

LOOKING CLOSELY, I COULD SEE THE PROBLEM, THE RUNES I used to define the joints were being overpowered by the elemental knot. Which meant I needed a better way to interface the two. Dismissing the skeleton, it collapsed into a heap and I flipped through my notebook. There were a couple more things to test, but I could already see I needed a couple new runes, or a more complicated elemental knot. I think the runes were the best choice. At least for me.

I spent the next ten minutes trying different combinations of runes and knots on the joints while watching the others work on harvesting their corpses. When Zack announced it was time to go I already knew I didn't already have the rune or knots I needed to make the joints work. I had spent two thirds of my mana running tests. It took a lot of mana to make a single skeleton, but I wasn't that worried. A couple of Miasma Bombs didn't cost that much, and I had plenty of mana regeneration without a single minion to sap it.

Despite not getting much testing done on the command spell, I could tell something was wrong. Just. But without more work I had no idea what was going on. All that meant was I had a lot more work to do before I could even use my minions. It was an annoying position to be in, no doubt about it.

But not as frustrating as watching Kelly battle Styires in close combat. Technically I always managed to land a few Miasma Bombs on most of the groups, but once the melee started I was less than useful. Even making use of a rifle or shotgun wasn't likely to do much help. Skills and feats that enhanced weapon damage were unique to jobs

that used those items. This left me with nothing to do and no real way to fight.

All in all, I felt like I wasn't helping. And I couldn't do much of anything but sit there and watch as the others fought. I started to check my status after every fight, just to remind myself I was helping. Even if they were monsters, Styires still had to breathe. And my poison still made them slower.

Kelly was surprisingly helpful here, pointing out the extra effort she needed when a Styire made it past my poison and agreeing to hold back a little longer so I could correct those kinds of mistakes.

Between each fight I spent as much time as possible working, just mentally, on the problem of my minion's joints. I made a couple of improvements but they still weren't ready, the joints were either too stiff or not strong enough, and nothing I attempted eliminated both problems. I did have really good runes for all the bones that didn't need to move much. But shoulders, elbows, knees, wrists, and those kinds of things were another matter.

The command spell was also resisting improvement. Like before, I think this was a result of my weakness with elemental magic. I couldn't see a problem with the runic parts of the spell. Unfortunately, I didn't really know how to improve this area of knowledge, at least not today.

Lunch was a needed break. The Styire stew wasn't the most flavorful, but it gave me time to flip through a notebook I brought looking for new runes. The hope was that I could find some more advanced ones that would help the joint. No reason to sit still just because the biggest problem was the knot. I had found some runes that might

help with one aspect of the joints or another, but nothing definite yet.

I hadn't been without progress though. Thanks to my constant study of the runes in the spells, I'd gained a significant amount of knowledge already.

*< Golem Creation V has become Golem Creation VI
Runic Magic (Bone) V has become Runic Magic (Bone) VI
Runic Magic (Poison) IV has become Runic Magic
(Poison) V
Conditioning I has been created!
Conditioning I has been made a minor Necromancer skill
>*

The newly discovered runes might not do what I wanted them to. But more knowledge was always better. It was one of the reasons I was so sure my new runes didn't fit what I was working on. The knowledge gained from the level up told me enough about those runes to know they wouldn't work.

Conditioning was valuable as well, as it reduced stamina lost to heavy loads. Not much at level 1, but it would get the job done.

"What are you doing?"

I jumped and looked at Kelly, who had sat next to me at some point. She hadn't been there for the whole lunch break, had she?

"Umm, just looking for a rune to solve the problem with my skeletons," I said slowly.

“How does that work?”

“I make some runes that I know work, that are needed to connect to the runes I’m hunting for, then I let a sort of mist of mana condense while connected to the attachment points on the array,” I said. “You sure you’re interested?”

“Yeah. Besides, you look like you could use some encouragement. So, how do you know what you’re doing? Magic is invisible, yes?”

“Only to those without Mage Sight. It’s a skill that lets you ‘see’ magic out to a certain distance. I can see about fifty feet at Mage Sight V, the normal max level of the skill.”

Kelly nodded and thought about it. “That kind of makes sense. I guess you have to learn it to be a mage.”

“Not technically. It’s kind of a pain to learn, and you can use Mana Control even if you can’t see the mana. It’s just a lot easier if you can.”

Kelly nodded and we fell silent. I went back to work, but some of my attention was split with Kelly. We didn’t hit it off well yesterday. Normally I’d shut down when someone pushed like that, but apparently we had bonded or something.

It’s weird, but becoming friends with Ashley officially doubled the number of female friends I had. But between Ashley, Sandra, and now possibly Kelly, I’d almost have more female friends than male. Weird shit.

“So what path for Monks are you following? I know there’s something that allows you to fire blasts of energy with your stamina?”

“Energy Manipulation, yeah.” Kelly snorted. “I have no idea. From my research, the first step in that direction is available at level 7. But no one really seems to know what

the prerequisites are. The Monk job doesn't have 'paths,' just 'job perks' at the tens. Those perks sometimes requires other perks you can get between the job ones."

I nodded. "Necromancer is very much a path-specific job. I've read that you can get 'special minion' paths at higher levels. But the job bonuses are always based on paths. I think the Healer job is more like the Monk job, filled with perks."

"Oh, I haven't heard of that job, is it your secondary?"

"No. It's supposed to be the magical companion to the Doctor job, but it was only discovered a few years ago. So no one really knows what it's capable of." I hesitated for a moment. "If you want to do the Energy Manipulation path, perhaps you need to be able to detect the energy used? It's your stamina, right?"

"I don't know," Kelly said. "Could be a couple of things. Some people said it required cultivation. Others say specific martial arts forms. You know, the normal thing, no one knows. So you're going for the Healer secondary?"

"I was originally going for it as a primary job. But it would make a useful secondary, right? I mean, I could heal injuries in the dungeon. Assuming the mana cost isn't too high. And I could level it outside of the dungeon as well." I started thinking about the logistics of that. It would be harder to get the job as a secondary, and I still had no idea how to get it. But with my knowledge of poisons gained from the Necromancer job, I should at least be able to mix with that.

"Better than my primary, even if you can only use it sparingly," Kelly said. "Laborer. Seriously, nothing is more soul-crushing than using the muscles and skills you honed over years of martial arts to haul boxes around."

I grinned. "I can imagine. Though it does give you skills that increase your strength, right?"

"Yeah, but only when lifting a heavy load. Those skills don't have any effects if the load is too light," Kelly grumbled.

I snorted. "God, I can see why people complain about plateauing with that job. It's probably one of the worst ones to have."

"Oh really? And what's worse?"

"Pyromancer. After all, no real safe way to practice control to the point where you can get hired using that anywhere except in the dungeon. And if you think my AOE is bad..."

"Oh god yeah, fire creates heat, right? You could burn someone without ever hitting them."

"Yeah, and you need excessively good knowledge of the area of effect for each spell to avoid hurting your teammates," I said. "Add to that how few places of employment would be okay with a human firestarter working for them."

Kelly nodded and we moved to more comfortable topics, specifically how best to work together. Kelly needed to move to intercept the attacking monster early enough to keep everyone safe, and I needed to dump big Poison Bombs on them as often as possible. We agreed that I should stay closer to the front of the formation for the extra range, and that Kelly would try to wait a little longer. Not much, of course.

Lunch was done by noon, having eaten a little early, and we started back toward the entrance on Zack's order. I really wanted to be out even longer, but my feet were

getting tired, the Styire stew we made was bland as fuck, and the meat was tough.

However, the most awkward moment was after lunch. After our first kill after lunch Zack announced he was going to use the bathroom and explained the best practices here. Suffice it to say, you didn't want to be caught with your pants down, literally, when monsters attacked. So waiting a few minutes after a fight to make sure monsters were pulled in by the noise of the fight had already proven to be a good idea. Otherwise you risked stopping with a pack on the other side of the hill that showed up about the same moment you dropped your pants.

Some of the funniest videos from dungeons came from times like this. Also some of the most tragic injuries and deaths.

Zack had one person go at a time, with everyone else keeping an eye on the area around us.

There were a few extra tips I had picked up. Like, if you're a little nervous about dropping your pants around your team, standing off to one side and keeping an eye on them. Not surrounding people, because no one wants their boots to smell like piss if the puddle spreads in an unusual direction. Things like that.

Between the awkwardness of that moment and the fact that everyone was really ready to get out, I couldn't ask for more time to practice. I wanted to run into more monsters, but we didn't. It seemed like the massive number of orientation Divers really cleared out the area around the entrance, and the closer we got the fewer monsters we ran into and the faster we moved.

The result was that we were all ready to get out of here. If I was alone, or just in charge, I would have pushed for a few more hours. But that didn't mean I was actually going to get what I wanted. I was getting closer and closer to level 3. But when Kelly hit the next level I realized the others were getting more experience. The extra time fighting revealed they were advancing faster than I was.

It was with great reluctance that I left the dungeon. Kelly had reached a new level, though she had only managed to gain 20% progress in the dungeon. Both Andrew and Jack had made it to level 3. And I was stuck at level 2.86. Two more fights and I would have been good. Except most groups were leaving at around the same time, 3ish, and we ended up leaving in a small line of people. From what I heard there was a mixed bag of events.

To my surprise, I saw at least three groups with injuries. Or at least with bandages. All the injured parties I could see seemed to be the guides, but it did make me nervous about the next trip into the dungeon. Which wouldn't involve a high-level individual.

I sighed. Nothing to do about that now, so we headed toward the cafe after checking on the next scheduled bus departure at 4:30. While my teammates decided to celebrate, I ended up having to take my own table, as there was more pressure from Andrew to delete my armor's memory cards.

Knowing that people would want to know what was going on, I sent a "I'm out of the dungeon" text to my parents, Ashley, Eric, Alice, and James. As I got

congratulations and relief from everyone, I smiled. I might still need work to be competent, but I hadn't gotten injured this time, and I suspected the next hunt would be easier. I had plenty of time to do more research, so I should be able to get everything working at a practical level fairly quickly. I just needed more preparation.

The trip home was surprising: Kelley, Adam, and Sandra sat nearby and we compared notes. The oddest part was that Kelly seemed to notice, as the conversation went on, that I was operating on a handicap and was even more impressed.

It wasn't till I got home and noticed my three shrines, or specifically Zilena's, that I remembered her blessing and the note. The blessing didn't affect allies, so if Kelly began to see me as an ally, then her starting to notice something that should have been blatantly obvious could be seen as a sign of the blessing not affecting her any more. Or maybe she was simply more focused on avoiding being injured and I was reading far too much into the thing.

My first stop was a shower, and the luxurious feeling of water washing off the sweat of the day was indescribable. However, upon getting out I found a private message from Ashley.

Ashley: How'd it go? Did you get your minions working right?

Kathrine: Not how I would like. Minions aren't ready either. Need more practice, runes, and time. Maybe even more info on the knot.

Ashley: Sounds rough. What level are you?

Kathrine: 2. Almost at 3.

Ashley: Well, at least you can get some experience without minions. That's good to know.

Kathrine: Yeah. But I need to find a way to get a dedicated training run. Lots to work on after I have a workable minion.

Ashley: I have an idea. I know a Druid who uses 'summons.' They may be a form of golem.

Kathrine: Really?

Ashley: He will require some compensation. Don't worry, I'll tell him about your limited means. He won't ask for anything you can't provide. Good guy all around.

Kathrine: Are you sure?

Ashley: Yes. Don't know if he has anything to help. But I am sure he won't take advantage.

I stare at the text for a while before agreeing. Sounded a little shady, but I didn't have to make a decision before I knew what the price would be. Hopefully I'd be able to access the bigger database and clear the knowledge requirement on my own. Not that I was very confident of that at this point.