

AN IDEA CAUSED ME TO ISSUE NEW ORDERS, SPREADING THE minions out. This caused the Clobber to slow as it reared up on its legs, both fists above its heads. The fists glowed red, and I barley registered what that meant before they were brought down to the ground.

I could feel the ground shaking from twenty feet away; the two closest skeletons fell to the ground and the more distant ones stumbled. The two furthest from the Clobber recovered first, and I ordered them to charge in. One of the fallen skeletons was killed a second later by a short hop of the Clobber, and a side swipe from its massive hand cracked the shield of the skeleton next to it. Still off-balance this skeleton fell over, but the Clobber couldn't take advantage as Kelly rushed in and landed several blows into its side, avoiding the thicker armor along its back before slipping away from its retaliation.

My first skeletons arrived at that point and formed a ring around the Clobber. My ranged skeletons continued firing, but they seemed to have difficulty causing much bleeding, as their rounds seemed to be bouncing off the armored plates along the creature's arms and chest. I hoped the chips I saw flying off were pieces of plate armor, not the bones I was shooting at them.

Ax hits were only marginally better, they too skipped off armored plates. However, each hit from the Clobber's arms cracked shields, and the damage I was causing had limited effects. It seemed the massive Clobber was less affected by poison or damage. I needed to change tactics a little bit.

I did, however, have a good idea of the range of the creature's fists. So I moved forward carefully with my large weapon and found an angle that would let me strike through the ring of skeletons. Ordering one with a nearly busted shield to step back and be replaced with a fresh

melee skeleton, I took advantage of the momentary breach in the ring to chop down at the Clobber's neck.

My scythe cut a bit into the unarmed portion of its neck but got stopped by a heavy armored plate. I pulled back just as the replacement skeleton moved in and breathed out a cloud of poisonous gas.

I was only mildly surprised when the foggy Clobber clapped his hands together, scattering the poison with a shock wave. I was close enough that I breathed in a bit of my own poison, but it wasn't much, and I was used to that at this point. Not certain that was a good thing.

Kelly rushed in and jabbed twice into its armpit, hands glowing red, then twisted around the clumsy retaliation to throw a few more attacks into the monster's other side and slip out past my skeleton ring again.

This attack slowed its movement, allowing three of my skeletons to land more ax hits on its back. One of the axes deflected off the spine armor only to dig into a previous wound. This cause the Clobber to roar in pain, and I ordered all of my skeletons back.

I was slow retreating. As the Clobber charged forward and smashed the closest skeleton to it into the ground, the monster then raised its hands again, only to see two of my skeletons' bone shots dig into its flesh next to the plates. Recognizing the same attack as before, I tried ordering all my skeletons to plant their feet. The feat-enhanced ground pound obliterated the prone skeleton and threw all my others off-balance. But a fiery beam burned into the Clobber's face.

I managed to catch myself by planting my scythe into the ground. This time the Clobber didn't take advantage of its attack because it was distracted trying to swipe away the beam to the face.

Zak's beam ran out about the same time as my skeletons recovered. This allowed them to close in, but I also made sure to leave a wider opening for ranged attacks. I also ordered the ones behind the Clobber, that were less damaged so far, to be more aggressive, hoping it would turn around.

At this point it was clear the Clobber was going to fall. Unfortunately, so were my skeletons. A third one was destroyed almost immediately after that. Kelly managed to get a solid shot in on the monster's knee, and from the way it fell to the ground and didn't immediately recover the damage was significant. Yet it continued to absorb plenty of punishment from all three of us.

With the monster trapped on the ground, the conclusion was inevitable. The Clobber was moving too slow to get a solid hit on my skeletons, and it was sufficiently injured to prevent it from moving fast enough tackle another skeleton to the ground. This allowed us to take our time finishing the monster off. Kelly would slip through the line whenever she had an opening. Zak would use his fiery beam to really put on the heat. And I took every opportunity to get a slash or cut in with my scythe.

This continued for a minute or two until the constant punches finally shattered one of the skeleton's shield arms, despite its shield still being intact.

Seeing that, all three of us redoubled our efforts, not wanting to see how many skeletons we could lose. A minute later the creature finally stopped moving.

"Wow. That thing took way too much to kill!" George shouted, apparently still pumped up on adrenaline.

"Yeah. That's a Clobber," Kelly said. "I knew we could handle it, but it does take a long time. Which allows for a lot more errors. Thankfully, Kathrine's minions allowed me to be more deliberate in my attacks."

I grinned, having just checked my progress increase from this fight. "I have to say though, all of my skeletons are in bad shape. Even if the high density of the Clobber's body allows me to make more than one skeleton from it, I won't be up to full strength until I can replace all of them."

Zak rolled his eyes at my grin. "Well, it's time for lunch anyways, and much to everyone's annoyance, Clobbers aren't worth anything. So replace your skeletons and let's go." It seemed he was finding amusement at my desperation to hit level 10.

I was able to make three skeletons from the creature's stupidly dense body. But even with that there were issues. Mostly in the near-shattered skeletons. It seemed the monster's hits were really good at transmitting damage through the skeletal structures.

I swapped the ones with sufficiently intact arms with my ranged ones, which meant I had six new skeletons on the front line and two that were really only useful as distractions. Fortunately, I had a lunch break to work out the best use of these things.

Lunch was something of an anti-climax. The raptor meat was great, a more flavorful chicken that Kelly grilled on a skillet she'd brought for the purpose. Something I was going to need before coming down here. I didn't think raptor meat would be good in a stew.

The next fight was simple enough, the pod of raptors being the more reptilian, movie variation. Despite the damage to my skeletons, this meant the fight was about minimizing more damage and increasing damage output. It took longer, but I was able to refresh all my skeletons when we were done.

I still needed a repair spell. And I still hadn't made one. Partly because of the difficulty in making one, partly

because I was often distracted by far easier and more “practical” spells.

After each fight I continued to check my progress. Unfortunately, we didn’t run into another Clobber, which was a major problem for me. As it grew closer to time to climb back up the cliff wall, I was getting closer and closer to the next level. And yet, we weren’t hitting enough monsters. Unlike the Rat Way, which backfilled quickly, our trek back toward the path we took down was much more sparsely populated. And leaving me at 98.7% of the way to level 10 with nothing but Styires and Cliff Huggers to push the rest over.

I really, really needed that extra little something that came from the next path. The Bone Shaper bonus I’d been getting hadn’t been quite as useful as it had been at first. This was partly because any changes were harder to achieve these days, and part of it was because I experimented a lot and thus had learned some of what it was teaching me.

In other words, it was time to get a new path bonus. Or to dig deeper into the skeleton branch. Whatever it ended up being.

Based on the progress I’d been making, I expected level 10 to come around sometime tomorrow. If not then, I’d have to wait until the next time I could get inside a freaking dungeon. I didn’t want to wait that long. Especially because I’d have to do some freaking work outside the dungeon before anything new I learned could be made use of.

As we climbed out of the plains we learned that getting my skeletons up was a right pain in the ass. They weren’t particularly good at climbing. And getting impatient only made it worse, as they lacked the coordination to go quickly. The only real positive part was that they were

light, bones generally only weighed about 15% of a person's body weight and could jump fairly high as a result.

This allowed them to jump high enough for me to grab their hands if I was on my belly. I could drag them up that way. Kelly and Zak helped as well, and to our amusement, this was faster than going down.

We ended up eating dinner on the side of the cliff about halfway up. It was an impressive view hanging off the side of the cliff overlooking the wilds, but I couldn't really enjoy it. I was less than half a percent of the way from level 10. And it drove me insane that I might not make it today.

At this point I was wondering if I should turn right around and walk back in after seeing George off tomorrow. Unfortunately, that would be a really bad idea because I was really tired, strung out from the extra fighting, and it would fall under evidence of "she's pushing herself to hard," which left me grumbling and unhappy. Somehow this was amusing to Zak the dick.

After dinner we continued to push up the side of the cliff only a few hours from leaving, and I was the only one trying not to spoil the mood because I wanted to stay as long as possible. We made it off the cliff without issue, but I was still staring at 99.9%. I didn't know if I'd manage that last bit. Fighting Cliff Huggers on the edge of a cliff had to give more progress than Styires at this point.

At the end of our third Styire battle I froze, the level-up notification ringing in my head. "Finally!"

"Got your level 10 advancement, did you? Good. Now pop the notification and make your choice later," Zak said tiredly.