

The Plains
Saturday – 12.2.62

THE NEXT MORNING WE WATCHED THE LAST OF THE WATER tumble over the edge to reveal the wide and still-wet plains. Sunlight glistened through grass as what must have been torrents of water started draining out of the area. It was a rather impressive sight, all things considered.

“Well. I don’t know what to say. How far was the walk to this point?” George asked.

“About six kilometers in a straight line. So half of the distance to the forest,” I said. “It took longer than expected thanks to regular monster attacks and the lack of a straight line to follow.”

Zak grinned, being way to much of a morning person. “That’s why we came down here last night. Don’t want to lose it in the shuffle.”

George grinned a little bit, but we went back to getting breakfast done. I glanced at Kelly and Zak, who were both checking out up and down the path. I glanced around as well but didn’t see any Cliff Huggers.

“Do they spawn close enough to attack?” I asked quietly.

“Not that I know of.”

“Never seen it happen myself.”

With both of our “veteran” plain runners stating they hadn’t seen it happen, I figured it was just caution and turned to George. He was programming his drone. A pang of jealousy shot through me. He had one of the stealth camera drones, and this one was rated for dungeons like

this one in which any kind of radio signal was asking for death and thus was piloted by a basic AI without any remote control.

The drone itself was stealthy, using a honeycomb electric induction engine, nearly silent while underpowered. Still, it was perfect for this moment, though George had to carry a new battery for each day of use. I'd love to have such a thing for my own uses.

"Hey, George, could I bum the video off you for my YouTube channel?"

That triggered a laughing fit from George. "Of course. Can't really believe how long you held off asking that."

I blushed but grinned. The drone footage would be very useful.

After setting up the drone, George tested some gesture commands, checking to make sure everything was working right on his device before unplugging it from the drone and sending it out. We then broke down camp and started back down the path.

The rest of the way down was much like the first part, heading down to the end of this path and finding another switchback, unsurprisingly. We were attacked twice by a Hugger, once at the switchback and once just after we had all climbed down and started walking away. Only the second one killed a skeleton, as it caught us by surprise from behind.

The rest of the trip went about the same, though I lost three more skeletons on the way down. I was only a little worried, between the helmet and all my other less obvious advancements, my skeletons should be able to hold up. That, combined with the three of us working together, meant we were significantly more capable of dealing with

monsters than one might think. Plus, much like the Scrags we'd just come from, the monsters on the plains were more predictable the closer you were to an entrance.

Two hours after starting out we had made it to the ground level. The last leg of the journey passed without attack, though apparently this was a bit odd. According to Zak and Kelly.

The grass was also a welcome change from the dull browns and grays of stone. Less nice were the sections of tall grass, or the fact that the sun felt much hotter down here. I had no idea if that was the result of weird dungeon effects or just a more humid atmosphere. But whatever the cause, it was hot and humid. And that made my armor even more uncomfortable.

The plains weren't really "plains"; instead, they were a series of hills and valleys, with taller grass in the valleys giving off a false impression of relatively even ground. These high grass areas were where you could find some of the monsters in this region. Even the non-ambush types were in there often enough.

So we found a good spot to defend, close to a single patch of tall grass but distant from any other. Jabbing the butt of my war scythe into the ground, I lobbed a pair of Miasma Bombs into the brush and immediately rearmed myself. And I had a third spell prepped in my free hand as I heard a chirping sound coming from the grass.

As soon as the groups of Velociraptors left the grass, I dropped that spell on top of them as well. And yes, I said Velociraptor. Complete with a layer of feathers. Three burst through my gas cloud almost insistently, and I managed to prep and fire another Miasma Bomb at two raptors that swerved around the gas cloud to the far side.

Sadly I only managed to get one of those, though Kelly went to intercept.

I could hear the shields popping and cracking from the impact of the three charging raptors, but at least my skeletons had held up. The axes chopped down but apparently couldn't dig all that deep into the raptor's hides. Zak summoned a number of his glowing swords, some of which went to help Kelly, and I turned around to the flank of the line and swung my scythe at the raptor. It was fast enough to dodge backward, but the extra range of my polearm meant it was forced to reengage my skeleton or risk taking hits from my weapon in the side, giving me a chance to attack again.

Double-checking that Kelly was all right, I noticed Zak had managed to land a fire beam into the side of one of her opponents so I wasn't that worried.

A second swipe at the raptor allowed me to open a gash in its arm, lobbing off a number of feathers. The raptor hissed, and I could sense a little magic moving through its arm.

Ignoring my discovery, I realigned myself as the raptor's distraction cost it dearly and an ax found the side of its neck perfectly, causing it to bleed profusely, apparently hitting an important vein. Two light swords also landed a hit on its side. This distraction allowed me to align myself along the edge of the skeleton line and breathe out some Toxic Breath while sweeping my scythe in front of me to discourage a charge.

This did the trick, and I needed to think about a better way of applying this kind of poison, because the three raptors were suddenly much weaker.

The first to go down was the one I'd injured. And this allowed myself, the light swords, and the two skeletons fighting it to turn and start surrounding the others. However, this was a little slow, as both the other raptors managed to get their jaws around the skeletons heads and crush them. Yet, this left them open to gunshots from my ranged skeletons and a flurry of blows from the rest of us. I only managed to score one more hit on the last raptor before it died.

As soon as we were done, I turned to the other two and kind of glared. Only to get a grin from Kelly.

"You were doing fine, and we would have jumped in if you needed help," Kelly stated while Zak nodded along.

"Fine. Not a bad thing anyways, I did get something out of it."

< Tactics (melee) I has been created!

Tactics (melee) I has been made an Other (Major) skill!

Polearms (Bone-Forged) IV has become Polearms (Bone-Forged) V >

The tactics skill seemed to be a knowledge skill in how to create a unit using old-style melee units. Which made a lot of sense. The weapon skill was quite useful, as I would need a lot of it to fight in the process. I highly expected to get a path around the idea of powerful weapons. I didn't know if I'd go down that path this time, it would depend on the way things went on the way to that choice.

"I might not be able to replace all my lost skeletons on one fight. But this could be a good way to start," I said, ignoring my companions leaving me to finish off the raptors.

George smiled as he looked around. "So, how close was that?"

I was actually interested and turned to Kelly as she answered. "Not close at all. Both me and Zak were lined up to finish the monsters off if anything went wrong. And Kathrine's weapon was a stand-off one, she wasn't really at risk of the raptors closing in."

That made me smile. I was glad to see that I was able to contribute to this hunt. Not too surprised, however, I was right at the level that a small group could start hunting down here if they were better than average, and all of us preformed above the "standard" set of combat jobs.

A quick check of my status and some calculations had me making around 9 or 10% progress off this fight. "Looks like I could make level 10 today!"

I ignored the snickers as we turned to harvesting. Raptor claws were useful in some alchemy and their meat was pretty good, making it preferred for the next couple of meals and worth carrying out of the dungeon as well. Zak did mention that red raptor tail feathers were valuable but rare; apparently those feathers were used in enchantment for something. Kind of cool if you thought about it.

After that, I turned the leftover bodies into skeletons and managed to have enough parts left to replace all the damaged shields. The main use of my melee skeletons, in this area, seemed to be a delaying tactic, tank attacks until something dies. The ranged skeletons weren't doing as

much damage as I would have liked. However, if I could spot a raptor attempting to pounce on a skeleton, I could disrupt the move with a volley of range fire. And of course there were other types of monsters, so I guess they were still worth having around.

So the ranged skeletons stayed for now. Besides, I'd finally managed to tack some poison onto the bullets, not nearly as much as I had on the melee weapons, but they seemed to penetrate better than the axes, so I figured it was a good move overall.

We then headed down the cliff wall and found another patch of tall grass that was sufficiently isolated. This was the general method used by most first-time hunts in the plains. It eliminated the risk of being surrounded and reduced the chance of getting turned around in the maze-like inner regions of the plains.

As we walked to the next place we were likely to fight monsters, we decided that groups of raptors should be called "pods". The biggest annoyance was the variety. Different types of raptors required different tactics. All were generally agile, especially compared to Styres, but each emphasized different things. This made them all especially difficult.

The first monsters we fought were called "Natural Raptors" because they looked the most like how people tended to view velociraptors, a mix between the ones that showed up in the movies and the ones that were thought to have once existed. They were a balanced monster, fast and durable. And common. It was inevitable that monsters were compared to each other.

As we set up for another fight, I was ready for whatever came after us. This time when the miasma went into the grass, the sounds we heard were deeper and more growl-like. When the nine monsters appeared from the grass they were different from before. These “Move Raptors” were completely without feathers and much more reptile-like. Corresponding to their appearance, these raptors were tougher and stronger. While they were slower, it was only relative to the other raptors.

This did allow me to land a small barrage of Poison and Miasma Bombs into the pod. My ranged skeletons were able to target these monsters effectively as well. Combined with beams of fire from Zak, we managed to bring one down before the raptors crossed even half the distance to us.