

AS ANNOYING AS IT WAS TO BE GIVING A TOUR TO RICH people who just wanted to see something cool, it came with its advantages. Mostly in that we would be seeing a lot of the dungeon, and we could charge for the inconvenience.

For me it was the fact that we would definitely swing by the Ice Drakes, as those monsters were one of the major sights for Miles. I wanted to make a symbol for Zilena using my own creation magic. Creating it from Ice Drake meat wouldn't be any different from anything else, except that the meat would be the most valuable corpse we'd be working with.

Maybe that would make a better symbol? I didn't really fully grasp the rules of faith magic or religion. So maybe not. Still, this seemed like the best way to do it, so I figured I'd go down that route.

It was just a symbol, so it didn't really matter what I made it out of. But I kind of liked the idea now that I'd thought about them.

Miles was quiet for a short bit as we walked toward our next destination. Maybe he was just waiting for me to relax—Dot went back to her usual careless self far too quickly for me—because he said something almost as soon as we were far enough away that I stopped checking the wall for ambushes.

"So. Those were probably Cliff Huggers. How did you know to look, Kathrine?"

"She didn't. Just got lucky with being contrary."

"It's a well-known ambush spot. Enough that a significant number of injuries occur because of careless

people entering or exhausted people leaving,” I answered, ignoring Dot.

“What hidden dangers are there in this first part of the dungeon?” Miles asked, looking at Dot.

“Not much. The crabs hide like boulders, but they only exist in one part of the dungeon. See boulders and you know they’re there.” Dot rolled her eyes. “Ice Drakes blend into the icy snow of their canyons. Hard to spot but not really tricky.”

“Right enough. Seen more than one report of someone getting turned around and ending up heading away from the entrance when returning from a canyon. And the Hugger swarm has caught a few people out, entering the wrong canyon,” I filled in the rest of the issues.

“There are canyons other than the Ice Drake one?” Miles asked.

“Don’t know why anyone goes to them in the first place. Only idiots,” Dot grumbled. “Only a moron would make that distinct mistake.”

“Yes. Two types. One filled with Cliff Huggers, so many they swarm, and the other filled with Styires,” I answered. “They’re used by people who are more interested in level progress than in money at the time.”

“Like I said. Idiots,” Dot cut in. “Going out of your way to put extra stress on yourself is just asking for trouble.”

I rolled my eyes. “Not everyone finds fighting monsters stressful, Dot.”

“Well, Cat, I would imagine hiding behind skeletons will do that.”

“Use my fucking name,” I growled. “But, yes, it is. Though if my skeleton line is breached things get panicky

quickly.”

“What about your favorite parts and why?”

The questions continued on like this as we trekked through the Scraggs, slow enough that Miles could enjoy the view, though we made good time given we weren't going to hunt any one place exclusively for a specific monster or anything like that.

In an odd yet refreshing set of opinions, Miles seemed immune to Dot's anger over agreeing with me. Though he agreed with her as well about certain things. That didn't seem to help Dot's mood at all.

On the other hand, Miles was a continued pain during the fights. He wanted to help, but between his over-built shotgun hitting my skeletons and his eagerness to go around to the side of the combat line to shoot across the Styres, I had to continuously keep an eye on him. At least these monsters weren't that dangerous. Or smart. Unfortunately, loud noises caught the attention of monsters, so his gun often called more attention to him than I was comfortable with.

As we moved deeper into the dungeon, Miles got more excited.

“So, do you gals think we can hit a frozen canyon before lunch? I'd kind of like to try fresh Drake sushi,” Miles asked.

I laughed, “We figured that was what you wanted when asking for such a thing. We'll probably have to eat a little late.”

Dot sneered. “Please, you're the one slowing us down.”

“Not likely,” Miles said, “I can already tell I underestimated how hard it was to travel around here. I’m glad we’re staying the night.”

I shook my head. Miles was both frustrating and fun. He liked to get too close to the monsters while they were alive, but I’d already dealt with this issue with past clients. Didn’t make it any less annoying, but he was also very easy to deal with as a client.

“We might want to wait for dinner for such sushi in that case,” I suggested. “Styire stew isn’t the most flavorful, but I’ve got a fairly good spice rack and they’re often quite abundant.”

Miles looked a little uncertain but nodded. “I guess the full experience is a good idea. But if we make it in time I’d love to have the sushi for lunch.”

“Ugh. I’d rather skip more stew if at all possible,” Dot complained.

“Is it that bad?” Miles asked, sounding more curious than worried.

“I bring proper food into the dungeon. The stew is so bad that paste would be better,” Dot said, apparently feeling quite self-important.

“Disagree heavily there. Nutrient paste has a somewhat terrifyingly bland flavor and doesn’t pick up spices very well. Styire stew is far better all around,” I countered, only to set off a series of stupid arguments from Dot that proved she had never eaten the stuff.

We picked up our pace, as Miles was more motivated now than before. Both me and Dot were attempting to hold ourselves to better behavior for the client. And I’m sure he noticed, but he didn’t say anything.

I hadn't managed to work out the situation perfectly. I was getting "random" spikes in my danger sense every now and then. But while the majority happened in battle, I doubted they had anything to do with the Styires. Both me and Dot weren't much of a threat yet. I could probably solo Styires if I wanted to. Dot could as well, if she paid more attention to what was happening around her. Though she'd have to be more careful, she had to be at least a level behind me by now, and Bullet Dancer wasn't the same tier as Necromancer.

Which brought up the real question. Why? I kind of wished I was alone right now, I could monologue at the camera for a while. It wasn't perfect, but it was a good way to get thoughts down and on record.

We made it to the frozen canyon at about the same time we wanted to stop for lunch. Miles was quite excited to taste that sushi, and I didn't care either way, so we decided to move forward. As soon as we stepped onto the ice my "danger sense" prickled. There was a little danger in what we were doing now, and I double- and triple-checked the perimeter of skeletons around us.

Oddly, Dot seemed in a good mood. No idea why. The canyon was ice-cold and a real pain for anyone dealing with it. Plus, she was heavily slowed down by the need to pull her ice spikes out of the ice.

Miles was looking around in wonder, which was understandable. With the sun pretty close to overhead, the glittering ice off set off by jagged rocks and covered in a dusting of fine snow was one of the best sights in the dungeon so far. I did wonder if he was actually hunting for "sushi" instead though.

The slight sense of background danger remained as we worked our way up the canyon. I kept an eye out for any shift, but the first warning of a problem was one of my skeleton's being tackled by a Drake. I had the closest skeletons attack it, along with my ranged skeletons and a pair of Miasma Bombs. Dot shouted a second later, so I spun to see what was happening. Turned out to be another Drake she was already in proximity with. I moved a few more of my skeletons in to help her, but couldn't use my poison spells for fear of hitting her.

Back to my Drake, I saw that it was using the tried and true method of tail whipping the backs of my minions' knees, but my skeletons were much stronger than the last time I was here so the effect was less impressive. Each hit did knock them off kilter and on occasion was enough to leave them venerable, so I took more control of the skeletons in order to help them better handle the issue.

I forced the three skeletons fighting the Drake to spread out a bit, giving my four gunners a clearer view and moving my last spare skeleton into place so that it could intercept if the drake tried to make a break for it. I then dropped a Miasma/Poison Bomb pair into the melee, ensuring the Drake was even worse off.

This allowed a steadier rate of fire for my ranged minions, and that drew the Drake's attention. However, I also had my skeletons attack in mass a little more aggressively than normal. The Drake took advantage and managed to snake its head around one of the skeleton's shields, over its hips, and then bit down through the spine. This instantly killed the skeleton but left the Drake open to two retaliatory strikes.

The Drake tried to rush through the opening and toward freedom. It seemed to shimmer, then blur with the surroundings. I'd heard of this ability but had never had the opportunity to see it activate. Still, it wasn't as effective a camouflage as actual invisibility and the creature wasn't moving at full speed, its injuries and my poison doing their job.

So manual control of where the skeletons attacked gave me a chance. Many attacks still missed, but the crack of bone rifles proved the Ice Drake's undoing as I saw a suddenly blurry patch of fresh blood. With a much clearer target surrounding the Drake, attacking it was much easier.

Honestly, without the Organizer perk and those study sessions with Sandra and Adam, I wouldn't be able to do this. Originally my skeletons weren't up for something as simple as targeting nothing, they literally didn't have the brains for it. But the improvements in their elemental knots, as well as my command spells had made it possible.

Sadly, it still was a right pain to create the knots. Even if I understood better how they worked. I didn't think this would be changing any time soon.

With my Drake dead, I turned back to the fight with Dot. I had lost another two of my skeletons there because I wasn't able to focus on both fights. Still, I was unsurprised it was over already. Nodding at the completed ambush, I scanned our surroundings. Nothing to explain the fact that the level of danger I was feeling hadn't returned fully to the level it was once at. Whatever the problem, I'd be able to replace at least two of my skeletons.

After harvesting the meat, making two more skeletons, and laughing at Miles for demanding we eat lunch now, I looked at the leftover monster parts. Significantly more than we had from the Cliff Huggers, so I had my skeletons gather enough of them into one place as I slung off my backpack for a quick second to find one item in it.

Ignoring the confused looks from Dot and Miles, I pulled out a black stone just small enough to fit into the palm of my hand. It was a piece of obsidian shaped by a geomancer to be round and flat. It was a leftover from when my parents were pushing me to get into enchantment. I chose not to pop the job because it was brain-bashing boring but had kept the rock because it looked cool.

Holding it in my hand, I began casting the modified spell I had designed just for this. The remaining corpse pieces turned to dust and swirled around my hand. I was focusing on controlling the spell, uncertain it would work first time, when I felt like a hand settled on my shoulder. However, I didn't need to look to know it was all in my head. Kind of.