, and I shrug. Sure, I want to learn faster, but I’m not leaving her behind. And I’m sure Brandon will manage to do something that’ll let her feel in danger while not being so.

Does that mean I won’t get the bonus? Do I have to know I’m in actual danger, or is suspecting it enough?

System Query: Leveling Skills
Skills can be raised through 2 methods: spending skill points and training
Spending Points: 1 point can be spent to raise a skill 1 level. A point can also be used, instead of currency, to buy a new skill, setting it a level 1 automatically.
Training: Skills can be raised through training at the rate of twice the current level in hours of active, focused training. The use of a teacher will reduce that total, based on the teacher’s competency. Only one teacher can help a student learn, but a teacher can help multiple students, based on their teaching skill level.
Training under duress: when under life-threatening situation, skill gain is increased significantly; with that gain reducing the higher the skill level being used is.

Thank you for such an accurate description that doesn’t help me.

“Alright then,” Brandon says. “Me and Hel will make sure you and Dennis are safe. We’ll think of this as giving you both a taste of what a dungeon is like, so you can decide if it’s something you want to do again, maybe without us to protect you.”

“I know I’ll do that,” I say before I can stop myself, and Silver gives me a disbelieving look. “I don’t want to go so far I’ll die, but I could do with speeding up my learning. I don’t want to always depend on Brandon to save me from the people Xander is sending to kill me.”

“You should never do that,” Helen says, and the siblings lock eyes.

I ready myself for the argument. I was really hoping this—

“So, who’s ready to go in?” Brandon asks, breaking the staring contest.

“Me,” I say, relieved.

“I guess,” Silver says.

“I’m not leaving you alone with them,” Helen states.

“Then in we go.” He places his hand through the cave’s opening, pauses, then steps through. I follow.

You have entered: Dungeon of Munsee
This Dungeon has not been explored. Experience and reward bonuses will be assigned upon exit based on percentage of completion.
No Information is available about this dungeon

There is no ‘sense of the dungeon’ once I’ve passed the threshold. I think there’s a bit more dampness in the air, but that can be my imagination. The way the stories go, from those who’ve trained at the Dungeon north of Court, it made it feel like once you stepped into the dungeon, you were in a different world.

This just feels like what I imagine a cave might.

“Is it colder?” Silver asks, rubbing her arms as we step out of the light streaming through the entrance.

“The earth acts as insulation,” Helen says. “So it will be cooler.”

“Dennis, how much light can your ring generate?” Brandon asks as he attaches his light crystal to the end of a wooden rod with a small bowl of reflector around it.

“Just what you’ve seen it generate. Close to two meters of soft light.”

He nods and hands me something that looks a lot like the rod he put his crystal in, except it’s metal and has a handle.

“I knew you’d taken it,” Helen snarls. “Dad kept saying he had misplaced it and—”

“He gave it to me,” Brandon says flatly. “It’s a crank light,” he tells me. “Which means you have to crank the handle for a while, so it’ll build a charge and give you light.”

I look it over, perplexed. “I didn’t know magic items could work that way.”

He laughs. “It’s not magic. It’s old tech. From well before the system. Great-Grandpa had that in his basement. Mon and Dad were living there when the system arrived and technology stopped working. They found it, and it still worked. Dad remade the casing in metal at some point, but it’s basically the same as when Great-Grandpa used it. The switch turns it on. Don’t look into it.”

I point it ahead, and the circle of light on the floor is stronger than his light.

“Why aren’t you using this instead of your crystal.”

He chuckles as he walks again. “You’ll get your answer quickly enough. Alright, Dennis, you’re walking next to me, sword at the ready. Hel, you have our back, and Silver, whatever buffs you can give us, we’ll take.”

“The music will warn them we’re coming,” she says.

Brandon chuckles. “Oh, they already know we’re here.”

* * *