

I ALSO HAD ACCESS TO A HOARDER PERK WHICH WAS SIMILAR to the Organizer one but focused on creating large numbers of minions. I didn't really want to work with that one, because it sounded like it would work better for zombies, or at least that it was far too cliché to use zombies for me.

Besides, Organizer reeked of the start of a series of perks which sounded like I would eventually get to unit tactics. It was possible I reading too much into the smarter undead effect, but I hoped not. I guess any of these could be part of a similar chain of perks, but uncoordinated hoards didn't matter to me. Getting my skeletons to work together better would be a major force multiplier.

The same could be said about the Poisoner one. Applying poisons via skeleton attacks would make them more deadly all around. If even a minor injury could poison a monster it would have a similar effect to the smarter minions, increasing the overall effectiveness of my minions. Obviously the knowledge gained by these perks could be learned without the perk, but the secondary effects would make that knowledge so much better. For instance, adding poison to the attacks would require mana maintenance, which would make it more difficult to create more undead. The Poisoner effects would make that less of a problem.

Which left me with something of a problem. Which would be stronger? I had to go with Organizer, mostly because I had no clue how I would increase the intelligence of undead. I figured that would be in the elemental knot, and that was my weakest part of magic in general. On the other hand, I was fairly certain I could add poison to the attacks without needing extra help.

*< Organizer perk gained!
Golem Creation VI has become Golem Creation VII >*

The knowledge gained from the perk increase was interesting. I'd have to make new skeletons to take advantage of the increased knowledge. The Golem Creation knowledge also applied directly to command spells. It would take some time before I could integrate that fully, but that was a great bonus as well and one I wasn't expecting. No regrets here.

The next hour worked about the same as the previous hour. We'd hike for about ten to fifteen minutes, fight seven to nine Styires, and I would have to replace one or two of my skeletons thanks to mounting damage. I did tweak my formula as we went and over time produced better quality skeletons.

We decided to take a short break when we saw the first large boulder. I think I had my Create Skeleton spell up and running, but I was significantly less certain about how to deal with the command spell, which was just clunky to use. The information from my new perk helped, but not as much as I would have liked. Ah well. More things to work on.

With the break done it was time to hunt Hardbacks, which was certain to be more interesting. Thanks to the Hardback crabs' body shape their heads were close to the ground, so I launched Poison Bomb spells at the nearby rock formations. The assumption being that the monsters

would attack as soon as they got poisoned. Otherwise none of us were really certain of a way to detect them, as they tended to look exactly like large boulders otherwise. Hardback ambushes were quite dangerous over all.

The strategy paid off, on the third grouping of boulders one stood up, claws that were much more like weapons than any crab's extending menacingly from around its head. The monster's back stood six feet up and it was almost as wide as it was tall. Its face was maybe half a foot from the ground. The monster shuffled toward us. Frank and Steven opened up with their rifles, each glowing, using feats to increase their damage output. However, the crab's shell seemed to be absorbing the fire, because even while chips were flying off, no sign of penetration was visible. Several Miasma Bombs later, I had to conclude that the monster was less effected by my poison than other monsters.

But not unaffected, as it clearly slowed down a little. As my skeletons and Dot charged in, the crab turned to attack them. My skeletons' shields weren't effective as the crab's claws snapped around two of their knees, and two of my skeletons fell to the ground with one of their legs cut off. They didn't last seconds after falling to the ground.

For all her bragging, Dot's gunshots weren't any more or less effective than Frank's and Stevens'. She was closer of course, and could reliably target its head, but apparently she couldn't hit the eyes. And when she hit the armored back, she was even less effective. I swear her bullets bounced off with enough velocity to be dangerous.

I took to ordering my skeletons back then forward, having them smash its head then backing up again. All an attempt to avoid snapping retaliations. Dot would dash in after it attempted to retaliate, then another skeleton would

be ordered in. I lost three more skeletons, bringing me down to five, as we perfected the strategy.

Once it was clear the crab was focused on Dot and the skeletons, Steven and Frank moved closer, getting shots in on the damage portions of the armor more accurately. It was this that finally tipped the balance.

As we were all sitting there staring at the dead Hardback, Dot spun toward me. "Well, you were useless."

"Now Dot. You have to have seen the crab slow down after her third hit of her poison spell. And her skeletons absorbed a lot of attacks that would have otherwise gone after you," Frank answered, exasperated.

"But she didn't do anything but sit there," Steven came to Dot's defense.

"I was controlling the skeletons," I said slowly, uncertain what was going on.

"Of course you were, using some invisible spell no one could see. Convenient," Dot said.

I just stared at her, oh boy. She'd spent time coming up with this argument, hadn't she. Crap and shit. This was going to end poorly.

"You're wearing enchanted armor. It only took me a few hours to learn to see magic within a foot, the first level of the skill. Shouldn't take too long for you to achieve the same, right? After all, you can practice on your armor," I countered. "Then you can check and make sure I'm telling the truth."

"I can't use magic, so of course I can't get that skill. But that's not the point. The point is that you did nothing personally, even if you might have done something remotely.

"I'm proposing that Kathrine gets half the normal share of the contract and the rest of her share gets split

between the rest of us.” Dot looked triumphant.

There was a split second when I stared at Dot as if she was insane.

“I agree,” Steven said before I could recover. “As that means more than half the people not including the individual being censored agree with the proposition, it passes. The guild rules are clear.”

“Fuck you guys. Good luck on your next fight.” I turned and started marching back. I was going to make only 1K to start with on this contract, which was small. But five hundred dollars? Not worth the risk, not with such a toxic individual in the party. I now expect that Dot and Steven had planned this at some point.

“The fuck you doing? You can’t go back alone.” Dot sounded shocked.

“It’ll be safer than sticking around you fuckers who are determined to screw me over,” I answered, turning around to look at them. My skeletons moved up with me, following my commands and carefully getting between us.

Dot narrowed her eyes. “I’m just stating the truth. You did little to help and can do little to help.”

“And I’m saying this job isn’t worth the risk only five hundred dollars, once you add in the fact that I can’t trust you to watch my back,” I pointed out.

Dot flushed red. “What! Why can’t you trust me? When have I done anything but be trustworthy!”

“Right now, by denying my ability to have a part in this without even checking into the way Necromancy works. By denying my abilities for nothing more than petty reasons. By spending this whole fucking trip flirting, talking, and ignoring everything around us so only me and Frank were looking for ambushes.”

Dot scoffed. "Bah, none of that is against you. And Styires don't set ambushes."

"Doesn't stop them from coming from behind," I snapped back. "Or from them showing up suddenly over the top of a hill."

I took a deep breath. "Not that it matters anymore. I will not continue this trip you. I'm heading back. This trip will at least be worth the experience and whatever I can get for harvested parts this way."

I started back toward the entrance again. I had no idea how I was going to survive my first fight alone without a full set of skeletons, but I would just have to make it work.

"Fine. I'm sorry." Dot said. Turning around, I saw she clearly hated having to do this. "I'll remove my proposal, okay? No need to run off."

"So I do something to make this group safer."

"Of course not," Dot snapped. "I just don't want your death of my conscience."

I rolled my eyes but decided to leave that argument be. "So you will drop this bullshit about censoring me?"

"Yes," Dot agreed.

I turned to Steven. "And you?"

He shrugged. "Ok. Sure."

I grinned. "Excellent. I doubt I would have gotten back uninjured. Honestly, I suspect I'll be sore in the morning already." I quickly pulled up my stats. "Damn. My stamina is below three-quarters already."

Of course I made a point of standing away from Dot and Steven at all times. Using my skeletons and the boys' strengths, we managed to flip the Hardback crab up on its side and started cutting into the monster.