

CASTING A SPELL WHILE BLEEDING OUT WAS DIFFICULT, BUT I gritted my teeth and pushed through. I followed up with another Poison Bomb nearby and switched back to a Miasma one as the other two members of Dot's team showed up.

Any hope of them stopping her ended as the woman raised her overbuilt shotgun and blew a hole right through the shoulder of one of my skeletons. The round had been deflected by the shield, probably the only reason the skeleton still had anything in its right shoulder.

*Focus.* I shifted the focus of the three remaining ranged skeletons to the Thug and dropped more Miasma and Poison Bomb spells around Dot. The Bulwark stepped up next to my skeletons and basically prevented four of the eight from dealing with Dot, mainly because I didn't want to risk him taking a potshot with his shotgun. Alchemical rounds were possible, especially given he was Dot's ally. She had the funds for those weapons.

A triple bark from my ranged skeletons followed by a screech of pain caused me to turn to the Thug, who was on the ground, the left side of her head bloodied. I gulped, she wasn't moving. I forced myself to focus on Dot, who seemed to have avoided most of my poison so far. So the ranged skeletons turned to Dot.

I wasn't the only one to notice the Thug's fate; Dot's eyes went wide, and suddenly she was glowing with red energy. She twisted and turned around the attacks, even seeming to gain the ability to dodge as my ranged skeletons fired at her.

A few of her shots were fired in my direction, but she had given up some ground, and the bullets struck around me. I pushed myself up, not wanting to remain at risk. Getting to my feet required more effort than expected, as the pain in my side from the bullet was high.

Whatever happened, the bullet obviously hadn't penetrated that far; I hadn't started coughing up blood, which was a good sign. But the pain was tremendous. Only the need to not die was keeping it at bay.

I was down two skeletons, and it looked like Dot was about to kill another, as a flurry of shots to the head of one of the skeletons showed that she understood some of their weaknesses. These shots failed to kill it, the helmet doing its job, but eventually either enough damage would be done or a round would get through the eyes of one.

I pushed myself up with my crow's beak and considered using it against the Bulwark, but I doubted I could move fast enough to capitalize on that right now. It would take too long to get close to him, and he could block the attack.

The Bulwark struggled to load a round into his shotgun while still blocking. Unfortunately for me, he managed it and immediately fired the weapon at one of the skeletons fighting him, a lightning arc, striking skeleton and man alike.

Where skeletons were struck cracks formed in bone shields, and sections of bones were shattered. The prime target was reduced to more cracks than not, while some minor damage was done to the skeleton right next to it.

Unfortunately, the Bulwark seemed no worse for wear. He simply slammed the edge of his shield right into the half-dead skeleton, which shattered into a million pieces.

I started stumbling toward the dead crab, while not the best cover in the world, its size and hide would make for effective cover. The destruction of one of the skeletons fighting Dot pushed me to move faster, and I ordered both skeletons to charge her and attempt to bowl her over. Still glowing red, Dot easily dodged around the clumsy charge and rushed my way. I fired a couple of Miasma and Poison Bombs in her way, to buy myself time as I stumbled behind the crab. It wasn't going to cover me long with Dot charging at me, so I made sure to peek over the edge.

I continued lobbing spells and tried to watch my mana. I was pretty sure I'd managed to poison her on the rush up. I hoped she had both poisons in her, but I wouldn't bet on it. Dot started firing at my head, forcing me to duck back behind the cover periodically as rounds chipped away at the armor.

Panic gripped my throat as I tried to keep track of Dot. If I was to have any chance of this working I needed to know where she was coming from. Suddenly a fireball burst from the shell right in front of me. The heat caused me to dive backward, stumbling as my face tingled from the pain.

Had to be the Bulwark and another alchemical charge. As soon as the fire died down I poked my head up and spotted Dot heading right toward me. She was taking the short way around the crab. I stepped back and only had to wait a heartbeat. A horizontal swing of my crow's beak

forced Dot to step back, a smirk on her face which disappeared as soon as the crescent-shaped Baleful Light struck her in the chest, which I followed up with a Toxic Breath.

The barking of a gun was overwhelmed by a kick to the chest, and the next thing I knew I was laying on the ground, the pain in my chest fading a bit. The pain meant I was alive, so I forced myself to look at the sound of dry-heaving. Dot was holding herself up with one hand on her knees and only one gun while trying to puke with nothing in her stomach.

Dot must have seen me move, because said single weapon was turned on me. There was nothing I could do, any spell cast would be slower than the bullet, and I wasn't going to trust my armor to hold out against a second point-blank shot.

And at that moment a skeleton rounded the crab and ran shield-first right into Dot. Her pistol barked but no pain followed. New orders were given to the two skeletons that had been chasing Dot. Both started swinging their axes at Dot on the ground. She twisted around to avoid the axes, but all the coordination of before was gone, robbed by the impact and my poisons.

Dot's armor relied mostly on enchantments, and even magic had to follow certain rules, like energy conservation. Every ax blow weakened the whole of the enchantment, unlike traditional armors where only the damaged sections were weakened.

Dot took two hits to the side, and one on her arms, before I sensed the enchantment breaking. She had just

regained her footing when a coughing fit slowed her dodge and an arch of blood from a near hit sprouted from her side.

Dot tripped, landing on the ground as both skeletons moved forward and chopped down into her chest. It happened so fast that before I had a chance to think up new orders Dot was dead and the skeletons stopped attacking. Blood all over the place, standing out in clear contrast to the stark white of the skeletons.

I pulled my attention away from Dot as I noticed that the Bulwark was retreating rather hurriedly. Two of the skeletons fighting him were down a leg, and the other wasn't going to catch up, so I called it back.

None of the normal relief flooded my body as I realized the fight was over. Instead I was still taking shallow quick breaths, a few moments from full-blown panic. An extra sharp pain in my side, from my ribs and the bullet hole, focused my mind. Dot dug her grave, and I was way too close to death to feel too bad.

I knew the only reason the blood seemed to stand out was because it came from a human. Monsters bled, so my skeletons had been dyed almost completely red in the past. But this seemed different. Completely. The smell was different as well. Sharper, or maybe more pungent. I had no idea if that was all in my head or real.

Trying to get my mind off the gruesome image of Dot, I turned to the unknown Thug. My first kill. That wasn't a good place to go so I almost looked away, but something caught my eye. Was her chest moving? I couldn't tell. Pushing myself to my feet, I stumbled over to her.