

I SPUN ON MY FEET AND HEADED DOWN INTO THE DUNGEON. There was nothing I could do to solve this issue except do my best to push everyone forward. A spellcaster really shouldn't be on the front line, but if that was what it would take to get Dot moving, I'd have to do it. I just hoped she worked to keep up, otherwise I could get myself in trouble.

Actually, with that in mind, I kept glancing over my shoulder to make sure I didn't get too far ahead of the group. I ended up having to wait yet again as we reached the area of the canyon where it actually started to feel like a canyon.

Dot was giving me a concerned look as she walked up. "Cat."

"Kathrine, Dot. I said I preferred Kathrine," I interrupted her.

"Relax. If we don't complete the contract we'll just have to do better next time. No one expects new people to be perfect after all."

"Failure to complete a contract is a valid reason for clients to refuse to work with you. I need this job to live. I don't know about the rest of you, but this job is necessary for my continued survival. I have no other prospects for making the money needed for things like clothes and a roof over my head," I said, glaring at the group.

You could see the light bulb go off in Dot's head. "I see. While I understand the fear, you can't honestly believe the guild will let you starve! It's well-documented how much people become less effective if they're starving! The guild needs you at your peak performance to make money. That's why they tell us we need to relax. Stress kills more Divers than monsters."

I just snorted. The conversation with Mai raised doubts that the guild was actually full of good will. Instead they seemed to be more exploitative, at least here in Columbia.

It likely wasn't a nationwide thing, or there would have been more evidence of the issue.

"There's no evidence of that. Not that I've seen. Besides, I find my uncertain financial situation stressful. And 'relaxing' isn't going to make that better."

It was Dot's turn to snort, and I turned to walk away before she could even speak. As a parting shot, I said, "I know I'll never starve, I already only eat nutrient paste at home. But living without a roof and four walls isn't living."

Dot and the group did pick up the pace, so I slowed to match the current speed. I could see that Dot wasn't happy but apparently didn't want to be left behind to make a point. On the other hand, I spent more time than I probably should have trying to ignore her.

I normally only got this angry at people giving advice to new Divers that would kill them. She definitely hit the same buttons, but I think my stress surrounding my current situation was getting the better of me. I needed to maintain control, no need to make a new enemy. Assuming I hadn't already done that.

Out of the entrance canyon the group turned to the right and started heading toward one of the regions that contained large numbers of Hardback crabs. Frank and myself were gobsmacked that Dot started flirting with Steven. Not only did this make more noise, but it left us as the only ones looking for monsters.

Less than fifteen minutes into the hunt, we spotted a group of nine Styires coming in from the wall. Having seen them first, I fired off a pair of Miasma Bombs. Frank snapped around and fired off a shot; given the red glow surrounding him and the *snap, fire, snap, fire* pattern where he tracked different monsters, I had to assume it was in fact a feat.

Dot and Steven jumped, as if they had forgotten they were in a dungeon. Steven moved forward, his assault rifle apparently on auto, spraying bullets everywhere. Most missed, but he was firing enough rounds that it didn't matter. Three Styires fell rather rapidly, and I managed to catch the remaining monsters in a second volley of Miasma Bombs.

Those that breathed in the miasma began coughing and hacking, clearly they needed to breathe just like everyone else. At that point Dot rushed forward, her pistols ready for the fight. Even before she made it six Styires were dead, Frank having taken out three of the most affected by the miasma.

Dot arrived, and we got to see why Bullet Dancer was a top-tier job. She immediately started glowing red and quite literally dancing around the monsters, firing shots at them with the guns in her hands. Dual wielding, she always targeted two different monsters. The speed she was using allowed her to avoid multiple attacks. She was even better at avoiding multiple attacks than Kelly had been and each round was placed carefully, doing maximum damage.

Like last time, I was unable to do anything useful during the melee. The main difference was that both Frank and Steven were having difficulty picking targets. With how much Dot was moving, I imagined they were worried about her dodging into their fire.

Unlike last time, I was excited to try out my spells and hopefully get working skeletons rather quickly. As soon as the fighting was done, I moved toward the closest corpse. First step was to carve out some meat for lunch.

"Oh god. What are you doing, Cat?" Dot asked.

I decided to ignore her completely. "Are you guys going to harvest anything to sell later? I know at least their

horns are worth a decent bit.”

Frank was the first to answer. “Actually, that wouldn’t be a bad idea. Besides, you’re going to be experimenting with creating zombie spells, right?”

“Skeletons. Yeah.”

Frank moved forward to grab a few horns, and after a little hesitation so did Steven. Grabbing the horns and not having to purchase meat anymore meant I should be able to make more money. The whole way, things were difficult.

Once I had harvested the corpse in front of me, I cast my first creation spell. This was one of three that I thought would work well. Much like the last one, it made a fully formed skeleton when complete about two minutes later. Unlike last time, I’d actually graduated above a simple “club,” although I hadn’t done a sword or anything like that, given our main targets were going to be rather well-defended. Hence the name “Hardbacks.”

Which was why the skeleton was created holding a mace made from bone. Most of the skeleton was the bleached white color you’d expect from such skeletons, but the shield and the head of the mace were a dark brown.

This was because I’d found a couple of runes that hardened the bones. This might have been enough to make sword or ax, but I didn’t feel the need to attempt it yet and would rather perfect the weapons that would work best against the Hardback crabs this time.

The head of the mace was just a big ball of brown bone, simple but hopefully effective. The shield was a square one but was just big enough to protect the skeleton’s chest. Taking a look at the binding magic, I was happy. The skeleton was held together well, and I was pretty sure it wouldn’t fly apart on the first hit.

More than that, the skeleton seemed more animated than before. Testing my command spell, I noted there was

still a delay between the order and action but it wasn't as bad as before. Hopefully I could find a solution to the problem.

"Nice, successful minion I guess?" Steven asked, causing Dot to turn around.

"So far, we'll see how it fairs in combat, however," I said as I watched the skeleton moving around. I still had a massive delay in giving the order and the skeleton moving. I thought before that was because of poor skeleton construction, but different command spells were giving different delays. How did I check if the minimum delay was achieved?

Settling on the most responsive command spell, and determined to create and test more for shorter delays, I moved to another corpse and, after removing the horns, I used a different create skeleton spell. The first three creations were a success, in that I figured they were sturdy enough to take into combat. However, the fourth one was a dud. I had hoped the runes I used would make the entire skeleton structure harder, but apparently those hardening runes had to be applied locally rather than globally.

"Why'd you drop that one?" Dot asked hotly.

"Because the spell I used was less effective than the others and actually made the bones brittle," I answered blandly, moving toward the next corpses.

"None of the others did that." Steven sounded skeptical, not accusatory.

"Different spells. Think I'm going to need to hybridize them," I answered as I called up another skeleton. This one was also wrong, going back to the problem of before with loose joints.