

I WATCHED AS THREE DIFFERENT SAMPLES WERE TAKEN from each of the melted Ratigers. Rolf explained that they were taking the fully melted goop, something right on the edge of the melted goop, and something a couple centimeters behind the edge to see how the creature's mass changed and if something penetrated into the monster meat.

Once they were done and we packed up, we headed deeper into the dungeon.

"So is this going to be in your next episode?" Rolf asked.

"Yup, unless you'd like it to be more in depth, it's probably only going to be the parts of interest. Fighting and anything weird that might have happened," I answered, a little tense.

"I wouldn't mind explaining what we're doing. I find this interesting." Rama was clearly excited.

As neither of my clients were bothered in the least, I relaxed. I guess I'd gotten a little too used to the Devils, where such a thing would result in a spat about the right to privacy or something.

"So, start with why you hired me," I said.

The conversation lasted only a few minutes as we walked down the same corridor I had used to find my minion creation supplies. I ended the conversation as I focused on a sound I heard between breaths.

I could hear the clacking of claws between the pauses in conversation, and half a second later several Ratigers burst around the corner in front of us. I threw a number of Miasma and Poison Bombs in front of us, and my two lead skeletons chopped into anything that poked its head out of the gas.

The fight was over in less than ten minutes. Six or so, if I'm any judge of these things.

"Well. That was longer than expected," Rama noted.

"Actually, that was short. I guess it was only the monsters that filled in after I killed them for the initial skeletons," I explained.

Rolf had been staring at the gas cloud, which I had regularly refreshed after the first moment. As it faded once the magic ran out, he spoke up. "What happens if we breathe that in?"

I grinned. With no idea what the hell to think about this one, I was still oddly proud that it happened. I guess Zilena was happy at my swing toward actually worshiping her or something. Or maybe my turning to her for help.

"Check the active effects tab, you should find blessings there." Getting blank looks, I expanded the explanation. "You pull it up the same as any other page of your stats."

"Wait, what's this?" Rolf said, pure confusion in his voice. His eyes were out of focus in the way that people looking at their stats always were.

"I asked Zilena for help while making a small sacrifice for a blessing. And this is what I got. Which is perfect for the situation, don't you think?"

< *Zilena's Thumbs Up: Zilena answers the requests of her followers as best as she can. Your party shares in your Resist Poison skill. Current resistance skill: Resist Poison VI. Lasts four days.* >

I have to wonder what the hell that name meant. But it was kind of nice that things were moving forward. Especially as Zilena now considered me a follower of hers. As I agreed with that assessment, I had started poisoning myself last week during breaks and as I left the dungeon to increase my resistance. In other words, this blessing did nothing for me but did a lot for the other two.

The lack of a personal note could either mean Zilena had nothing to say on this one or that she'd left it off since other people could see it. I happened to expect that both had come into play.

"Why do you have a poison resistance skill?" Rama asked, a little unsettled.

"Because I intentionally poisoned myself a couple times in order to gain and increase the skill," I answered, ignoring that the original acquisition of the skill was an accident. "Given my heavy use of poison, it's a good call just in case."

Rolf nodded but looked confused. "This is a blessing that doesn't make things better for you?"

"It does actually, as it helps me maintain my business." I grinned a little. "Now, I don't believe you explained your personal interest in the dungeon yet. Just the general interest of researchers."

"Smooth transition," Rama said as she bent down next to one of the Ratigers. "However, we might as well get started. I'm doing my thesis on the comparative biology of monsters. I know a lot of people have done the same, but there are surprisingly few in recent years who take samples out of the dungeon. We have several new methods of investigation that might shed some light on the subject."

The first step of their investigation involved setting up a number of high-quality cameras on tripods. Rama was collecting the samples and Rolf mostly made sure they had solid video of everything. Apparently it was about proper documentation of the sample collection process.

Rama explained what they were doing and how monster physiology had impacted different fields, most notably enchantments and alchemy. They were both new fields of uncertain overall value and, with the recent dismissal of alchemy as “real” medicine, a lot less certain in the future. Hence patchy work in areas that supported them.

Case in point, Rama’s primary reason for the research was to understand how monsters kept themselves alive. Food, energy usage, that kind of thing. It was pure biology research, and only possible because she was a PhD student and had chosen this to be her research topic.

The dissection and sample collection were a slow process that took around an hour. And of course the monsters started filling in, resulting in a number of small fights with my skeletons. But five or six Ratigers weren’t really dangerous or difficult to deal with, and with my skeletons posted at the entrances to our little area it didn’t really take any effort.

Which unfortunately meant no real level progress. Without the massive press of bodies, it just wasn’t that difficult and I didn’t gain level progress accordingly. However, the pay was definitely worth it.

Once done, Rama and Rolf had a wide collection of meticulously labeled and documented samples. These easy-to-stack containers were replaced in their backpacks and everything was promptly packed up.

“How many samples will you have to pick up at the next spot?” I wondered if they had overestimated the time involved.

“Nowhere near as many. Basically, this sample batch is the baseline, and we’ll grab more from further away to compare,” Rolf was the one to answer.

“Not from Ratigers anyway,” Rama quickly put in. “Anything else we run across will need a bunch of samples as well.”

“Way Fishers then. We’re unlikely to see anything else,” I put in easily.

“I’d like to pick up samples of Lurkers,” Rama countered.

“Not going to happen. We’re in the wrong location for one, and Lurkers are far more dangerous than I’m willing to deal with right now.” This wasn’t something I was willing to waver on.

All I got was a shrug and we were done, ready to head deeper into the dungeon.

Once everything was cleaned up and I gathered the rat tails, we headed deeper in.

The next major fight happened in the main tunnel system, so we had a lot more room to work with. While the fight was more intense, and much longer, the extra room allowed me to keep the clients further from the front line and I could make full use of my ranged skeletons as well. Of course the extra area left a little gap in the back, but keeping two ranged skeletons focused behind me and paying enough attention to poison as much as possible made it a little easier.

The fight was surprisingly easy from a “kill the enemies” point of view. But it was more difficult with the

existence of clients. Rama and Rolf both wanted to help but didn't have the skill set to be huge assets. Which meant I had to keep an eye on them every time they found an opportunity to help.

Rolf was far worse than Rama at this. Twice I had to pull him back as he got close enough to make me nervous. After that point he was better, but I knew a confrontation was coming from the way he glared at me. And by better I meant he wasn't trying to join my skeletons in the front line. He still made me nervous with the way he inched closer to the front.

Unfortunately for Rama, we didn't see a Way Fisher even after about twenty minutes of fighting, which took both of them by surprise. In fact, I don't think they'd brought enough ammunition to support a full dive in this dungeon, based on what I saw. Thankfully it wasn't really necessary, we weren't going to push nearly as hard as I had my first time here.

In fact, I hadn't repeated that move yet, more than willing to take things easier as I still got oodles of progress in every way that mattered. That, and I didn't want to be that exhausted again if I could help it.

When the last of the monsters were dead, I decided to announce my intentions. "I'm going to inspect my skeletons for damage, still haven't figured out a good way to do that automatically. Uhm. If you want I can bring some of the corpses inside?"

Rama took several deep breaths and closed her eyes. I'd say she was trying to think now that things weren't quite so intense. "I don't think we're quite far enough into the dungeon to justify more samples just yet."

I nodded in understanding. "Works for me."

Every level I get a Bone Walker perk bonus. This was mostly a slightly better understanding of Bone runes, of course, and had helped me make incremental increases in the durability, weapon skills, and cooperative abilities of my minions. This meant that with each level the quality of my skeletons had gone up.

A result was that my skeletons didn't take as much damage as normal. Hence the Ratigers couldn't always visibly damage the bones of my skeletons. And yet I still had to replace three of them and rearm my ranged skeletons, thanks to the damage done and munitions used. Though that was more the result of the rather long fight than anything special.

A few minutes after I got started working on my skeletons, Rolf came over. "Kathrine, can we talk?"

"Of course," I said as pleasantly as I could.

"I need to help. I can't just let you protect us. If you keep pulling me back I won't be able to help."

I shook my head. "I understand, but you don't need to be on the front line. That will just make life more difficult for me, as I'll have to prevent any monster from getting close to you. A tall order."

Rolf seemed to be insulted. "I'm not helpless."

"You don't have a combat job." I took a breath, stupid people. "Look. Without a combat job you can't last long in a straight fight with a monster. Firing a few shots into the crowd is just fine, but getting up close without some kind of defensive skill derived from an actual job is just stupid."

Rolf seemed to struggle within himself. He was clearly one of those people who still thought that their physical capabilities reflected their combat abilities. It only worked that way if you ignored the effects of jobs, but you wouldn't believe how many people assumed that just because they'd worked out that they could take on someone who had a combat job. Even if it was just at a low level.

Rolf here looked like he worked out every day, he was "amateur strong man" big. But I could take him in close combat without much issue. Why? He had no combat job. I might not have gotten the chance to use it much, but I'd been diligently upgrading my Toxic Breath spell. And it was a spell, so I didn't need to be breathing to use it. So he would be hit in the face with one of the most potent poisons I'd managed to come up with in one second and have no experience or skills or class bonus to fight through the resulting effects. And once that happens, it doesn't matter what you do.

The same was true of every single combat job. If you didn't have a job yourself, or were sufficiently below that job in level, you were unlikely to stand a chance unless you could get a one-hit kill on the first hit. And even that wasn't a guarantee. There were enough reports of bulwarks being healed up after pulling a claw or spike or something from their heart to suggest that defensive-focused jobs at least could get past the point that a "one hit" kill was even possible.

Rolf looked like he wanted to protest, but he shrugged and walked away. I went back to what I was doing while also hoping I could think of a way to make him feel better.



I came up with nothing. When you ignored a universal truth, I couldn't think of anything to make the side effects of that truth sting less.

Ah well. Once I was done with the skeletons, I started gathering Ratiger tails. Not much later we were ready to head deeper into the dungeon. The next fight was about an hour later and went about the same as my other fights in this dungeon. Rolf didn't do anything stupid like last time, and when a Lurker actually appeared the creature managed to pull one of my skeletons off-balance, but a pair of the ranged skeletons nailed it, causing it to let go quickly enough that the skeleton could retake its place in line, with the help of a couple Miasma Bombs.

Now that they were being more careful, Rolf and Rama were a lot more helpful. Rolf took to aiming for injured or otherwise weakened Ratigers. This helped thin things out faster, something that both of them noticed. I, of course, knew this was about the rounds hitting injuries but didn't say anything. Let them think they were doing more damage than they actually were.

Despite the lighter attack on the back and only needing a single ranged skeleton back there, I kept a weather eye on things. I still remembered the shit that had happened my first time, and I was not going to let that happen again. Especially as the side of my face was still a little less sensitive to touch and things compared to the other. Whatever that poison was, I wasn't fully healed.

In many ways, keeping the battle lines stable was a full-time job. Order a Ratiger be killed before it could slip by. Force a skeleton to take a step back for a moment to better control the incoming Ratigers, or step forward for

the same reason. Shifting sideways was also necessary, especially on the back line from time to time. Yet there were enough breaks that the occasional spell was easy enough to fire off. Yet I was finding that managing my skeletons was often a better choice in most situations.

My ranged skeletons switched sides as needed to thin the numbers, but more often than not only two were pointed toward the front. While the back didn't see as much press of bodies, it was easier to keep the skeletons firing in that direction with less management as the gaps between my shields were wider.

Probably the reason I'd developed the "inspect skeletons" habit after every fight. It was mindless and let me relax without having to think at even the most basic level. Way too much going on otherwise.

As I started noticing the number of Ratigers thinning out, my back line was greeted by another Way Fisher. The tongue lashed out, wrapping around the neck of one of my skeletons, and drug it out of line before my ranged minions could hit it.

I rushed forward and breathed out a full two seconds of the Toxic Breath spell into the gap, the largest burst of that spell I'd used. This allowed me to order the skeleton back and caused the death of a number of the Ratigers from poison. Toxic Breath was ludicrous, as it wasn't only the most potent poison I had access to on its own, but it made all other poisons worse on anyone affected by it, so the Miasma Bomb I dropped in right after I began breathing out my cloud of toxins was rather potent as well.

On the other hand, I paid for that combo with half my remaining mana. So there was little surprise that

everything in the cloud died rather quickly.

For some reason the back line wasn't much of a problem after that, though the front line took the next five minutes for the fighting to stop, even after I put three of my ranged minions on it.

Once it was clear the fighting was done, Rolf turned to me. He seemed agitated and confused. But mostly confused. "So why didn't you do that before?" He nodded at the back line, leaving no doubt as to what he meant.

"Simple really. 408 mana burned in that one move," I said after checking my stats and doing a quick calculation. "It'll take about half an hour to recover with my full set of skeletons right now."

"Really? Isn't that a lot?" Rama asked.

"I started with more mana than normal and have been building up a more massive store over time. The issue right now is mana regeneration. I'm down below a third of the full quantity right now," I shrugged.

Rama shook her head. With the help of my skeletons, we moved the Way Fishers' bodies together so Rama and Rolf could do their work on the two we'd ended up with.

While they did that, I inspected my skeletons and took stock of my condition. Casting spells wore you out, and I wasn't aware of a magical version of stretching. So it was important not to push yourself too hard. I didn't know if the magical "soreness" worked the same way as sore muscles. But people largely considered it likely.

I was able to convince Rama to save some of the Way Fisher's meat for lunch, as it was actually quite tasty, and we rested for a bit before moving on. The next few hours

had nothing of note. I decided to increase the size of my skeletons' shields, which did help protect them from Fisher tongues. That limited their danger, and the more durable skeletons were making it quite hard for the Ratigers to kill anything as long as I didn't leave any damaged skeletons around.

Lunch was an interesting affair, as Rama and Rolf were spending some of their time focused on preliminary work, including recording observations and what not. I mostly listened and answered any questions I could, including how far we'd walked and the like. I did keep track of that in the Rat Way, as the maps had tons of measurements on them and tracking the distance traveled was a major way of navigating.

After lunch we headed back toward the entrance. Rama and Rolf were getting complacent, which was mostly fine, but I was worried they'd get jumpy. I was starting to feel the drain as well; I'd kind of expected this, but at least these two weren't bad. I feared what would happen after this when I was escorting worse clients.

Between being a little more tired than normal and having to keep an eye on the clients, I was a little more tense heading back. Still, we made it out of the dungeon with plenty of samples for Rama and Rolf, and I progressed toward level 7 more than I expected. I guess dealing with escort duty counted as a complication that increased the difficulty of the encounters.

Sleep came next. At least the money I'd made from this suggested I'd be stable before long. I just hoped I could maintain this pace long enough to build up the buffer I needed.