Chapter 36: Rematch

“Every city charges a different amount to register as a Delver, changing the dynamics greatly depending on where you are. I wonder what it’s like in the other countries? I’d love to go see for myself one day.”

-Anonymous

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After splitting off from Malik and the female Delver, Clay raced through the first layer of Greymark’s Bastion—or so he’d like to think. The reality was that each step grew heavier the closer he got to the colossal tree in the distance.

It was one thing to return to the dungeon and stay around the outskirts, and another if he were to go further in, where he had gotten injured not too long ago. While Clay was no stranger to abuse and harassment thanks to his previous job, it was the first time he went through such a life-threatening event where the other party had such malicious intent. His body naturally revolted at the idea of getting close to where such a traumatic episode took place again.

Calm down and keep moving! I’ll have to venture further in eventually if I want to make enough money to achieve my goals, and now lives are on the line.

The face of the female Delver, who he did not know the name of, surfaced in his mind. From her words, her companions must be in a similar age group, just teenagers who were in over their heads.

I can’t let my inaction be the cause of their deaths. If I rescue them, it will also further my goal of achieving some recognition within the Delver community, too.

Slapping his cheeks, he gritted his teeth and picked up the pace. Even when he heard movement ahead, he didn’t slow down and charged at the Feral Kobold when it revealed itself. There was no time to take things slowly anymore. Every second counted.

The large man, over two hundred pounds, came toe to toe against the oversized rat. The critter leaped up once it was in range, only to produce a squishy noise from being bashed aside by the flat end of a shovel. It slammed into a tree, and just as it fell to the ground, an overhand swing came down and extinguished its life.

[Ding—Level 2 Feral Kobold slain.]

Once he saw the message confirming his kill, he immediately resumed his journey into the depths of the first layer.

He encountered a few more Feral Kobolds on the way, bulldozing through any that stood in his path while running away from the others. The journey went smoothly until he truly stepped foot into what was considered to be the inner area.

He momentarily froze when he spotted a pair of Kobold Workers up front. The monsters noticed him at the same time, too. A brief moment passed by as the two parties stared at each other before the axe-wielding monster yelled out some gibberish that served as its war cry and charged.

By the time two child-sized figures were a quarter of the way to Clay, he finally snapped out of it and began casting.

There are no archers or heavy armor this time. Focus and I'll be fine!

He managed to fire off a shot each for the two kobolds, one landing one right on their head while the other caught their stomach. The former fell over as if its strings were cut, while the latter staggered back and its movements dulled. It allowed Clay to close the distance, bash its spear away before kicking it onto the ground, leaving it vulnerable.

[Ding—Level 4 Kobold Worker slain.]

[Ding—Level 5 Kobold Worker slain.]

Continuing to rush forward, it didn't take long before he came across a thick tree with a cavity wide enough to allow several men to walk through. It sloped downward, leading toward the subterranean world he had once escaped. It was technically the only path forward, as the area behind it rapidly grew more barren. It marked the territory of the colossal tree and was devoid of anything of interest.

As he approached the opening this time, he didn't even get a chance to hesitate whether he wanted to go in, as he could hear the metallic sound of metal clashing against metal from further in.

That must be them!

A new surge of energy coursed through his body as things looked up. There were survivors that were still alive.

He swiftly fetched out the light crystal from his coin pouch and used it to keep the darkness at bay. Rushing down the slope to the underground, the sound of fighting grew louder. There were no signs of monsters in his way, so he kept going. He only stopped when he reached the scene of the fighting, where he found four humans sitting on the ground with their backs turned to him. Their bodies were full of injuries, but they still kept fighting on, albeit clumsily. In spite of their conditions, they were surprisingly managing quite well.

Right as Clay was about to join the fray, he caught sight of something he hadn't wanted to see again so soon. A heavily armored kobold stepped onto the battlefield, swaggering forward as if nothing in the world could hurt it. The Delver party hadn't noticed it yet, but he did.

Against his wishes, memories of his struggle resurfaced, but he quickly shook them off. Instead, he focused his mind on one thing—his spell.

He slowly muttered the chant while stuffing as much mana as he could into his spell.

"Spirits, hear my call,

By Lestionora's name, rise from your thrall.

Awaken from slumber, heed my plea,

Shape to my will, come forth as I decree—Earth Blast!"

Perhaps because he was in a slightly elevated position, coming down the slanted tunnel, or because his stats and skill level had gone up, but either way, a large chunk of hardened earth flew rapidly at the Kobold Knight.

The dreaded monster could barely react before it landed squarely against its armet, denting it severely.

[Ding—Level 9 Kobold Knight slain.]

[Ding—Skill: Earth Blast(I) has leveled up!]

[Ding—You have leveled up!]

Clay's eyes remained on the body of the Kobold Knight for a few moments, despite having read the message that it had been slain.

It's down? That easily? And I leveled up, too?!

There's no way this is for real, right? My rematch against this Kobold Knight ended just like that? No desperate struggle or anything?

I should've aimed for the head more last time!

Slowly but surely, reality began to settle in for Clay. He had vanquished the enemy that had almost ended his life not too long ago. The happiness was magnified as he looked over his status screen, confirming his new level up.

Status:

Name: Clayton Stratton

Age: 30

Class: Earth Mage [Apprentice] - Level 5

Profession: Staffmaker, Alchemist

Resources:

Health - 98%

Stamina - 62/112 [1.6/min]

Mana - 45/100 [4.0/min]

Stats [Mage]:

Stat Points: 0 -> 5

Strength: 15

Endurance: 16

Agility: 15

Dexterity: 11

Intelligence: 10

Wisdom: 20

Skills:

Spell Manipulation(I): 3

Earth Blast(I): 3 -> 4

Meditate(I): 3

Summon Elemental(I): 3

Another huge step forward was taken. When he thought of that, his smile couldn't help but widen.

By the time he snapped out of it, he found the four Delvers sitting perfectly still, staring at him. For some reason, they didn't say a word, and an awkward atmosphere hung in the air.

“You guys okay?” he asked, but no reply came. “Too tired to speak or move? Feel free to relax. You can rest for a bit while I stand guard. There shouldn’t be any more kobolds coming anytime soon. Rescue should be on the way as well.”

The four Delvers blinked blankly at his words and exchanged looks with each other before the man who was presumably their leader spoke.

“Rescue? How did you know to send for rescue? Did you come across Nyra? Is she okay?”

“Um, if Nyra is the girl with platinum blonde hair, then yes. She asked me to come find your party. She should be waiting outside the dungeon by now.”

With that, all four of them breathed out a sigh of relief and collapsed on the ground. Clay was just getting worried about their condition when the man he had just spoken with suddenly burst into laughter.

“Ha, we survived! Thank the Goddess of Life for prolonging our time.”

“Hell yeah, we did!” a thin man yelled. “We leveled up a ton, too! You better buy us all potions now, Darian.”

“Haha, sure, sure. Why not? It’s coming out of the group fund anyway.”

“You!”

“Keep your voices down,” Clay interrupted, slightly irked by the nonchalant attitude these young teenagers had with their close brush with death. “Save it for when we actually get out of here.”

To his surprise, the group, which he assumed was composed of unruly teenagers, immediately quieted down upon his request. It made him think they were scheming something.

“Of course. Our apologies, sir—um, I’m Darian, by the way. Can you tell us the name of the one who saved us?”

“Clay,” he curtly answered, playing along to see what the young man wanted.

“Sir Clay, please forgive us for our behavior. We couldn’t help but feel assured, knowing a powerful mage such as yourself is here to protect us. We’ll be sure to learn from your example and be on guard even on the first layer in the future, rest assured.”

He thought about correcting the man for a second, but realized it would be too much trouble. “It’s fine. Just—rest. I’d like to get out of here as soon as possible."

“Understood!”