

Alternatives?
Tuesday – 09.19.62

“I’VE ALREADY ASKED AROUND. EVERYONE I COULD FIND either wanted to be paid for the effort, or simply refused. Most people in my level range only have time for one hunt a week. That’s why I’m asking,” I said.

If I could find a way to get the time in the dungeon to properly practice and test out my theories, I would rather do that than give Ashley the runes I really wasn’t supposed to do. The legal advice was complicated but boiled down to fact that the law hadn’t caught up with the presence of skills. It would be hard, but I think I could make it without the extra information if I could get some extra time in a dungeon. Unfortunately, things were more difficult than I had anticipated.

Mai just opened her hands as if to say, “what can I do?”

“We have rules for a reason. Entering the dungeon more than once a week at this point is a bad idea. If you can’t convince someone to do a slow hunt like you’d like, try paying them. The guild has rules against causing more stress than necessary like this.”

“The problem is, I don’t have enough money saved to live on for more than three months. Paying for a mission like this will almost certainly put me on the street before hunting can pay for my living expenses,” I said.

“I understand, I really do. And honestly, this is the part I hate about being in charge of the new recruits. We’ve never had someone thrown out on the street because they took too long working in our guild. Please, believe me when I say you can make it.

“If nothing else, you can always work as a stripper. It’s much better, both in pay and safety now than when I was doing it to pay for my living expenses. And even then I never had a problem.”

I shook my head, perhaps more vigorously than necessary. “I’ve done the math, and I need to hit level 10 in six weeks. Faster than average, but not by much. That leaves me with some time to stabilize my income before I run out.”

Also, why did I keep hearing that? It could be that the industry simply had improved by leaps and bounds recently, but for some reason that attempt to comfort me did the exact opposite.

Mai sighed. “We can’t help you there. I wish we could, but we can’t take actions as a guild that increase the stress of an individual. We also have to be especially careful when it could be seen as favoritism. It would make things objectively worse for other members of the guild. It’s these kinds of things that determine how much we invest into specific hunters.”

I left frustrated. I’d heard Mai’s message. Prove that I was worth the investment, and they would consider bending the rules for me. She might have also been saying that the guild would step in and help if it got bad enough, but her mention of stripping made me think they wouldn’t.

The very fact that the guild seemed to be waiting until I got desperate left me uneasy. I couldn’t think of a good reason to do that.

I did have to wonder how many of the older generation, those who dived before prices for monster parts were at all consistent, ended up doing similar work for a while. There was the painful transition time when the

world was no longer in terror but industrial uses of monster parts hadn't been widely used yet. During that time it was actually impossible to sustain yourself hunting monsters unless the state government paid bounties simply for proof of a kill. Not as common as it should have been.

I wouldn't be surprised, it was a hard time for those older Divers. But someone had to keep the dungeons cleared. Yet none of that explained the oddities I'd been noticing. Or at least didn't justify the oddities.

Under the Table
Wednesday – 09.20.62

I was so nervous I woke up early and could only settle down by pulling out the notebook I had spent much of yesterday filling with all the Poison and Flesh runes I was going to hand over. I double-checked all the information, made sure the rune sketches were accurate, and made sure I avoided using shorthand. The Poison runes came entirely from my personal knowledge. But almost everything I knew about the Flesh runic language almost certainly could be found in the database I'd just gotten. I was risking a violation of the NDA just to develop my minions faster. Yet I couldn't see any way to avoid the worst possible outcomes if I didn't do this.

So after hours of unproductive pacing I arrived at the meeting point. Walking into the front door of the same restaurant I'd met Ashley in the first place, it was only imagining the look on Eric's and Alice's faces when they walked into a strip club and saw me on the stage that kept me from acting like a complete idiot.

I know acting like I was doing something wrong was the fastest way to get people to notice I was in fact doing something wrong. Unfortunately, that didn't really help. At all.

Ashley was already here, despite me being thirty minutes early. She smiled, "Calm down, Kathrine, you look nervous. People might think we're on a date."

Ashley grinned as I snorted. "Thanks. I needed that. Uhm..."

A simple head shake from Ashley was all I got. "Already got a date, still gotta see if it becomes something more."

We ordered our food and Ashley asked me about my trip in more detail, and I started to relax. I have to say how surprising it was to have Ashley say she thought I did as good as I could in the situation. She did warn me that orientation days were always a little easier than normal Sundays. Apparently under normal circumstance as the day grew older the Styires would mob together, building bigger groups. But when there were so many people sticking to the Scraggs all at once the monsters were killed before they could actually band together.

"So, I thought you would have asked by now," Ashley said after a while.

"Well, I didn't really know how to ask." I blushed a little.

Ashley smiled and put a USB up on the table. I handed her a notebook in exchange. That got an raised eyebrow, and Ashley opened it to look inside.

"Wow, Kathrine, neat handwriting and well-drawn sketches. How did you avoid picking up the Artist job?" Ashley said.

I smiled, "The sketching is just a hobby, and I'm not that good compared to people who actually have the job."

Avoiding it was easy. Too little stamina.”

Ashley winced. “Sorry, that was a tad insensitive.”

“Not really, I wouldn’t have wanted the Artist job anyway. That would have come with a lot of assumptions.” Though it would have given me a possible source of secondary income right now. I wouldn’t be able to have that and a magic class as well. Maybe Illusionist, if such a job existed.

Ashley nodded and placed the notebook in her bag. “Out of curiosity, how did you put that together so fast?”

“I’d already started copying the runes into their own notebook for easy reference. So I just finished that project off quickly. Might have missed something important, but...” I trailed off, uncertain what to say next.

“Sounds good. I hope that info is useful to you. From what I understand, it’s scans of my friend’s notebook. All on Golem Creation. And yes, one of the docs in there is a primer on creating the knots needed for the skill,” Ashley stated.

I grinned and snatched up the USB drive. It went carefully into one of my pockets. A weight I hadn’t noticed lifted off my shoulders at the same time. Ashley then asked how I planned to use my minions in combat and asked about giving them ranged attacks. I mentioned James’ ideas regarding crossbows and what I’d learned about simple crossbow construction.

She thought it was a good idea but echoed my worries about complexity. She did suggest a spear as a simpler alternative at first, as that would allow me to get the second line involved in the fighting. Which would be hugely advantageous, because they wouldn’t have to worry about defense at the same time and could simply attack

past the front line fully. Something to think about, though I wasn't certain I'd be able to make enough minions for spears to work under most circumstances. At least not enough right now. We'd see in the future I guess.

As I walked through the door of my room in my apartment, I noticed Zilena's shrine sitting off to the side. Made me wonder about the longer time on her blessing as well.

< Zilena's Cloak of Misdirection: Your actions will have a lesser impact on those who learn of them while this blessing is active. Sorry to say, but you will end up needing this blessing. Don't worry, it won't affect those who are your allies, as they are unlikely to misunderstand what is needed. Lasts 16 hours. Thanks for the new shrine. >

Well, it seemed like she wasn't bothered at all over the little dirty deal I'd just pulled. I wonder if it was because of the limited options I had. I should probably look into that. I knew a little about some of the Christian religions thanks to my parents having been Christians before the system change, but I didn't know a thing about the poly-gods like Zilena.

Either way, I walked over to the shrine and pulled out some of the spare incense. I said a quiet "thank you" to Zilena and placed the incense into the alter. It immediately started burning slowly. The aroma was also different, despite being the exact same stuff I used last

time. Not really certain what to do with that, maybe it was proof that my thanks were accepted?

Shaking off the oddity around that, I sat down at my computer and started looking through the USB I got. It didn't take long to figure out what went wrong: the connection between the elemental knot and the runes.

I had started working out parts of it, but according to this the connection should be in only one place. I suspected it was possible to do more but was more complicated. So the best place to start was with one.

Looking at the example given, I came to the conclusion that there was something more to it. I could see notes to the same effect, though if the author of these notes—whose name I'd never gotten—had ever figured out what else was happening, that knowledge wasn't in my notes. He called his connection rune the Gaia Gate rune. I would be calling mine the Dust Gate, at least until I knew better.

I hate to say it, but I might not have figured that out for months. I could probably make rudimentary undead without knowing that little tidbit. But they really wouldn't be up to snuff until I figured it out. Given how it worked, I doubt they would have fully made use of the extra behavioral complexity they were supposed to have as skeletons.

There were other mistakes, mostly with how the runes and the elemental knot worked together, and a lot of tips on how to do the knots themselves. Which really helped—really, really helped. All told, I felt like at least a month of effort was skipped with just this set of information. Honestly, this was the kind of thing I had expected the database to do.