

AS THEY APPROACHED THE HALFWAY POINT, KELLY RUSHED out. I had managed to get poison and miasma into all of them but was prepared to save the rest of my mana, so she didn't have anything to worry about from me.

She ran full speed at the left side of the pod and ended up jumping into the air, putting the full weight and speed of her body into a single kick into the creature's side. The attacking raptor stumbled and actually fell into the other raptors nearby, giving Kelly enough room to back out of the way. Three peeled off after her, leaving five to crash into my line of skeletons.

Zak must have gotten the timing down, as fiery swords appeared, flanking the line of skeletons, that quickly learned that their axes were struggling to handle the thicker skin of these monsters. Stepping around the right edge of the skeleton line to minimize the risk from Kelley's three monsters, I took a swing with my scythe.

The blade cut into the monster's side, though nowhere near as deep as I would have liked. Rather than take another swing, I dived behind the line as the raptor turned toward me. Fortunately, this let me order the ax-wielding and shield-bearing skeletons right there to land an attack right away, forcing the monster to turn back.

Letting my heart rate settle back down, I tried to come up with another plan. Though I had less room to aim, I started taking vertical chopping attacks from between my skeletons, and this turned out to be a lot safer.

Though missing because I didn't have much room to maneuver was frustrating as hell. Keeping an eye on Kelly wasn't necessary, as Zak was using his fiery beams to support her. And she had killed her first raptor.

Not wanting to stay behind, I watched as my ranged skeletons managed to land multiple shots which allowed

myself and another skeleton to land chopping strikes, killing one of the raptors right away.

Another one managed to get its tiny arms on the shield of one of my skeletons and pulled it down, biting down on the skeleton's helmet. The helmet held, for a minute, but the monster remained vulnerable and I brought down a huge overhead chop, the curved blade carving into the creature's neck. It must have hit something important, because the creature went limp.

My actions didn't save the skeleton, but the hole in my defensive line was easily plugged, and by now the flaming swords had been refreshed, the weapons forcing the raptors to not be all that maneuverable.

The result was a large number of openings as the remaining raptors couldn't really do anything to dodge. Of course, these movie types were very durable and thus didn't need to dodge as much. But the time it took to kill them despite the ease of landing blows proved that they were far from out.

Two more of my skeletons went down before the end. One's shield arm gave out, shattered by blocking repetitive body slams, and it was killed almost immediately while the other skeleton managed to take the raptor down with it by landing a near-perfect blow into the raptor's neck muscle, opening up something important as blood went everywhere.

The last of the raptors went down with all three of us focusing on the final group. Nine corpses meant I would be back up to full strength, even when they had killed a few of mine.

"Well, I have to say you can hold the line better than I expected, Kathrine. Good job," Zak said, quite pleased.

I grinned. "It can be kind of frustrating. Forced to basically defend and take the slow path. But it works well

and I've come to prefer it." A glance at my scythe had me frowning. "Still trying to figure out the best way to use this though."

"You're doing well enough for now," Kelly put in. "I'm sure you'll figure out a few tricks."

I grinned. "I kind of want to figure out how to use a kind of spell or something through it. Like how you make that pain wave thing. Been thinking about it since yesterday."

George had relaxed a little bit. "Looks like the three of you were right. You are skilled enough for this level."

I grinned as we grabbed a few more claws and I started recreating my skeletons and filling up my full minions. I was a bit surprised at how well I was doing.

The next fight was against the Natural Raptors, and with a full line of minions and four fully ranged skeletons, that fight was a good bit easier. Or just less stressful, despite having more monsters to deal with.

George was enjoying himself. As soon as he realized I was able to create more skeletons than I lost, he relaxed and started asking more questions. Filling him in on whatever he wanted to know became a small competition between us to see who could get the answer first.

Zak and Kelly no longer held back. Probably because things were getting more intense. Or at least they felt we all knew enough about our abilities now to work correctly.

We only saw the same two varieties of raptors for the first hour. The rarer Rouge Raptors remained hidden. Zak and Kelly were now averaging more kills than me, which was fine of course, but it showed the difference in ability level and I wanted to catch up so badly! Level 10 would help a lot. I'd be able to change paths again, and similar to level 1, it would probably provide a lot of extra

information. I also had to wonder if I'd have choices that extended outside of the skeleton-zombie dynamic.

Two hours into hunting the plains we ran into something new. Bursting from the grass were short, bright-red raptors. They moved so fast I struggled to hit them with my poison at all.

Kelly intercepted four of them and immediately focused on avoiding attacks. From what I could see, she had few chances to land hits. Zak created the largest number of light-based swords yet. They tried to push the red raptors into the shield line my skeletons were holding. These raptors were about the same size as the Ratigers, which I had plenty of experience defending from.

Even so, three got past the swords and skeletons and came right after me and George. A swing of my scythe forced the raptors to jump back or get bisected, and I used that moment to breath out a quick ark of Toxic Breath.

However, it wasn't as effective as I would have liked, and I was forced to use a few more wide swings of the scythe to keep them at bay.

Zak must have launched a barrage of fiery darts at the raptors, and although the fast raptors dodged most of them, the ones that impacted seemed to stun them for a second. This gave me a chance to step toward one of the stunned raptors and take a slash at it. The extra reach was good, as the raptor still managed to avoid being chopped in two, but I severed both its arms and opened a gash on its chest anyways.

I had just enough time to return to my stance and get my blade between me and the raptors. Apparently they were now more weary of it than before. And that got us more room.

Between the poison on my war scythe and the blood loss, the third one died rather quickly. However, the other

two were more wary, and Zak was forced to focus on helping Kelly as two more broke off from the skeletons I was slowly twisting into a box to keep them from being surrounded. Fortunately, it seemed these monsters lacked the bite strength of the bigger ones, because my skeletons were holding up better.

That said, I still had to keep the other two monsters away. However, I could feel George getting more and more scared. "Hey, George, no reason to worry. With only two left it shouldn't be too hard to control things."

I heard a gulp behind me just as the two raptors jumped closer to each other. Taking advantage, I breathed out another short burst of Toxic Breath, but the two raptors were fast to hop out of the way. Rather than waste mana chasing them, I stopped and simply kept up swinging my scythe. Unfortunately I wasn't up to using my scythe full-time yet, and I could already feel myself getting tired.

In the end, it was the death of a few raptors to fiery swords, darts, and skeletons that tipped the balance. Once that happened, Zak was able to focus more attention on the two that were facing us, and I was able to cut them down as they tried to dodge darts.

With the death of those threats, I could turn my full attention to controlling the rest of my skeletons. Combined with Zak's and Kelly's assistance, the rest of the raptors fell quickly. In fact, despite the slight risk right at the beginning, the fight felt faster than any that had come before. These Rouge Raptors went down with a solid hit, assuming you could land such a thing.

"Wow. That was scary. How close were we to being in trouble?" George asked once we had all taken a moment to rest.



"Not that close," I answered honestly. "One of the reasons I started using a war scythe is the extra advantage it gives me in melee combat. The reach is particularly difficult to deal with, even for fast monsters."

"In other words, we really weren't in any danger of serious harm. Though it was a little scary."

George turned to the other two.

Zak spoke first. "I kept an eye on everything. That spell I was using, the swarm of fire darts, is designed to deal with this problem. With a bigger group we would normally have a Pyromancer set the entire patch of tall grass on fire, or some other large-area attack. And then the large volume of fire from extra shooters would keep the numbers down. Kathrine's army of skeletons makes this, at the very least, feel safer. I have no idea how to really make that comparison."

Kelly shrugged. "Knowing that Kathrine's minions will draw a lot of the monsters into melee has certainly made it easier on me. Both Kathrine and Zak are used to keeping an eye on the whole area around them. Which really helps when monsters suddenly change targets." Kelly shrugged as if to say, "probably better."

George looked at everyone as if unable to understand exactly what was being said. I grinned, "To sum everything up, George, we can't really say whether this was more dangerous than normal, but we all prefer it this way because we think it's better. Don't worry. I've picked up more experience with my weapon, and I bet I'll be very good at using it by the end of the day."

George sighed. "I'm beginning to think all of you Diver types are insane."

"Not according to my shrink," Zak said with a smile. "Humans are really adaptable apparently. And getting used to hunting in a dungeon isn't outside of our abilities."

“That’s what an insane person would say.” George chuckled as he rolled his eyes.

After harvesting the corpses and replacing damaged raptors, we continued onward. The fighting continued, and fortunately, the fast and annoying Rouge Raptors stayed rare. However, I was far more comfortable now than before. It seemed the last raptor type being dealt with was a weight off my shoulders.

After asking Kelly and Zak, we decided that mixed pods were rare this close to the cliff. The biggest oddity was that Cliff Huggers never seemed to attack those of us on the ground. It was almost as if they knew they stood no chance against us without us being on the edge of the cliff, able to fall off.

It was just before lunch when my Miasma Bomb triggered a deep roar that was quite unlike the chipping sounds we were used to. From the sound alone, I felt adrenaline flood my body, and I tensed up, knowing what was left to come.

The monster that burst from the grass was completely unlike anything we had fought before. Looking like a cross between a gorilla and an armored dinosaur, it had the massive muscles and knuckle-dragger arms of a gorilla. Thick leathery skin and armored bone-like plates left the Clobber with few weak points.

The Clobber rushed forward, only to catch shots from my ranged monsters and a fiery beam from Zak. Despite the fire, it didn't slow down, though it was much slower overall compared to what we'd been fighting all day. This made it easy to hit the Clobber with more poison, but the beast seemed unaffected.

I moved my shield wall forward to meet him and then pulled back half of my skeletons to create a second line, not wanting the Clobber to charge straight through the wall. It appeared to be heavy enough to actually do so despite its slower speed. I wasn't surprised to see Kelly move off to one side, keeping a careful pace. Likely she would wait for the Clobber to stop moving and to focus its full attention on my minions.