

I THEN HEADED TOWARD THE NEXT SET OF ROCKS. LIKE before, there were two duds before the next hit. And this time I just focused on taking out the pincers first. This made things both faster and easier. My second brain was in the bag comparatively quickly, and with less damage than before.

One last crab to hunt down. I even had over two hours to get it done, yet I could hear the repeated crack of gunfire echoing through the dense sections of stone. No idea where it came from. I guess that explained the dearth of crabs. Someone else was here and I was only running into the backfilling crabs.

Well, it didn't matter at the moment. I moved in a different direction, which hopefully got me out of the area affected by the other group. Thus, I was unlikely to be in real competition for total number of crabs. Hopefully they weren't getting in over their heads, because of all the echoes I had no idea where they actually were.

With three brains in my bag, I started back toward the dungeon entrance. At some point during the last fight the shooting had stopped. I guess the others had finished their fight as well. I wanted to grab some Cliff Hugger brains, but did I have time? I kind of did, so yeah. I just didn't know if I could find any quickly.

Of course, the only places where Cliff Huggers were guaranteed were the paths down to the plains—which would be nearly impossible to find in the time I had—and the “swarm” canyons, which would be stupid. I didn't need to kill twenty or thirty Cliff Huggers in one go to get a handful of brains.

So I headed toward the back wall. I hadn't seen a Cliff Hugger near the glacial canyon from before, but if I walked back along that wall there was a chance they'd show up as well. Best chance I had for the bonus. Cutting around the riskiest parts for fighting multiple crabs, I headed toward the cliffs, only to stumble on someone I really didn't want to see.

"Found you, Cat." Dot's grin was vicious, showing more teeth than any honest grin should. She was a solid hundred feet away, and even from this distance something set the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

"Hello, Dot. Bad luck meeting you here. What's up?" I made no move to head toward her and instead surveyed the area around me. I didn't like what I could see. The two rock patches both myself and Dot's group passed near were likely empty of crabs. But I couldn't be sure of anything else. And there were two more patches. Hopefully this area had been hunted and I didn't have to worry about backfill yet.

I glanced at the two companions Dot had. The woman looked completely uncomfortable and had a massive shotgun as her weapon. Her heavier armor and weapon made me think she had the Thug job. Which meant she would be dangerous in close combat and hard to kill. Given the size of the shotgun she had, I wondered if she was more dangerous than Dot. Would kind of be amusing if Dot ended up in a party of higher-level people.

The man was far more relaxed than he should have been, though the helmet he was wearing and shield on his arm told me why. Bulwarks were well-known to not be bothered by much, largely because they had so many

defensive skills that, when wearing armor and using a shield, they were nearly invincible. Of course, they had little or no offensive abilities and would therefore be no better than a civilian on the offense. At least for a dozen or more levels. Which was probably why I could see a pistol grip shotgun strapped to his legs. One of the best choices for jobs that didn't enhance firearm offensive abilities.

Bulwark on guard, Dot to distract and strike from behind, and a Thug for offense. Probably the best set up for a small team without magical support. They would be severely limited on AOE, however, and as a result even Styres would take time to kill because they'd have to hit each one individually.

"I want to know why you're destroying the guild!" Dot wasn't in a good place, and it was clear that the Bulwark noticed this as well, though he shifted a little getting his shield in front of himself.

"I'm not," I answered truthfully.

"If that was true you wouldn't be trying to destroy all that Uncle Mathew built here! Did you know my family is the oldest Diver family in the city?"

"No. Though that means at most your family has been doing this for twenty years. Not that much of a legacy, right? A good start to one though," I said carefully.

"Shut the fuck up! You should respect us and bow to our superior knowledge!" Dot screamed.

"The only one I will bow to is Zilena. If you want respect, earn it or shut up," I said harshly.

"Fucking shit. Did you give yourself over to one of the so-called pagan gods?" Dot said, apparently beyond angry.

“Jesus help you. No wonder you’re in such a bad place. And I fucking wasted my time on one as corrupt as you. I’ll tell Uncle. You’ll never be able to start your guild. A fitting end, to die in obscurity.”

I raised an eyebrow at that. What the actual fuck? Dot looked, and sounded, disgusted. The hell was going on? “Well, nice to know. See you around.”

I stayed away from the other group as I angled around. I readjusted my grip on my crow’s beak and was careful to stay away from Dot. I casually flung a Poison Bomb into the stony field but had to curse silently in my head when one of the rocks stood up and headed toward me. All my ranged skeletons started firing and I moved the rest into place.

Like last time I focused on the claws, but I could feel something itching at my back. I needed to end this quickly. As a result, I ordered everything to attack the monster’s pincers. The charging monster took a face full of miasma, then I took a two-handed grip on my weapon.

My arms were getting sore, unused to the level of hard work I’d been putting in swinging around the polearm. However, I timed my attack to make maximum use of my weapon. Stepping forward, I stabbed with the spike as hard as possible, aiming right at the creature’s head just before it should have slowed down to attack my skeletons.

The result was the full force of my stab, combined with the crab’s slightly slow walk. The spike glanced off the creature’s head but buried itself deep in the neck. The impact threw me backward, and a shudder went through the weapon as I fell on my back. A glance at my weapon as

I scrambled to my feet told me the spear spike on my crow's beak had broken off.

Still, it got the job done as the monster staggered backward, bleeding from its neck. Another round of shot from my ranged skeletons to the head increased the damage in that area, and my ax-wielding skeletons used the creature's momentary confusion to deliver a number of successive blows to the creature's head. The result was a dead crab in less time than before. I just needed to remember to make the spike a lot stronger.

I had no desire to stay near Dot and co, so I ignored the crab and started off, forcing my skeletons to reform.

"No you don't!" I turned to look over my shoulder just in time to see Dot, now only about twenty-five feet away, raise a gun pointed right at me, a red glow surrounding the weapon. Her teammates were a ways behind her as she fired.

I managed to get one of my ranged skeletons between us, as time seemed to slow for a second. I could see an explosion of bone at the same time as pain blossomed in my side, below my armpit.

Screaming, I dropped to the ground, pain shooting through my whole body. A second and third shot reminded me that there were things going on, and I ordered a defensive line to form.

Sitting up was a painful experience, but it gave me a good look of Dot trying to get around my skeletons. It seemed that whatever feat she had been using wasn't in effect, even though I was down a ranged skeleton, and she couldn't punch through a shield any more. I dropped a Miasma Bomb between her and the edge of the line.