

Acceleration
Friday – 11.24.62

< Go Get 'em: Zilena supports any idea that will improve the conditions for Divers. The development of the proposed mages' guild has been blessed as a part of this. Those affected by this blessing will have an enhanced Charisma attribute when it comes to presenting their case to others. This blessing will be lost when the guild is formed, or when individuals seek to create a form of guild that does not improve the life of those it's seeking to help.

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WELL, THE IDEA OF ASKING FOR A GROUP BLESSING HAD worked better than I expected. Charisma wasn't an attribute that combat jobs utilized. Unlike in most pre-system video games, you couldn't wink seductively at a monster and suddenly it started working for you. Or whatever.

Fortunately, this didn't stop me from picking up a more normal blessing.

< Preservation: As a follower of Zilena, you already stand closer to the edge of death than is normal for your race. As a result, you're less susceptible to the normal failures of the physical body. This blessing amplifies that protection.

Pain, blood loss, lack of oxygen, fear of death, and injury are less debilitating than normal. I'm sorry. Lasts fourteen days. >

More normal, not actually normal. And made even odder by the fact that the only personal touch was an apology. But the timing of the blessing left a lot of uncertainty surrounding when shit was going bad. The most disturbing part was that I had to wonder if the problem was coming this outing, or at some hypothetical future time. It was hard to tell the difference.

However, whatever else was happening, I was 100% certain we made too much noise with the "mages' guild" idea. Just before arriving at the Rat Way today to act, somewhat serendipitously, as magical support for a group that hired me, I received a phone call where I was officially fired from the Sanctified Devils for failure to conform to their mode of conduct.

I, of course, demanded written documentation for legal reasons, and hopefully I'd have it by the time I'd woken up tomorrow. I always need to sleep all day after a Rat Way hunt. Mr. Witt actually thought it might be possible to use the weight of everyone's experiences to show that the Sanctified Devils had created a "hostile" work environment. Nothing I could do now, but things were looking up. Minus the probably going to nearly die sometime in the next two weeks.

Much like every time I was escorting someone in a dungeon alone, I'd arrived early enough to pre-make my skeletons. I even had enough bodies to experiment a little. These kinds of things were necessary to push my knowledge skills to higher levels. Recently I'd managed to catch my Golem Creation knowledge up with Bone and Poison. Now it was just a matter of filling out all my knowledge.

Anyway, my clients were two fighters and a rifleman, Alex, Elizabeth, and Jordan. No idea who was who, but when we talked on the phone they seemed chill enough. However, this time they were all of similar level to myself, being level 8 or 9 in actuality. The reason was that we were going deeper into the Rat Way, an area dangerous enough for a group at our level. This left me quite hopeful that not only would I make bank, but I'd gain a lot of valuable experience. Yet, the warning of Zilena's blessing had me uncertain what would happen. I shouldn't be worried for no reason, two weeks left a lot of time, but I couldn't help it.

The three of them walked up to me a little confused. I didn't blame them, the universe wasn't far, and Necromancers were one example of that truth. Of course, their confusion might be about why I was already here with a squad of skeletons.

"Kathrine? I'm Elizabeth." The woman walked forward with her hand out.

"Yup," I say as I shook her hand. "That's me. When doing the Rat Way I like to get here first and stock up on skeletons. It just makes that first fight safer for everyone involved."

That seemed to clear up the confusion. Alex and Jordan introduced themselves and we stepped inside, heading for the hunt we were looking for.

“So, how does that make the first fight safer?” Alex asked.

“Simple really, the only way I can fight without access to minions is massive quantities of poison gas. As one might expect, this doesn’t work well for group fights in tight spaces. I actually poisoned myself this time.”

“You okay to go along?” Elizabeth asked.

“Of course. I’ve been poisoning myself a lot recently to build up the poison resistance skill. It’s quite useful, though I think my more potent poisons actually ignore some levels of that skill now. So I guess I’ve got to keep rising the skill level.” I just shrugged. “It sounds weird, but it’s really a necessary part of using poison as your main attack.”

Elizabeth shook her head; however, Alex chuckled. “Sometimes I forget we aren’t playing a video game, and this is one of those things that make that hard to remember.”

I had to agree, but this group was a little special. All of them looked to be in their forties. I had verification that they were the levels they claimed to be, but it seems like they’d decided to dungeon dive as a midlife crisis or something. Kind of weird. But they were also old enough to remember the arrival of the system, which I’d love to pick their brains over. Though how you asked how their lives had changed with the system, I had no idea.

I grinned as we heard the clacking of claws, questions would have to wait for later. As always, the first fight seemed to come just before we got into the wider areas of the dungeon. Following Elizabeth's directions, we ended up taking a different path from what I took when creating my skeletons. Which meant this was likely to be a full fight.

The first fight proved my point spectacularly. With the cramped quarters, my clients couldn't really fight, not without risking hitting my skeletons. Yet we still managed. I noted that my skeletons could now handle a lot more damage before falling apart, and that the bullets from friendly fire, which happened despite everyone being careful, were not doing as much damage to my skeletons as you'd expect.

Once done, I needed to replace three of my skeletons, but I took a moment to get good shots with my phone of the damaged sections of my skeletons. Seeing the shattered remains of rib cages settling into their proper place, despite clearly missing sections of bone and not being a single piece any more, was just too cool not to share with my followers.

"You've never seen this before?" Jordan asked while also examining a damaged section.

"Nope. Don't use guns often enough to have noticed something like this. Generally speaking, a punch or bite is going to pull a lot more mass out of the skeleton," I answered. "The few clients I've had armed with weapons have had shotguns."

Once I had my little video completed, I moved onto replacing my damaged minions.

Minion mixture for me right now was four ranged skeletons and eight ax-wielding and shield-bearing minions. I could make swords, but axes had worked so well for me until now that I didn't see the point. Things might change if my current minion experiments worked out well enough.

With that done we moved to the dungeon proper with much more room and started heading for our destination. Elizabeth and her crew had a contract to collect Lurker parts, so we were headed toward a part of the dungeon I'd avoided up until now.

Lurkers were inky black monsters that seemed to haunt a section of the dungeon which devoured light. It wasn't just this area of the dungeon that did this, the Lurkers themselves had tails that sucked the light out of the area around them, because why would things be easy? My mage light spell, combined with the enchanted lights that were apparently provided for this job, clearly stopped working as well as they should the moment we stepped into the region.

We stopped at that point to eat an early meal. While we were fixing our Way Fisher soup, complete with some leftover crab meat we all had, Jordan asked a question I think we were all nervous about.

"Right, what advice did you guys run into surrounding fighting Lurkers?"

"They like to hang out in deep patches of shadows, which is somehow more like a fog in this section of the dungeon," I answered quickly. "I figured I'll use my cheapest Poison Bomb spell in an attempt to flush them out when we spot sections like that."

Elizabeth nodded. "Lurkers are also hard to pin down due to the way shadows move around them, making their exact location hard to track. It's suggested you spread fire around the area it appears in."

"Which is why we've got feats to make that easier," Alex cut in.

I grinned. "That sounds good. The Lurkers will also reveal their location when they impact with my melee skeletons. I'm going to order them to be more defensive when fighting Lurkers. So we should also have that advantage."

"That's useful. I didn't know you could give complicated orders like that."

"In practice it's a lot more complicated. I'll have to send the order to each skeleton as needed. But I've sort of set up the behavioral commands I can use. I use the same set-up for Ice Drakes, block instead of counter. But you have to switch the skeletons back and forth in real time," I explained as best as I could.

The group nodded; I had no idea if they just accepted what I said or if they were being polite. But we continued to share more strategy tips. Once we were done, it was time to head deeper into the darkest part of the dungeon.

It was weird, the light sources near us didn't seem any dimmer than normal, yet the light clearly didn't fall as far as normal. Similarly, the greater the distance between us and a light source, the dimmer it looked. It really was as if the light in the area was being consumed in some weird way.

The first patch of inky dark smog revealed nothing, even as we passed it. So I guess it was empty. The next one

was much bigger, however, and a Poison Bomb was met with a number of chattering voices and then a large mass of shadows burst from the darkness. I immediately ordered my skeletons at the front to take a knee; the shadows were just as tall as a Ratiger, which made me suspicious of the monster's actual height.

My three clients opened up at the same time, spraying fire in a wide angle into the darkness. Screeches, sounding more like anger than pain, poured out, but the wave of blackness still hit the shield wall. I dropped a couple of Miasma Bombs in the darkness and followed up with a couple of Poison Bombs.

I pulled two more of my melee skeletons to the front, as my skeletons could no longer move as much and could not fully block the hallway with only six skeletons. While my skeletons having to take a knee to block the apparently midget monsters was unfortunate, it was far better than having to fight them in close combat.

Killing these monsters took more effort than one would expect, given the apparent size of the monsters. Sections of the darkness popped up, the monsters apparently climbing on top of the shields. These raised sections of darkness quickly became the main target for all the guns in the fight. My ranged minions had better luck knocking the monsters off their perch, but the others definitely killed any they caught at the top of the shield wall.

Unfortunately, my offense was limited to poison and my ranged skeletons. The kneeling skeletons didn't have enough room for really good swings given this type of enemies, only really having room for overhead chops. A small amount of an angle was possible, but without much horizontal movement the attacks missed more often than not. Still worth the time every now and then.

All the while I was splitting my attention to keep an eye on what was behind me. I didn't know if anything would come from behind in this portion of the dungeon, but I wasn't about to find out the hard way. Especially because I only had two spare skeletons to work with in case of a rear assault.

Whether through fortune or different rules for this part of the dungeon, fifteen minutes after the fighting started and we weren't assaulted from behind. However, we were definitely ragged. The others were in desperate need of refilling the magazines they kept on hand for reloading, and my skeletons had taken a stupid beating.

While it was definitely fortunate that we didn't lose a skeleton, I wasn't certain that would remain true as we continued deeper into this part of the dungeon. After all, many of my skeletons had taken significant damage to their skulls, and I couldn't fully remove them from the situation yet. Or create helmets for them.

I let the others replace their expended magazines with the extra ammunition they brought while I got a start on harvesting. The Lurkers we had killed so far were now visible, kind of. They looked like a dark-blue version of

those big-headed “shrunk head” zombies that sometimes appears in fiction.

The Lurkers stood about two-and-a-half to three feet tall, though one or two were clearly taller and had an oversized head. They seemed to use this to attack, because their head had a heavy bone-like plate on it that definitely protected them that was kind of pointed to increase the effects of a headbutt. Plus, their arms were too scrawny to be of much use.

They also had a bunch of these weird, muscular but very small, tentacle-like tails that seemed to project shadows or consume light, and was what they used to create the “cloud” of shadows around their body. This was also what we were here to collect.

Handling these tails was beyond weird, however. The shadows right next to the tails felt like thick air, as nonsensical as that sounded. Your hands could move through it, but you still felt it. It was almost like water, but far too “airy” to make that analogy work. Plus, there was no residue. I also spent the entire time harvesting these tails wondering if the shadows were hot or cold. Because I was sure they were one or the other, just not which one.

Each of the monsters had dozens of these thin tentacle-like tails, many of which were broken in our attempts to kill the monsters. The contract, according to my clients, was for primarily unbroken tails, removed at the connection point between the monster and the tentacle. Some broken ones were harvested, however, just in case

this was useful to the people who put forward our contract.

From what I learned, these were for a scientist looking for practical uses. Which, if they found some, would change things greatly. After all, I'd listened to enough of Eric's rants to know a lot more people would hunt Lurkers if someone found a practical use for them. The value of the tails would go up dramatically, and the risk-reward ratio would change as a result.

I had no idea if that was a good thing or not, but it was a thing that crossed my mind as we harvested these tentacles. After all, if they became valuable enough for people to come here, I might end up fighting them far more often.

Once we had harvested a sufficient number of monsters, I stopped harvesting them and started replacing damaged skeletons. Fortunately, fifteen minutes of mini-monster mayhem had produced a rather obscene number of Lurkers. This allowed me to replace the damaged skeletons and make new weapons for two of my ranged skeletons. This way I had ten ax wielders and shield bearers, as well as two ranged minions. I didn't want to drop the ranged ones completely. However, I wasn't going to risk an attack from behind again.

Unfortunately, I was getting worried about the upfront costs of creating skeletons. I might need a repair spell just to avoid overcasting. No need to suffer through that problem if I could avoid it.