

ZACK GOT OUR ATTENTION AND WAVED US OFF TO THE SIDE and up onto a large hill. "Now, I know this is an impressive sight, but remember we are officially surrounded by monsters, so be careful."

As if to emphasize his point, a loud snap of gunfire cut across any reply we could have made. Quiet cracks of fire also resounded in the background, low enough that I had to wonder when they'd started.

"This is about the distance from the cliff where you'll be safe from Cliff Hugger attacks, although sometimes they'll still come after you." Zack pointed behind us and we all turned to look at the cliff. It towered upward and had plenty of outcroppings and ledges where a monster could hide from our sight.

"Now, time to head out. We should move further away from the back wall for the next hour or so, otherwise we might run into another group. Still might."

We followed his advice and walked further from the back wall. Like Zack had suggested, we heard weapon fire in front of us and turned a little away from that location. No need to pop up near some other rookies, even though they should have also had the same escort as us so they weren't really in any danger. No reason to make things more complicated than it had to be.

About twenty-five minutes later we hadn't come close to another group for a good while when a pack of eight Styres appeared over the edge of a hill off to one side. Styres look like a cross between the mythical goat men and a gorilla. They aren't knuckle-draggers, but they have the bulky upper bodies and faces of gorillas, and the horns on their head and their legs are all goat.

Andrew opened up on the charging monsters first, and I followed up with a Poison Bomb to test out my range. The bomb made it close enough for me to cast a pair of

Miasma Bombs. The miasma was thick enough to be visible from this distance, but even without it you could see the Styires stumbling. Clearly they were affected.

Jack started firing after that, and two of the Styires fell right then. I managed to cast one more Miasma Bomb at exactly the same time as Kelly rushed forward. Damn, she was faster than should be allowed.

Fortunately she avoided the miasma, but the last five Styires charged to meet Kelly. She dodged around them, all five creatures now sporting damage from rifle fire and slowed by my miasma. Despite the ease of avoiding their attacks, Kelly had some difficulty landing hits. I couldn't help at this point, as the Styires were too close to Kelly.

I just stared as Andrew and Jack waited for Kelly to strike one of the monsters and retreat back to fire. I really needed my skeletons. Other than be prepared to launch a Poison Bomb if anything rushed past, I was useless.

Twice Kelly almost got caught by a Styire when she retreated into it, but she continued keeping an eye out for that kind of thing. Once she got tired though... I really, really needed my minions.

Once the last Styire was finally dead, Kelly put her hands on her knees. I walked up to see what was wrong, because there was no way a Monk could be tired after such a short engagement. Zack said he would show us how to butcher the Styires after a short break. I had no idea what to say, honestly, what were you supposed to say to things like that? Still, I couldn't not say something.

"Kelly?" I called softly. I noticed she was staring at her now blood-covered fists.

She looked up, eyes wide. "That was a lot different from what I expected."

I nodded. She was talking just as low as I had.

“I did some research, you know. I guess I skipped over the fear and panic part.”

Should I pat her shoulder, would that be alright? I didn't know. “I've wanted to hunt in a dungeon since I was twelve. As you can imagine, my parents were very against it, but they didn't forbid me from doing so, knowing I would be an adult when that happened. They sought out solid proof. People talking about every imaginable danger,” I said, looking into the distance. “The dangers of this aren't purely from monsters. The fear, exhaustion, and chaos of the battles are a factor as well. Because I always knew I would enter dungeons, I dug deep into all the dangers, even the non-physical ones, for those of us on the back line.”

I nodded at Jack and Andrew, who were looking a little green. “My parents even made sure I went on hunting trips and learned to butcher animals when I turned sixteen, all in the hope I would give up the dream of becoming a Diver. And I guess it worked, because I spent the last two years looking for a job interesting enough to hold my attention outside of the dungeons.”

Kelly closed her eyes and nodded. Visibly pulling herself together, she then smiled at me. “You're pretty good. You know that?”

I snorted and shook my head. “Come on. Let's see what Zack has to say about butchering.”

Kelly nodded and we headed back toward Zack. It seemed that little interaction had made Kelly more comfortable around me. Andrew continued to give me weird looks, however, and Jack was still just uncomfortable.

I quietly took a deep breath and opened my stats. The line “Necromancer Lvl 1.24” caused me to exhale. I could build up experience even if I didn't kill any of the

monsters myself. I just needed to make sure I poisoned everything that came after us so I could progress my job. Even if you knew that getting kills wasn't necessary, it helped to see evidence.

"Right, so everyone gather round. We're going to pause here a little longer than normal so everyone can get back to shape. And we can learn about butchering monsters. So first, since it's kind of important, does anyone know how experience is awarded?" Zack asked.

I glanced at the others around me and saw they were confused. "Experience, better referred to as level progress, is tracked individually. Experiments have shown that each individual appears to gain progress to their next level based solely on the contributions they personally applied to whatever event is being judged. Most of us have a combat type job, so each of us gains progress based on how much combat we see. And our contributions to the fight itself."

"Exactly. Thus, all of you got experience because you fought in the battle. I had to take one shot, injuring a Styire right as melee combat began, but my level is high enough in this section of the dungeon that it didn't move my experience at all."

Everyone nodded. "So what, if there were fewer of us we'd see more gains?" Andrew asked, clearly thinking about the problem.

I didn't know what Zack was going to say, but based on his glare it wasn't what I said. "Current thinking is that the idea of 'experience' is incorrect. It's not like there is this finite resource that has to be divided up. 'Progress' is the word preferred in the scientific literature, and several experiments over the last few years show that progress is generated purely individually. So you gain more progress the more you solve problems your job deals with. The

more 'combat obstacles' a combat job overcomes, the more it progresses.

"Fewer people might result in more progress, but experiments show that this number doesn't change linearly with the number of people or monsters involved in the fight. Look up Dr. Kweku Nepi's paper 'Overview of Progress Tracking Experiments, a Retrospective' if you're interested. It's a couple years old, but it's very approachable and covers every major experiment since the system arrived."

Everyone looked at me like I was crazy but I just shrugged. "I'm a dungeon geek."

Zack was visibly put out, making me realize he probably had a canned "guild approved" response for that question. But he carried on without contradicting me. "Pretty much. We have a lot of experience with this and know a good balance between leveling speed and risk of injury and death."

Zack then pivoted, gesturing to the corpse next to him. "I'm going to show you how to identify valuable pieces from the different monsters you can find in this dungeon."

Zack then began showing us how to butcher the monsters. It was surprisingly similar to dealing with animals, the main difference being that monsters were more durable and had bones that existed as internal armor, often requiring specialized cutting tools to get through their hide without tearing it up. Fortunately, Zack passed out skinning tool kits for us to keep.

While listening to Zack with half an ear, I took a look at the guns Andrew and Jack were using. I had forgotten about it until the fighting started, but I had read that guns used in dungeons came with built-in suppressors so that they could be used without the need of hearing protection. They were still loud as fuck, but they weren't loud enough

to damage the user's ears. Looking carefully, I could see that the ends of the barrels were slightly larger and it looked like a modern suppressor had been attached to the end. Good to know, but something I really should have remembered. I needed to go through all my old dungeon notes in case I'd forgotten something more important.

Once I had some Styire meat for lunch, and the horns of the one I was using for "butchering practice," I then started working on creating my minions. First came the command spell. I felt the magic settle into my mind, it would be needed, just in case I got lucky and managed to create a minion. With all the preparations I'd been able to do, it wasn't surprising that the spell appeared to work as intended. I hadn't put any stress on the elemental knots yet.

An odd pale light with no describable color surrounded the corpse, causing it to almost turn to some kind of fluid. I relaxed when that happened, a little worried that taking even that little bit would have rendered the corpse unusable. The sandy colored fluid spun, revealing itself to be a truly massive quantity of dust before collapsing into a standing skeleton.

The whole process took almost three minutes, and I almost lost control of the spell before it completed. Even a cursory inspection of the skeleton in question revealed that it wouldn't work as a minion. The mana binding it together was so loose that I was honestly surprised the whole thing hadn't fallen apart already.

"Looks like you didn't need much practice after all," Andrew smirked.

"Oh come on, look at this thing. The bones are sliding around, the joints are changing size. This is clearly a crappy-as-hell minion," I said.

“That’s just how basic skeletons are supposed to work.”

“Come on, Andrew. You don’t gain feats just as some spontaneous ability complete from the void, right?” Andrew didn’t say anything, so I continued. “So why on earth would magic work that way? Use your fucking head.”

“It’s not that big of a deal, Kathrine,” Zack said, stumbling a bit over my name.

“Of course it is. The assumption that spells appear fully formed from the system is one of the biggest reasons mage users struggle to get any respect in the world. *And* it’s the main reason no college has been willing to hire arcane researchers. It holds our understanding of the system and our new world back greatly.”

I then turned back to the skeleton to inspect the magic some more. I could see where the different runes had settled. This was a surreal experience, as I’d never worked with such a complex spell before and the only “stable” spell that even compared was the Mage Hand spell. But the hand was maintained by five unique runes, and only three of them appeared twice. And none more often than that.

This skeleton used twenty-seven runes, most of which appeared a minimum of twice. The club and shield I had settled on for their weapons seemed mostly solid. But they were very simple, no need to figure out how to harden an edge of bone so it stayed sharp.

Sighing, I took the club from the skeleton and gave it an order to guard itself. As the skeleton moved, one of the arm bones and a rib fell out of place and clunked to that

ground. A lazy strike to the shield and the whole thing collapsed. By the time all the bones had hit the ground, half of them turned to dust and were blown away. Something was odd about the way the dust moved, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Not that it mattered too much right now.

Gathering the surviving bones into a bundle, I walked to my next Styire corpse. This was the one Zack had butchered as a demonstration. He gave me an odd look, and I dumped the bones on the body. Fortunately, monsters don't have much in the way of internal guts, which made the mess far less disturbing than it would otherwise be. Plus, no worries about slicing into the bowels. Trust me, that was a horrifying smell.

I decided to test a different spell and whether or not I could use leftover components from destroyed minions. My new spell twisted the knot differently, and I'd bet that was part of what had caused the last one to fail.

The spell worked like I expected it to, the leftover bones were consumed in the creation and left behind about a quarter of the Styire corpse. The skeleton itself was a lot more solid, but unfortunately this went too far. Every attempt to move caused the bones to scrape across each other. Given the general weakness of the bones, this meant that each movement scraped off a little more bone and allowed the magic to tighten down just a bit more as well. It also moved slowly because it had to overcome the friction between the two bones.