

THE SPELL CHANGED, JUST A HAIR, IN SOME WAY I COULDN'T quite figure out. When it was done, I was looking at a Zilena Holy Symbol that was more personalized than I'd expected. Mostly because I didn't think I would have had the control to pull it off perfectly.

The stone had shifted impossibly, now taking on the traditional shield shape, kind of similar to a guitar pick, now that I paid attention. The edges were lined with bone, and a skeletal raven was either landing or taking off in the center of the shield. The raven was made out of pale-blue Drake scales, giving the whole thing a rather impressive look. There was even a leather strap, which I immediately slipped over my head. I guess Zilena had liked my idea and decided to help.

Miles took one look at my amulet and nodded, as if he suddenly understood something. Which I thought was kind of weird.

Dot, on the other hand, narrowed her eyes. "What's that?"

"Zilena's Holy Symbol," I said stepping closer so she could see it easily enough.

"The fuck is Zilena? Some idol Necromancers follow?"

"Not an idol, bitch," I snapped. The only people who I'd heard use the term idol figured the new gods were all secretly evil.

"Oh? Touch a nerve?" Dot started.

"Can we just get something to eat? Kathrine can worship anyone she wants," Miles tried to interject.

"All the pagan idols are idols! They have no interest in humanity outside of what we can do for them!"

"Which makes their motives for doing things easy to understand. None of these 'mysterious ways' arguments,"

I countered.

“The old gods were interested in us before the system and its ability to get something from us! Of course they’re motivated by good.” Dot took a step toward me, clearly pissed about something.

“Prove it! There’s no reliable evidence of any kind of miracle from before the system,” I countered, not giving ground. Not to her.

“Of course not, you would call it unreliable if there was any kind of miracle in it,” Dot growled back.

“No, I’d look up the majority of historians’ views on authenticity, because I don’t know anything about determining that,” I shot back.

Miles stepped between us, snapping me out of some of my anger. “Ladies, please. Let’s go eat something and let our tempers cool. Get off the ice shelf too, no need for the added stress. Shall we?”

I nodded curtly and made sure I had my skeletons set up in a defensive ring around me and Miles. Dot gritted her teeth and I felt a spike of danger coming from her specifically. However, it faded slowly but didn’t actually leave. Those original spikes that I’d had difficulty tracking must have come from Dot as well. I needed to avoid spending too much time around her.

Lunch was a tense affair for me. Dot remained in a bad mood but said nothing, and the “danger” I was sensing from her seemed to remain slightly elevated. At first. It slowly receded over the course of the lunch, yet I couldn’t shake that rather large spike that had come only minutes ago.

On the other hand, the food was good and Miles knew a thing or two about sushi and showed that he had

brought some extra ingredients to liven things up, so we ate really well.

Miles ignored the tension, though he remained mostly quiet. Clearly not willing to tip off another fight. I did think I caught sympathetic glances in my direction, but I had no honest idea if that was true at all.

Either way, it was time for the more annoying part of the day, we were going crab hunting. Heading deeper into the dungeon, we passed near another group of Divers. We exchanged greetings and one of the Divers mentioned he enjoyed my posts, which was nice. Though that was awkward as hell and resulted in Dot ranting about how my videos made her seem like an angry bitch.

The biggest part of that moment was the realization that all the “danger” I’d been sensing from her had disappeared at some point. One could argue that this meant people could control their actions, free will and all that. But I found it harder to trust Dot knowing she was at least potentially dangerous.

I couldn’t claim I was ever going to trust her, but this had shifted even my willingness to assume she would do her job at all times. I’d have to keep my guard up even more, great.

On the other hand, Dot was right about my episodes in principle; I never claimed to be showing Dot in the best light, but her attitude here definitely didn’t help anyone else believe that she was normally much calmer than they picked up from my videos. Shouldn’t be that surprising, really.

After that diversion, we finished making our way over to the crabs. Miles was delighted, as the crabs were apparently “very cool.” The length of the first fight impressed Miles; despite the difference in power between

the crab and the two of us, it still took a lot of time to punch through the crab's shell.

Miles was super impressed by the fight, which was an amateur view of the thing. The whole fight was simple pattern repetition. A hard grind of chipping away at the armor of the monster, impressive-looking but not difficult.

While he was talking, I moved my skeletons over to the crab and flipped it on its back. Obviously this caught everyone's attention.

"So, what are you doing?" Miles asked.

"I wanted crab meat the next time I go in the dungeon. Plus, this stuff is valuable, so I'm grabbing extra as well for sale. Much like the Ice Drake meat," I answered as my skeletons finally managed to flip the thing.

"If it's valuable, why's there no one else out here?" Miles said.

"Mostly because it's time-consuming to get and there are less annoying sources of meat. You saw how long it took to bring this one down."

"Ah! And if there are other rock fields..." Mark nodded in understanding.

"Yup. Plus, you have to go out of your way to get here. All in all, not worth it all the time unless you have another reason to be here," I agreed. "I have a friend who's studying dungeon economics. Much to his frustration, things like 'it's annoying to hunt' have actual effects on the supply side of the equations."

Mark nodded. "So the meat is still good after all the poison?"

"Of course not," Dot snapped. "Fucking idiots, letting Necromancers sell food to people and getting them sick."

“Once the spell runs out the poison ceases to exist,” I ignored Dot. “Besides, it wasn’t alive long enough for the poison to get into the muscles and do damage that might affect it. I’ve been working on one that might cause that issue, but I won’t use it on any monsters I plan to eat.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Damaging the muscles would be useful for more dangerous creatures against whom my current stock of poisons isn’t as effective.”

Our conversation continued on until the next crab. Oddly, Dot didn’t get involved again until the next crab.

“You got the meat for the last crab, this one’s mine,” Dot said.

“Of course, I’ll just flip it for you.”

“Don’t talk like you’re actually doing anything,” she mumbled, almost low enough that I almost missed it.

Once the crab was flipped I kept an eye on my surroundings, just in case something silly happened. For almost three minutes no one moved, though Dot kept staring at me. Miles seemed confused as to what was happening. But eventually I got tired of waiting.

“Well, are you going to harvest your crab meat?” I asked pleasantly.

“Don’t be absurd, you’re a lot better at this than I am.”

“You know what they say, practice makes perfect,” I agreed. My butchering and skinning skills were advanced thanks to all the work I’d done harvesting ingredients when hunting alone.

Dot made a nasty face but stomped toward the crab. Say what you will about rich idiots who pay to see a dungeon, but Miles’ face told me he wasn’t impressed with

Dot's attitude. Though I'd caught him appreciating her figure, and he just shrugged at me when I did.

Not that I would complain, I understood the importance of attraction and all that. But I did wish he was more subtle about it. Or at least acted like getting caught was a big deal. It would have at least made me feel better.

After twenty minutes of Dot grumbling and complaining that she had to do disgusting work, we headed out yet again. We killed a few more crabs and headed back toward the entrance of the dungeon. By this time Miles was getting too tired to talk.

The trip wasn't without conversation, unfortunately. Dot had decided to return to form and kept spewing her bullshit. I had no idea what was happening, but I concentrated on not engaging. Yet this seemed to only make her even more angry. Until about the same time we stopped to make camp. We were close enough to the exit to be out in an hour or two, perfect for the "pay to win" dungeon trip we were providing.

"Ok, just shut up and listen for a bit." Dot pointed right at my face. "You're a complete waste of space! Nothing you did today was necessary and I could have handled everything on my own!"

"So you can force a dozen Styires to fight you? And not go after the client?" I asked carefully. Aware of our audience.

"We never fought a dozen Styires!"

"Just twenty minutes ago we fought thirteen, so I guess you're technically right. But that wasn't the question. Do you have any taunting ability? To keep the monsters attacking you and not Miles."

Dot just spun back and started stomping off. She then threw down her pack and started unpacking.

Miles sighed and shook his head. "I have no idea what she's going on about."

"She seems determined to make me look hateful, rather than simply acknowledging the truth. I just wish I had a way to deal with her."

Miles chuckled as we followed suit and started getting our equipment out. "You can't. People like her are really good at turning anything to their advantage."

I sighed and continued on. "I can't figure out if she remembers I haven't sabotaged my own cameras like the guild suggests. Everything she says gets uploaded to Dungeon Mapper."

Miles looked interested. "I can go back and watch this dive?"

"In complete unedited glory. I also run a channel, NecroDive, if you want to see the edited version focused mostly on the fun parts."

Miles raised an eyebrow. "I guess the assumption is that you're always being recorded. I can't imagine why she would think that things are different in a dungeon?"

"The Sanctified Devils guide 'suggests' you disable your armor's cameras to show your teammates you trust them. Failure to do so gets you complained at about twice a week saying that all the team dynamics issues are your fault," I snorted. "I've gotten very good at ignoring the lectures at this point."

Miles laughed and we finished setting up. At least he had a moment of clarity.

We went about preparing a Styire soup and getting the camp set up for the night. I showed Miles how we made the decision that this would be a good spot and we discussed the next day's activities. We would cut over to the edge of the Scraggs for a quick look at the rest of the dungeon, then we would head back to the gate. All in all, we should be out of the dungeon in about three hours.