

CLIFF HUGGERS WERE WIDELY VIEWED AS USELESS BY THE Balltown community, often outright hated. They had no useful parts, though every so often someone tried and failed to find something. They not only lacked flavor but had little meat to being with. And being ambush-type monsters who attacked from cliffs, they were surprisingly dangerous. All around, the only use we could get out of them was that they were barely large enough to make a basic skeleton out of. Or refill the shot of my ranged skeletons once that became necessary.

Dot grumbled the whole time the four of us headed up the canyon. As we stepped onto the ice, Dot's mood got even worse. Apparently she was hoping my skeletons would slip around, rendering me unable to help. If anyone was going to have problems it would be Dot, as the ice spikes stuck into the ground. That's what they were supposed to do, but it took more effort to pull your spikes out of the ice than it would otherwise take. This should probably slow Dot down. Unless she was smart enough to find a way around this problem.

After a few minutes of walking into the ice fields, I barely spotted an area of moving ice. My order to my skeletons to shield themselves was just in time as the Ice Drake slammed into a shield. Unlike Cliff Huggers, Ice Drakes look like wingless, small dragons rather than simple lizards. They featured wide heads, powerful limbs, and—now that it wasn't blending into the background—visible and large white scales.

The Ice Drake clawed at the skeleton's shield and managed to wrap its jaws around my skeleton's head. Yet

before it could crush the skeleton's skull the doomed minion managed to hit it with a weak glancing blow. The closest skeleton charged in and landed a larger and heavier hit right as the first one went down, its ax barely biting in as it scraped across the scales. The now-familiar popping of silenced weapons fire was accompanied by the slightly weird cracking of the rifles I'd made for my skeletons. My Miasma Bomb landed a heartbeat behind the others opening up.

Poisoned and bruised, the Ice Drake jumped back as if it was trying to hide again, but now that we knew where to look it was easy to follow. Dot charged forward, of course, as the rest of us pelted it with our attacks.

Whatever the drake's scales were made of, they were holding up surprisingly well against the onslaught. However, my skeletons were slowly getting around it, cutting off its retreat. It pounced on another skeleton, but this time I ordered my minion to raise its shield up further, something the skeleton struggled to do with the extra weight of the monster. Yet it still managed to keep its head free of the jaws.

This allowed another flurry of gun and bone shots. And something was successful, because I saw chips flying this time. Several ax attacks at the limbs of the monster caused it to fall to the ground. Yet its tail struck out and knocked two of my skeletons to their knees by knocking their knees from behind. Dot finally got close enough to start aiming at things, and that extra pressure seemed to be the tipping point.

Multiple attacks, bullets, bolts, and axes drove the monster back, and I turned to look around me. The creature died, and I let out an audible sigh.

“We need to be paying more attention. None of us were looking out for Cliff Huggers while fighting that thing,” I said, slightly annoyed at myself. I knew better. Or at least I thought I did.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “I thought of the same thing there near the end.” Jack seemed to be more comfortable talking now than before. Weird.

Working together, the baby dragon was butchered and the parts divided. Even with the special knives and other equipment, it was quite hard to cut through the creature’s outer coat. This indicated that some of the monster’s defense wasn’t purely from skills, as those disappeared with death. This also explained why the Ice Drake’s hide was used in expensive armors. Its meat, on the other hand, stayed cool without the need of refrigeration or ice, so it tended to be used in sushi bars. I always wanted to try some, but right now I couldn’t justify keeping any of the valuable meat for myself.

I lost one skeleton, and two more were damaged along the legs from the whipping tail. I had one of the damaged shield and ax skeletons swap gear with one of my ranged skeletons, which were less likely to be attacked, and used the remains to create a single skeleton. Barely. There just wasn’t much of the corpse left once it had been divided up.

The next two hours went about the same. We would get attacked by Ice Drakes and Cliff Huggers in rotation. I found that my skeletons would hold up if we could get the

Drake off their shields relatively quickly, yet every time a skeleton or two would be left with cracked bones. These damaged skeletons died much more quickly when attacked by Drakes. Still, thanks to the Cliff Hugger corpses I was able to keep my number of skeletons up. Though it did take some extra work to do so, careful managing of damaged skeletons and all that.

Things might have been worse if I hadn't already been in the Rat Way and had some experience with minion management.

We had been steadily climbing into the canyon. There were a couple of shocking moments, mostly when Cliff Huggers attacked with similar timing to the Ice Drakes. However, both Bullet Dancer and Necromancer were high-tier jobs, so between Dot's high reaction time and my skeleton's acting as decoys, we weren't really in danger.

After hunting the ice fields for a few hours we didn't have quite enough hides, but the last three hours of work meant we could expect the slope behind us to have been repopulated when we turned around.

On the way back down we were almost done when an Ice Drake jumped out of nowhere and smashed through one of my skeletons. The others charged in and pinned it down as I dropped two Miasma Bombs on it.

Suddenly Jack screamed, drawing our attention to his struggle with another Ice Drake.

How to help? Miasma bombs wouldn't work, none of my poisons would, and my skeletons were fighting the other drake. So I ordered my rifle skeletons closer. They then took near point-blank shots into the side of the

monster. Three rounds at close range right into its side got the attention of the monster.

The distraction was enough though, as Jack was able to get one of his legs under the Drake and flip it off of himself. The Drake rolled closer to my ranged skeletons, which forced me to pull them back and drop a Miasma Bomb between the Drake and my skeletons, hopefully close enough to the monster to poison it.

The wind, however, scattered the poison rapidly, and the Drake dived into my skeletons. The other two continued to retreat, but the last one was dead in seconds. I started to retreat as well, heart racing at the straight shot between myself and the monster.

A sound not unlike one long drawn-out gunshot sounded, and a burst of rounds slammed into the side of the monster, driving it into the ground. A quick glance showed Jack replacing his magazine as the red glow of a feat faded from his body.

I ordered my skeletons to return to the fight as the Drake tried to pull itself onto its feet, and spared a glance at the other fight, cursing myself for not paying attention to it.

One of my skeletons was down, and another was damaged. There was nothing to do, as Dot was dancing between my skeletons and the Drake in an effort to hit already injured areas and those skeletons were on the defensive, which was their basic behavior thanks to their use of shields.

Turning back to the Drake that had attacked Jack, I realized the fight was over. The damage caused by Jack's

feat appeared to have shredded the Ice Drake's scales along one side, allowing a skeleton and Jack to take shots without worrying about the monster's defenses around the injury.

With the creature down, I rushed to Jack's side. The fighting was done. I lost two skeletons to the first Drake and another to the one that ambushed us, plus the downed ranged skeleton. Most of the surviving shield bearers were damaged as well. I doubt I would be much help in the next fight if it was against a Drake.

Jack, on the other hand, was in worse condition. After a few diagnostic questions it was clear that, while his armor held up, the pressure on his right arm had caused some damage to the arm bones and elbow. Firing his gun rapidly like that probably didn't help either, though with a mostly stationary enemy at close range I could see why he did it. Fortunately, it was easy enough to splint up his arm. Seems I was finally getting to use that medical knowledge. Finally.

Once Jack's right arm was splinted up and his armor back on, we gathered our loot and headed out. For the first time Dot helped a little, though all she was willing to do was roll up and bind the hides, as well as wrap the useful meat in butcher paper. The non-enchanted kind. Otherwise it would freeze solid.

We did make it out of the canyon without another incident. But before we made it to a decent campground we came up upon a dozen Styres.

Splotches of dark fur made it clear half were injured. How that worked I'm not sure, maybe groups with all

ranged fighters allowed more to escape or something. Either way, we had a few minutes before they got close enough to fire at them.

Dot surged forward, apparently glad to be away from the ice, and I launched as many poison spells as I felt safe handling. Feeling Dot had it right, I pushed my shield line forward, which still consisted of mostly damaged shield bearers, hoping to slow down the charge if nothing else.

Heather started with some kind of feat, the red trails behind each bullet a telling sign. The bullets also seemed to hit hard. Even Dot had started with a feat, using it to avoid direct attacks with terrifying ease, leaving glowing footsteps behind.

Three injured Styires chased Dot, and another three fell to Heather's fire, though she was tiring, the rate of fire slowing. This left six mostly healthy monsters charging the front line. Heather was running out of stamina, Jack had nothing but a pistol, and my ranged skeletons continued peppering the charging monsters.

Heads lowered, the Styires charged, curled goat horns right into the shield lines.

Shields buckled and cracked under the impact and one of the skeletons just collapsed, its knee turning to dust. A nearby free skeleton missed a side swipe just as the Styire's momentum carried the monster out of the skeletons' range.

Keeping all my melee skeletons together, I didn't like the sound the shields were making. But between three ranged skeletons, Jack, and Heather, the lone Styire didn't last a full second.

As that Styire fell, three of my mostly shieldless skeletons were ripped right apart. I couldn't really do anything, as my mostly cracked shield bearers were struggling with the last two Styires.

The three monsters charged forward, right at my ranged skeletons. Thanking stupid monsters, I ordered my ranged skeletons to fire while retreating. Heather managed one more burst of red-streaked rounds, which ended one of them.

I fired off a Toxic Breath from just behind my skeletons, keeping it up only long enough to catch both survivors. Jack's pistol never stopped barking, but I couldn't really tell how much good it was doing.

Suddenly the shield line, down to two skeletons now, wasn't fighting anything. Assuming Dot was responsible, I ordered them back. This turned out to be unnecessary, as the injuries seemed to have done their job, the Styires falling to the ground. Though I was left with only a single ranged skeleton.

The fight couldn't have lasted more than two minutes, but at the end of the day and down one rifle, the stamina users had burned most of what they had left and were now gasping.

On the other hand, I needed to replenish my skeletons fast. Just in case of another attack.

"What? Not even tired? Fuck you, Cat."

"Shut up Dot," Jack said. "She saved our lives, and her skeletons helped down everything today. So shut up and be grateful she understands the difficulties we're currently working with."

I ignored Dot and continued to use the time to replenish my number of skeletons. This time I went with seven and four, creating the extra gunman skeleton

because it was definitely useful to be able to fire on the monsters messing with Dot. Also, it would annoy her more. It was childish, I know. But I didn't mind. It was also far more useful to be able to take out Styires before they got to the front line.

Dinner that night was a somber affair, much to my embarrassment Jack was very grateful, and so was Heather. Apparently they were together, given they'd only brought one tent. Not sure I would go hunting with my partner if I ever was in a relationship, it would probably be distracting.

We camped on a wide, "mostly" flat hill a few minutes hike from the canyon. The wind continued to pick up as the "sun" began to set. Even as we made our soup we were all watching the ocean, a little fearful as large storm clouds became visible. As 7 approached the clouds spread out across the entire dune.

Just before 7pm we all climbed into our tents. Exactly on time the bottom fell out. The initial downpour was so sudden, and so hard, that the tent actually bent down just a little. I didn't feel like sleeping for almost an hour, a little fearful that the rain would wash us away. But apparently we'd chosen a good camping spot.

Eventually I was able to fall asleep. It helped that I could sense my skeletons all around me. I couldn't claim it was the least restful night I'd ever had, but waking up many, many times in the night and not sleeping well on a simple camping mattress on the hard ground wasn't the most pleasant thing ever.

The next morning the rain stopped just as it started, in an instant. The sound of rushing water replaced rain as I stepped out of my tent. It honestly looked like we were on an island, surrounded by dozens of other islands all over

the place. And all of us were surrounded by rushing water, complete with small rapids here and there. And, annoyingly, one of the nearby hills was home to a group of nine Styires. Clearly they were waiting for the chance to rush us as soon as the water dropped far enough.

It would take a while, maybe half an hour, before the water fell low enough to allow them through. However, it would probably take a while for everyone to get up, and it would be better if we didn't have these Styires hanging over our heads while eating breakfast.

So I called to the rest of the group. Heather got up and out rather quickly. Jack was a little further behind and looked no better than yesterday. Dot was the last one out, though she kept yelling at us not to "steal her experience" as she got ready.

Once everyone was out, we fired on the group. Jack was using a pistol. I just ordered my ranged minions to fire, not even bothering with poison. Dot used both her pistols, though the range was something like four times what she was used to.

The group ran backward over the hill and only one died. But that was better than before, and I saw most of them twitch as if hit by an attack. It would take injuries. They'd likely attack again, so I moved a couple of my skeletons onto that side of the hill. Just in case.

Breakfast was a bit of a tense affair; not only did we have Styires just over a hill waiting to attack, but Dot was yet again annoyed that we were cooking a stew rather than eating something "fast and easy." Of course, it took nearly twenty-five minutes for the water to recede, so reheating lunch was just fine.

We were done eating before the water was down far enough for an attack, and the Styires waited another ten

minutes, so we were perfectly ready when the attack came. With the monsters already injured and us waiting for the attack, there was no real risk. So it was an easy start to our day.

The journey home was, in fact, comparatively easy. Maybe it was the one and a half or two levels I had on everyone, or maybe it was just in comparison to the Drakes. But we had little difficulty getting back. Though, thanks to the normal number of monster attacks and Jack's injured arm, it did take us a little longer than I would have expected.

The slower travel meant we decided to eat lunch in the dungeon. Because this was not an anticipated part of our journey, Dot had to eat stew with us. I did my best not to show my secret, and somewhat unhelpful, pleasure at this outcome.

I'm a terrible person, I know. But we weren't in any real danger anymore, so I let myself enjoy her discomfort. Even better since we had run out of some of the spices on the last meal, so she couldn't even experience the better flavor of the earlier stew.

Kathrine's Status, Spells, and Skills:

< Kathrine Baulcom | Human(Female) | Age: 20

*Necromancer Lvl 6.09 | Bone Walker | Organizer |
Poisoner*

*STR: 10 | END: 13 | DEX: 15 | SPD: 12 | WIS: 15 | INT:
18 | CHA: 11 | MNT: 18*

Minion Control: 11

*Stamina: 125/125 | Mana: 825/825 | +2.1 stm/min |
+25.8 mana/min*

Mana Conversion: 75% >

< Necromancer Spells >

< Poison Bomb

*Ball of weak poison. Can be detonated in air for reduced
poison concentration.*

+ Focus to expand +

Miasma Bomb

Ball of poison.

+ Focus to expand +

Toxic Breath

Exhale cloud of potent poison.

+ Focus to expand +

< Skeleton Creation >

< Command Undead

Control undead.

+ Focus to expand +

Create Skeleton (Varied)

*Description: Creates a skeleton and weapon set. Available
weapon schematics: ax, mace, shield, bone rifle, and bone
shot. Runes added that add poison damage to the melee
weapons.*

*Effect: Creates a skeleton minion under the control of the
spellcaster.*

Necromancer | Runic | Elemental | Bone | Poison | Flesh |

Golem Creation

Create Weapons

Description: Allows the creation of weapons independent of the skeletons themselves. This is useful for rearming existing skeletons or creating more ranged ammunition.

Available weapon schematics: ax, mace, shield, bone rifle, and bone shot. Runes added that add poison damage.

Effect: Creates a bone and flesh weapon.

Necromancer | Runic | Elemental | Bone | Poison | Flesh | Golem Creation >

< Other Spells(Major) >

< Casting Light: Creates a ball of light that can be anchored above a person or object or launched to anchor above distant objects and surfaces.

Runic | Light >

< Necromancer Skills >

< Runic Magic (Poison) VIII | Runic Magic (Flesh) VII | Runic Magic (Bone) VIII | Runic Magic (Contact) III | Golem Creation IX | Magic Accuracy VI | Mana Channel XVIII | Mana Control XIX | Magic Mass V >

< Other Skills(Major) >

< Runic Magic(Light) II >