

THERE WAS A LOT OF BLOOD AROUND HER HEAD, BUT HEAD wounds always bled a lot. I thought. Sitting down next to her, I didn't even need to check anything, I could see a glob of blood getting pumped out of a head wound. That was enough for me to stumble over and rip my medical kit out of its sling.

Medi-gel was carefully applied to the head wound. It was bigger than I would have liked. It looked like the bullet had grazed her. The angle was weird as well, no idea how that had happened. I didn't have any kind of head brace, so I couldn't do much in case her neck was in a bad way. While wrapping gauze I found another head wound on the back. This was just a cut, probably caused when she hit the ground. That too needed sealing and wrapping.

A shooting pain through my side caused me to start coughing. Right, I wouldn't be able help anyone if I passed out. Unzipping my armor took a little extra time, as my right hand was already holding my wound and the zipper was on my left side. Still, once I had access to the hole in my side I just quickly plastered some medi-gel in place and slapped on some gauze. A large bandage went over that and I was done.

The hole in the chest plate stopped me mid-replacing the armor. Right where my heart would be, tons of frayed threads sprouted all around it. It was hard to be sure, but it felt like so little of the armor was left that I would be able to see through it.

*Thank you, Zilena. I have no doubt I would have died without your blessing. I doubt I would be as coherent right now without the extra safety net. And, of course, I still have to get myself and another person out of the dungeon.*

Turning back to the thug, I couldn't help but fear she had brain damage. If memory served, being unconscious for a long time after a head injury was not a good sign. Still, nothing I could do about it right now. At least I didn't think there was anything I could do, maybe wake her up? Would that be good or bad?

Well, it might be her only chance to get out of the dungeon alive. I couldn't carry her, and I only had my three ranged skeletons and two heavily damaged melee skeletons left. I had no idea how else to get her out. I needed to design a spell for a stretcher or something. Not that I really knew what I could use as materials.

Right, the crab. Calling all my skeletons back, I took a quick look at them. The ranged skeletons were mostly undamaged, but the helmets and shields of the other two were in a bad way. I had all five of them drop their weapons on the ground and head over to the crab to flip it over.

I struggled back up to my feet. It took nearly twice as long for me to get over to the crab as it took the skeletons to flip it, which itself took longer than normal given that I usually used seven or so skeletons to do the flip.

On the way over I had no choice but to see Dot's body, given she was right next to it. I wanted to puke, choke, and break down sobbing, but I had a life to save, and collapsing here would do us no good. So I bit my lip and forced myself to think about the creation of a stretcher. The problem was that I'd never used enough flesh runes to make the soft flexible bit between two poles. I could try and make a board with handholds completely out of bone, but I didn't know what runes I could use, and the risk of

someone sliding off of that would be stupidly high. I'd have to make it curved in so you couldn't just roll off, and I didn't want to waste time trying to get that just so right now.

I created two more melee skeletons, then had one of the former ranged ones swap out for the shield and ax of the two skeletons that had been fighting the Bulwark. The shield was almost pristine, some minor pitting from the lightning, but the ax was horribly mangled, obviously the Bulwark's defensive abilities made him tougher than the weapons themselves. This wasn't a huge surprise, nor was it a big deal. Right now the far more important thing was that the skeleton be able to defend us from charging Styres.

I headed back to the Thug, using one of the remaining ranged skeletons for support, as I was starting to feel dizzy. I needed to save as much strength as possible for the trip out of the dungeon. Spending an unplanned night here while injured was less than ideal. But I didn't think I could move fast enough to get out today.

So we needed to travel far enough to find a perfect camping spot. I wasn't planning on camping and had only brought my small tent in case of emergency. Hopefully the Thug had one as well. Otherwise we'd have to share a one-person tent. And I didn't think we'd see much good coming out of that particular set up.

First thing I did was remove her weapons. Then I pulled the smelling salts out of the medical kit. They were included just for these issues. Dungeons in general were not conducive to perfect treatment of head wounds. No matter how important it was to avoid making her injuries

worse, I couldn't carry her out of here, and neither could my skeletons. "Carry a body" was not a set of behaviors I'd programmed, and as such I'd need to explicitly control each action. I'd almost certainly drop her.

All that aside, this wasn't the best choice. Still, it had to happen. After I using the smelling salts the Thug woke up almost instantly.

"Careful, you've got a pair of head injuries," I said as quietly as possible.

A groan was the only response, and I dug out some powerful pain medicine and handed her the pills and her canteen. The Thug sat up on her own and swallowed the medicine. I guess that was proof she wasn't as bad off as I'd feared.

"Why am I still alive?"

The hell were you supposed to say to that? "Got lucky. Looks like a bullet scraped your head. You must have also hit your head when you fell."

"No. I mean..." the thug held her head. I had to assume she was in pain, but I had no idea what to do about that.

"Wait for the pain to subside. Then we need to start walking back. I think we both could use some new blood as well."

I had no idea what to do here. What would help? What would hurt? We needed to get closer to the entrance, but I had no idea if she'd be willing to work with me. Why didn't I think of this before waking her?

"Why help me?"

"Zilena doesn't like a waste of good defenders," I answered immediately. "Plus, I don't want another life on

my hands.”

Another wave of nausea, plus a powerful desire to break down crying, gripped me, but I closed my eyes and forced it down. I couldn't be sick now. Well I could, but the crying part would last for a very long time.

When I opened my eyes I saw that the Thug was giving me a strange look. Like I wasn't acting the way I was supposed to. I reached out and grabbed the arm of the ranged skeleton still standing by and pulled myself up.

“If you can stand, we need to find a place to camp.” My other ranged skeleton walked over next to her. “We can use these two to steady ourselves and hopefully make it far enough to find a good place to rest. Not the best method, but the best we can do right now.”

I gulped, this was really bothering me, given the suspicious glare she was sending my way. “Do you have an emergency tent on you?”

“A real one.”

I felt my shoulders slump. “That's good. I didn't want to share. Mine's very small, only really meant for a single person.”

“Sam. My name.”

“Kathrine. I hate it when my name is shortened,” I replied, holding out my hand.

Sam nodded. Taking both my hand and the arm of the other ranged skeleton, she pulled herself up. Sam swayed unsteadily for a moment before grabbing hold of the skeleton next to her.

I formed up the few melee ones I had and took my crow's beak in one hand. “This is going to be awkward and

slow. Let's take things as slow as we can."

I was right. The two of us stumbled off, covering so little ground I would be frustrated if I wasn't in increasing pain and trying not to focus on Dot's death right now. I'd have to pray over it tonight or something. I didn't trust myself to be able to get out of here if I let my mind get caught on that.

It took me a good twenty minutes to figure out how to get the skeletons walking in a way that wasn't bad for our stability. In that time we had covered almost no distance. But we were still moving, so that was a good thing.

We ended up fighting only one group of Styires, and they didn't last long. A flurry of Miasma Bombs slowed them down significantly, and my skeletons were able to cut them down. Sam seemed completely defeated by that fight, as if it had proved something she didn't want to believe. Still, it finally gave me the ability to replace my full group of skeletons and my weapon. The spike would be necessary if anything made it past my skeletons.

We found a place to camp not long later and decided to take it. Away from the crabs and on top of a major hill. We hoped the rest would allow us to feel better as we headed back.

Setting up camp was rather simple: we had plenty of time to take things slowly. And the Styires provided meat for dinner. One of the reasons it was always possible to fight your way out, even if injured. There were plenty of resources in the dungeon.

Despite myself I tried to keep an eye on Sam and have at least one skeleton around. Yet I didn't want to treat her



badly, partly because I was on the verge of collapsing myself, and partly because it wouldn't help anything.

I guess I could have left her to fend for herself, but that would do me no real good, and it would leave me with two deaths on my conscious. I doubted anyone would hold it against me if I had done that to start with. But later it would be a whole different thing.

"Why did you save me?"

I blinked, looking at Sam. She sounded weird, though I had no idea what that meant. "It was the right thing to do."

"Why? You're serving a being who at best is apathetic toward human life, won't you get in trouble?"

I frowned. I figured she was being "careful" about what she said. "Have you read anything about what Zilena teaches? Or the origins of our modern gods?" Seeing the sneer fighting its way onto her face, I continued. "Anything not from those who hate them, I mean."

"Why would I listen to their lies?"

"To determine if they're lying at all."

"They didn't care about us until we were desperate for help. They only want something from us and will say anything to get what they want."

"All the gods appeared along with the system. Even the 'old-world' ones," I replied, trying to remember some of the things I'd learned from my research into the past. "I can't remember all of the evidence, but all claimed miracles from before the system lack evidence that they actually happened. This seems to argue that the gods didn't exist before the system appeared."

“Of course they happened. Why else would our ancestors believe in them?” The anger in Sam’s voice was harsh.

“In ancient times they didn’t understand how so much of the universe worked that they sought any explanation that felt like it would make things work better. More recently, because of tradition, it was more comforting, and they had emotional reasons to do so,” I answered. “It’s objectively comforting knowing there are beings out there who can manipulate the world for you. At least we now know how and why they’ll do so for us.”

“Bull shit! Our ancestors weren’t stupid!”

“No they weren’t, but they were unlearned. And the system wasn’t around then either. What else were they to believe?”

Our argument went back and forth, with Sam seeming to believe that our “ancestors” had to be smart enough to tell the difference between a real god and a fake one, without much explanation for why. I tried to focus on how a belief in god was useful, if not perfect, no matter how much she wanted it to be different.