

**Bone Walker**  
**Saturday – 09.23.62**

< Blessings >

< Toohr's Blessing of Exploration: As you travel through the world and dungeon, you will find the things you need more abundantly than would otherwise be likely. Lasts two days.

Syaos' Blessing of Discovery: Inspiration comes from the most unlikely of places, and this blessing helps highlight those connections. This does not guarantee you will find what you're looking for, but the unexpected discoveries are often the most important. Lasts two days.

Zilena's Blessing of Unlife: Your body is more resistant to the causes of death. Blood loss and the lack of oxygen has a lesser impact on your body's ability to function than for other people. Always a good precaution, you're also less affected by poison, but you're the only source of poisons you're going to meet. Lasts three days. >

I REALLY SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED BY ZILENA'S note in her blessing, and yet I was. From what I could see, she was encouraging and helping me in order to have me spread her faith around the local group. I wasn't really opposed, but I definitely wasn't going to go full evangelist. If some asked, I'd explain, but otherwise...

Sighing, I looked at my watch. I had difficulty finding a group to go hunting with. Most had already formed groups by the time I started looking for someone to work with or

they chose to do their weekly hunt earlier in the week. The only person I had a good relationship with and might be able to go into the dungeon with was Kelly, and she already had a group who were all within her own level range. Which made much more sense for her.

Unfortunately, there was apparently a reason Dot and Steven had difficulties getting the four teammates you needed to go into the dungeon. If I didn't feel absolutely pressured to get started right away, I wouldn't have taken this desperate option, but I did.

I glance over at party member number four. Frank was a Rifleman, a class that specialized in just about everything that could be called "long guns," from assault rifles to shotguns and sniper rifles. We talked a bit and found out we had nothing in common except the desire to support ourselves off the dungeon.

Which made the lateness of Dot and Steven even worse. We weren't supposed to be spending the night in the dungeon, as that was much more dangerous. So their being late was eating into the time we had to hunt, because the dungeon was already open. If we failed to get the monster components our contract was for, we'd have to pay a penalty. My money was on Dot being the problem, she just seemed like a rich brat to me.

A car pulling into the parking lot cut off my line of thinking and did nothing for my beliefs surrounding this group's ability to survive long-term. I planned on avoiding this group, or at least Dot and Steven, at all costs in the future.

For a vehicle to be deemed worthy of "Wild Operations" there were several requirements. It had to be sufficiently armored to survive no less than twenty-five direct attacks from monsters rated at an offensive level of

nine. Styires have an offense of four, and my armor is rated to absorb a single level six strike; however, the area hit will be destroyed, rendering the armor useless. Plus, the attack could still penetrate if I'm unlucky.

The vehicle also needs the ability to work off-road. This was in case you needed to flee off the roads, and because the roads weren't nearly as well-maintained outside of the cities as inside them.

The result of this, and of human psychology, was that most cars looked like they were armored. Assuming they were supposed to be driven outside of the cities. You could see the armored plates, the vehicles were bulky, the off-road wheels looked a little big for the frame, and of course the extra gas tanks were visible and stylized. This also made the vehicles cheaper to manufacture because they didn't need any fancy technology to make their defenses invisible.

Dot's car, on the other hand, hid all of that very well. The wheel wells were clearly designed to hide the oversized nature of the wheels. No visible armor unless unavoidable, like the extra thick doors and windows when they was opened. And no visible gas tanks. On the other hand, the trunk of the car had a visible smaller door, emphasized by chrome trimming, that could open. This was likely for a turret mount that could pop up and shoot at incoming monsters. The only visible addition to the car was something you didn't see on anything less expensive than 50K used. In other words, Dot's car screamed money.

When she got out along with Steven, it was clear she didn't really know what she was doing and I felt a moment of dread. She was wearing "armor" that hugged her form, emphasizing ass and tits, giving her the appearance of a "movie star" compared to the rest of us. Frank's light *tsk*

beside me told me he had the same belief. Unless that armor was enchanted, there was no way it had enough layers to be useful. And even if it was enchanted, it could be so much better by being built like normal people's armor and then adding enchantments.

Sighing, I stood up off the bench we'd been sitting on and headed toward Dot. Frank was a few steps behind me. Dot claimed to be a Bullet Dancer, so I was fairly certain she felt like she didn't need a lot of armor because the class was focused on dodge skills. And I was hopeful her ability would die the moment I got close enough to read the label off her armored catsuit, Hollywood Armory. People had been trying to close that company down for selling armor that would get you killed for years, but they had managed to avoid that fate largely because they openly and prominently display their armor's actual capabilities, only to then spread BS about why you didn't need proper armor.

I gritted my teeth and told myself that pissing off a teammate by arguing against her armor choice was a bad idea, but seriously? The one armor company that had "people died because they trusted your armor" as a literal fact verified by the court systems?

"Hello. We're running late, the dungeon has already opened," I said. It was the best I could do.

Dot simply waved off my concern. "Sorry, it's not like twenty minutes will change much of anything."

"Forty minutes, and it's forty minutes we don't have to hunt for money or experience," I shot back. "Plus, we have an actual contract to fulfill. And we aren't authorized for an overnight just yet."

Steven intervened for Dot. "We're sorry, ok? Things took longer than expected. Let us grab our gear."

Dot and Steven grabbed their gear and strapped weapons and extra ammo on. I stretched out my senses, looking for the slightest bit of enchantments, and managed to find a couple. Dot's armor was enchanted, but so weakly I doubted it did any better than mine in the final tally of things. There was something else in her belt pouches that had magic, but I had no idea what they were. I was willing to bet it was some enchanted item she only needed to cover the weaknesses of her armor.

Her pistols, on the other hand, were undersized and mundane. Most experts suggested that pistol-type jobs carry two sets. One for normal work with a large clip and smaller recoil. Skills and feats would make them do respectable damage so it didn't matter much if they were a little underpowered. And a second "hand cannon" when the normal pistols couldn't penetrate the armor of your opponents. Given our contract, I could barely hold out hope.

"Dot. Did you bring something that can hit hard enough to penetrate a Hardback's shell?"

"I've got this, don't worry, I can hit the eyes." Dot gave me what she clearly thought was a reassuring grin. It wasn't. I could see even Steven look a little worried, which resulted in me sighing.

"Right. Well, let's get a move on. We're burning daylight," Frank spoke up for the first time.

I glanced at the eastern sky and the beginnings of daylight were in fact visible. *Fuck. These. Guys. Calm down, Kathrine, all you need to do is find a working skeleton spell.* The money was a bonus, though I didn't want a broken contract on my record, even if it wasn't my fault.

I turned and headed toward the entrance, doing my best to manage my annoyance. The others, who were in fact ready, had to rush to keep up.

“Slow down, Cat. We have plenty of time to take it easy,” Dot called out.

“It’s Kathrine, I don’t like my name shortened,” I snapped back.

“Jeez, it’s just a nickname, Cat. No need to get prissy.” Dot grinned and I narrowed my eyes at her.

“I said it’s Kathrine. Either use my name or don’t talk to me. Those are your two choices.” I didn’t slow down as we hit the stairs up the side of the wall.

I made it to the dungeon entrance first and was forced to wait. Frank wasn’t that far back, but Dot, and Steven as a consequence, had slowed down to a casual stroll speed. And Dot refused to speed up. I narrowed my eyes at her as she got closer.

“We’ve lost almost a full hour. It will take two hours to get to the region where Hardbacks commonly show up. It will likely take longer to get back with our loot. Call that five hours of travel time. We only have twelve hours left of today’s hunt, so adding in lunch and dinner and some time to learn to butcher the crabs, we likely have six hours of hunting to deal with. The average time for hunting down a dozen crabs is five hours for those of us around level 3. That means we only have an hour for things to go wrong.” I narrowed my eyes. “If we want to fulfill this contract, we’ll have to move quickly.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I’ll cover any loss if we fail to get enough ligaments. Not that big of a deal.” Dot shrugged.