

Chapter 7: Dungeon Introspection

Clay sighed as he gazed out the lone window above him and to the right. There may be metal bars reinforcing it, but it was the only source of light within his cell. The sunlight made the damp, mushy straw underneath him more bearable.

How did I even end up here? All I did was go shopping.

He glanced around and found several empty cells near him, confirming that the guards working out of this branch didn't seem to be overzealous enforcers who randomly placed people behind bars.

Letting out another weary sigh, Clay could do nothing but sit there and think.

He tried coming up with plausible reasons for the guards to be targeting him or, to be precise, the red-haired woman he had seen. She seemed to be the one directing whatever bogus accusations against him, but he couldn't remember seeing her before, no matter how hard he tried.

Shaking his head, Clay soon realized all he could do was speculate at this point, so it was useless. He would have to wait for the guards to come and question him to learn more. For now, he believed his time was better spent refining his plans.

Let's see. The hard part of gathering enough money to become a Delver is done. It may have taken three whole months of homelessness, but everything should go uphill from here. Just half an afternoon in the dungeon has netted me double my usual pay.

Having thought of his new earnings, a grin naturally formed on his face. He couldn't wait to get to a point where he could take it easy and laze around all day. The carefree, laid-back life he had dreamed of was within sight. All he needed to do was steadily increase his levels by farming in the easy parts of the dungeon. He didn't even need to travel to any other ones, just the one in Ravenhold would do. Once he saved enough for a few skill books, he would be ready to start influencing how other Delvers operated. Then, a cushy consulting job was his for the taking.

He didn't care if others thought his plan was unambitious. Having worked two jobs for over a decade, he wanted nothing more than to just relax. It wasn't worth putting himself in the line of fire to become a hero. He would do his part by providing what he knew, and then it would be up to the passionate youngsters of this world to deal with it.

A simple life was all he wanted, and so far, the pay from just hanging out in the outskirts of the first layer was enough to bring food to the table. If there wasn't the threat of swarms of monsters overrunning the surface, he wouldn't mind just living life as it was right now, with perhaps a few quality of life improvements. It was something that would have to wait until he got settled down,

but it was safe to say he was more looking forward to building his dream home than fighting monsters.

Before he could lose himself to his fantasies, Clay quickly shook out any idle thoughts and focused on *how* to achieve his goals.

Okay, so far, the first layer has been easy. I may not need a lot of money to get by, but money will still help me get some proper gear and, more importantly, skill books.

Clay was well aware he currently only had one active spell—Earth Blast. It was less than satisfactory considering it took almost five seconds to cast, but it was still bona fide offensive magic. However, as he was aiming to build his own place, the spell he was really aiming for was the Earthen Wall spell.

It was one of the basic defensive spells for earth mages. That meant it wasn't impossible to obtain through the monster drops on the first layer, but rather than leave it up to chance, Clay would rather simply obtain it through trade.

From what he learned of the Delver marketplace, trading and buying skill books was one of the most common transactions outside of gear. There were notices up in the message boards about trades. He even saw what seemed to be dedicated brokers. Most Delvers mainly bartered with other skill books they found, but with enough money, it was still possible to buy the less popular skills.

Short-term goal—Earth Wall skill book. Mid-term goal—build a house, hopefully before winter. And long-term goal—become proficient enough in delving to a degree where other Delvers see me as their equals. Then, I'll start a guild and hand off everything I know. Once that's done, I'll be free to live an easy life!

What a great retirement it'll be, not having to deal with any co-workers, horrible siblings, tyrannical superiors, and best of all—the Karens and Darens of retail stores! I will then finally have some time for myself, where I can leisurely explore the tea culture of this world and even read a book without being interrupted for an entire day!

I'll even emulate those firefighters' fabled work schedule—work a day or two and then be off for the next two days. No, I can even do three days off for every day worked if I become good enough to solo the second layer or something. Wait, I don't have to stop there. Eventually, I may even be able to work one day a month!

Clay's daydreaming grew wilder and wilder. He was so absorbed by it that he began to laugh manically to himself.

"Ahem," someone cleared their throat in an exaggerated way to draw his attention.

Clay quickly snapped out of it and looked up to find two men decked out in the same uniform as the guard who had taken him in.

The one who cleared his throat was a younger man in his early twenties with short blonde hair and stubble. His partner was an older gentleman with salt and pepper hair, who had a demeanor that greatly contrasted with his partner's. His cleanly shaven face didn't help, either.

Upon closer inspection, Clay quickly noticed that while their metal plate armor was the same as his capturer's, the two had a mantle with a more elaborate design and a different color. The typical guard he had seen wore gray mantles, while the two before him were blue with yellow accents.

"Come here, boy. We have some questions for you," the older guard commanded.

Seeing it wasn't wise to go against those who controlled his freedom, Clay complied and walked over to the cell door.

"Yes, sir. I'm not sure why I was captured, but I'm more than happy to cooperate."

"Shut it. You only have to answer my questions. Nothing more."

"Now, now, Commander Zarek," the younger guard interrupted. "I say we be a little more friendly so the conversation flows better. What do you say?"

The older gentleman, whose name was now revealed to be Zarek, scoffed and narrowed his eyes at his partner.

"If *Commander* Kayston would like to do the honors of questioning our charge, who am I to deny him?"

The tone in his voice was filled with contempt, but he actually backed off after having said his piece.

"Thank you, Commander Zarek. Now then," he turned to Clay. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Commander Kayston of the Delver Guard Regiment, but you can just call me Kayston. I'm not big on formalities. You are Clayton Stratton, correct?"

Clay glanced around at the empty cells before shrugging. "Unless there's someone else in here with the same name, then I think that's me. I still don't know what I did to end up here, though."

That got a chuckle out of Kayston while his partner glared daggers at him.

Are they doing the good cop and bad cop routine? A timeless classic, indeed.

"So, assuming I got the right person," Kayston continued. "The reason you've been brought in is that you're suspected of being a dungeon bandit. You'll unfortunately have to stay with us while we investigate these claims, so I believe it would be in your best interest to tell us more about yourself."

“What? Dungeon bandit? Today’s the first day I ever set foot in a dungeon. You can check my license that your officer confiscated.”

“First day? You’re saying you’re a rookie Delver?” Kayston asked with one eyebrow raised.

“That’s right. I just saved enough to pay the tax to enter the dungeon today. There’s no way I had the time to become a bandit. I’m likely the weakest Delver currently in the city right now.”

“You? The weakest?” the older commander chimed in. “I doubt many of ‘em brats starting out could handle you even if you were level zero. Those younglings barely know how to fight. Don’t think we’d let you get away with that in our city, *bandit*. Tell us where your allies are if you know what’s good for you.”

Clay almost wanted to refute by claiming he was a lone mage, but he knew that wasn’t going to help much and only cause the conversation to stray even further.

“Hmm, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Commander Kayston said in a diplomatic tone. “Why don’t we have Clayton tell us about his party members, friends, and family, then we can investigate from there?”

“Um, I don’t have any party members. I work alone?”

“Huh?” For the first time, the two guards were in sync.

“You went into the dungeon alone?” Kayston asked as a deep frown began to form.

“Yeah. I only stay on the outskirts, so it’s not that bad.”

“There’s no way in Goddess of Life’s name that someone so—”

“Commander Zarek,” the young commander stated in an icy tone. “I believe you left this interview to me?”

The older gentleman scoffed and turned away, and Kayston continued.

“This is troubling, Clayton. That means we have no one to interview—do you have any family in Ravenhold? From what we know so far, no party has been reported missing yet, despite the allegations against you. It would help if we could verify who you are prior to today.”

Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, Clay didn’t hesitate to tell the man everything he knew.

“I’ve been working at the worksite for the church out in the fourth ring for the past few months. You should go talk to the foreman there, Garrick. He’ll know who I am.”

“You know Garrick?” Kayston abruptly blurted out with wide eyes.

Even Zarek tuned back into the conversation upon hearing the name come up. Before he could say anything, though, his partner was already halfway up the stairs toward the exit.

“I’ll be right back.”