

Relaxation
Monday 11.7.62

I WOKE UP AT THE CRACK OF NOON WITH A BIG SMILE ON MY face, the last push through level 7 finally done. Pushing myself out of bed, I made a lunch and then plopped back down in front of my computer, pulling up my video footage of the weekend. Level 8 felt like a huge accomplishment, even if I still had a lot of work ahead of myself, because I'd set it as something of a goalpost. I was later than I would have liked, but I was also still on track to be able to pay my bills.

In order to achieve this, I'd gone on a three-day weekend expedition in Balltown. So far I'd been getting too little progress from each fight, so I used the long weekend to, more or less, grind progress. So for three days I did nothing but fight Styres on repeat; however, I did go somewhere you could expect near-consistent fights. One of the stone forests.

Some of the back canyons didn't lead to glaciers filled with Ice Drakes, but to an area dotted with standing stones. Despite the name it wasn't actually petrified trees, as the stones came in many different shapes and sizes. Plus, there were a few of them, different "forests" connecting to different canyons. And just to make things worse, those canyons were near ones that led to massive swarms of Cliff Huggers. Basically, if you weren't careful, heading to the forest would result in a bad day.

I didn't make much money in this situation. Selling Styre parts wasn't the most profitable way of doing things,

but that didn't matter. The additional strength and tactical knowledge was the point, however.

Grinding in real life was a real pain in the ass. It was monotonous but dangerous. If you started losing concentration because it was the thirtieth identical fight you could die, or at least get really injured, so the stress was real. Fortunately, I could take breaks. Time limits were very permissive, no clients or partners, and no external pressure for this one. So if things were going bad, I could retreat and relax.

Piecing the video footage together took longer than it ever had before, though I did have more footage than ever before. However, I was also feeling antsy and felt the need to get up and pace around. I caught myself double-checking, in my head, the calculations for my budget. Everything that was bugging me.

Clear signs that I was getting stressed. Not surprising, but I didn't know what to do about it. Except find a way to relax. It would probably need to be limited to things that were also productive. That would help a lot.

Since I found it amusing, and it would be something for my channel, I hunted down clip after clip of my skeletons and myself taking identical actions against identical targets. And this spurred on the idea for the episode. I would focus on the endless repetition of "the grind."

It would likely take a couple days to get the job done. But I needed to continue moving forward. And for me that meant working my newest knowledge, observations, and ideas into a new and better versions of all my spells. Still, a short video of several repeated actions from the weekend

hunt would make a good teaser for my channel, and I slapped that together, something to garner interest.

After that, it was mostly research time. Couldn't just stop because I wanted to take it easy. I had a lot of work that needed to be done before that could happen.

Dot: Cat. Got a contract for next week. Balltown, Monday at opening.

Kathrine: Use my name, dick. Who is it?

Dot: Some chick. Wants to get a bunch of levels or something. Don't care.

Kathrine: Some chick. Very useful. Will be there.

I sighed. Clearly Dot was done even pretending to ask my opinion on these things. Still, didn't sound like a bad job overall. I was just hoping for a longer reprieve on dealing with Dot. Well, I had a full week before I had to put on my game face. Not bad, overall.

Erica: Hey, Kathrine. You up for a night out tomorrow? I know you're not today after that long-ass trip.

Kathrine: Maybe. What did you have in mind?

Erica: A club I know. Fun, good music, and not badly crowded on Tuesdays ether.

Kathrine: I'm supposed to hang out with Ashley tomorrow. Mind if I invite her along?

Erica: No idea who she is, but the more the merrier. We can make it a girls' night.

I grinned as Ashley confirmed she'd come and we made plans to eat first and meet after supper. I didn't know Erica all that much, but she had made an effort to get to know me. So why not.

Confrontation
Monday – 11.14.62

Dot spun around to glare at me. "Fuck you. Stop spreading lies about me!"

"Where did I lie?" I asked. "I'll be more careful next time."

Our client was looking between us, worry etched on her face. Honestly I didn't even remember her name. This was a job chosen by Dot, and we hadn't even gotten through the polite introductions yet.

"You told everyone I was a lower level than you!"

"I've said nothing about your level. I only stated that I've made it to level 8 thanks to you not wanting to hunt on your birthday and me taking advantage of a full weekend in Balltown. It was an intense training program but totally worth it."

"That's it! There's no fucking way a loser like you can be at level 8!"

"Well, I am. If you had a sheet of paper I'd be more than willing to prove it."

One of the National Guards standing nearby walked up while fishing out a folded square of computer paper of his

pocket. "We see this dispute more often than you would expect."

I grinned and grabbed the paper. Pushing my status screen into it, I held it out for Dot to see. It was rather clear.

*< Kathrine Baulcom | Human(Female) | Age: 20
Necromancer Lvl 8.04 | Bone Walker | Organizer |
Poisoner*

*STR: 10 | END: 13 | DEX: 15 | SPD: 12 | WIS: 15 | INT:
18 | CHA: 11 | MNT: 19*

Minion Control: 12

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

Mana Conversion: 75% >

The guard let out a low whistle. "You've only been going into the dungeon for a few months, right?"

"Two months, same as Dot here."

Our client actually relaxed. That impressed me considerably. I assumed she had some understanding of how combat levels worked. Could also just be happy about someone with such a level advantage.

Dot, on the other hand, was smirking like she'd won some competition. "I'm sorry, Ms. Koven. There's no way she made it this far without putting far too much stress on herself compared to the rest of us. Guild policy holds that she can't be trusted to enter the dungeon."

That resulted in the guard standing nearby laughing his ass off. I simply raised an eyebrow at him. That got us an explanation. "I heard about you partying with Erica. And I've watched your videos. You're clearly a born warrior and you've learned how to manage your stress.

"I'm not saying you don't stress out, but you clearly know how to handle the issue."

I grinned at the memory of Erica, Ashley, and my trip "into town." It was a perfect way to burn off that stress. Plus, I'd learned that even a little drunk I couldn't tell if someone was flirting with me. Something Erica and Ashley were determined to teach me how to do. I still didn't understand why though. I wasn't really interested in a relationship at this time. Maybe once I got settled in I would revisit the subject.

Dot sputtered, clearly not certain how to handle this conversation. "My argument stands. Guild policy is very clear, Kathrine can't do this mission and I can't run one on my own."

"I assume that means you'll be ending the contract? Because I have no reason to think it's needed," I answered. "I can see no other reason to end this and will not be paying the penalty for a decision I disagree with."

Dot shook her head and pulled out her phone. A few minutes later all three of us got a text. Unsurprisingly, it was telling me that my contract was canceled.

"Ms. Koven. I'm assuming that means your contract was canceled as well? Because I'm free and can offer you an independent contract for entering the dungeon. We might have to be more careful regarding where we go then we would otherwise have to be, but as you heard earlier, I've spent three days hunting this dungeon by myself. We

should be safe for a single day, or even two if you'd like to replicate the canceled contract."

Dot turned red. "You can't do that!"

"Of course I can. Hopkins Vs Adventures Guild. 2059 I believe. It was ruled that guild members are hired as independent employees, like an MLM or personal distributive group. It was also decided that as long as we didn't work for a competitive company, our work outside of the guild is not in competition with the guild at all. So it doesn't infringe the non-compete clause of employment contracts."

"Why haven't you quit then? You clearly have no respect for the guild!"

"That non-compete clause means I would have to work completely through my own advertisements. Which I don't think I can do just yet. Plus, it takes a lot more work than you would expect to vet potential clients. I've already turned down some lucrative contracts because of what background checks have turned up. And I have to do some personal research as well. In other words, I'm not ready to run completely independent of the guild yet."

Dot spun and walked away, and a quiet scream was heard as she stomped away.

"Well, that was... unfortunate," I said. I couldn't quite hide the relief in my voice.

"You don't sound that broken up," Ms. Koven said.

"I don't like Dot. At all or on any level. So yeah, I don't mind that she's gone now." I pulled up my phone and the link to the documents I needed signed legally for a job.

After a few minutes and an exchange of numbers, Ms. Koven had signed a contract with me and we headed into the dungeon. The contract was specifically to help my

client grow her combat levels. She was with a different guild and they had a small fund for useful jobs to do this. Which was a smart idea, if you asked me.

We chatted quickly about our abilities as we entered the dungeon. Ms. Koven was a Witch, which was just so perfect I had to chuckle. From her eye roll I took it I wasn't the first to mention that, but whatever.

We quickly moved away from the entrance, not wanting to run into a Cliff Hugger ambush if we could avoid it and went in hunt of Styires. Thanks to our late start it quickly became clear that the area around the entrance had been emptied.

It took us thirty-five minutes to find the first group, which was nine monsters strong. In the end, though, I had something like 5 levels on the expected level for Styires to be difficult. A barrage of Poison and Miasma Bombs, followed up with one small burst of Toxic Breath did in all the monsters. And Ms. Koven, who still hadn't signaled she was comfortable with first names, wasn't useless at all.

She drop some kind of curse over a group of them that appeared to slow them down. And another spell which seemed to sap their energy, though given that was similar to the side effects of my poison it was hard to be sure exactly what her magic was doing.

"I don't feel like I did much here."

"Check your status. Did you gain any progress to the next level?" At her nod, I continued. "Then you helped. Don't worry, once I have my minions up and running I'll hold off on massive poison bombing. Then you'll get a lot more progress as you do more work. We just have to make allowances for this first stage of the fight."

Ms. Koven nodded and then sighed. "I guess it's just the knowledge that you can do this all on your own that bothers me."

"As you saw, I'm level 8." I walked up to my first monster and began creating minions. No need to harvest these first monsters for anything. "Tell me. What do you know about job tiers?"

I felt like I'd had this conversation before, several times, on my channel. But she needed it. Long story short, Necromancer was a 'tier 3' magic combat job. This meant we had far better ability to operate independently than the average magical job. I'd heard speculation that you had to have over 60% mana conversion just to gain the job, suggesting that most people would never get it because they were unwilling to sacrifice so much of their physical energy for magical.

Not to mention that few people started above 50% conversion, and the process of increasing your conversation level was a long one. People usually gave up once they reached what they considered "enough." Around 50%, in most cases.

But, and this was a big but, that didn't mean we were immune to death. I would never leave the Scrag alone at this point in time. I might be able to survive a fight or two against the monsters down in the plains, but without a lot more levels I wouldn't take the risk that my first fight was harder than expected and I got smashed. Now, once I was level 10? Maybe then I would be strong enough to solo the region below the Scrag. It was possible I guess, but unlikely and a risk that wasn't worth the reward.

Witches were tier two. I would suggest that one could run the Scrag solo around my level, if not a level or two

higher. But like the first time I tried to solo the Rat Way, they were more than likely to get themselves in trouble. If I hadn't been on the path to convert to a dedicated follower of Zilena I would have been in trouble. All of which I shared with Ms. Koven.

Thinking about this series of events made me wonder if Zilena was "investing" in me. Like, if she wanted to expand her following in the area, having a priestess with a unique job in the dungeons would be quite useful. So I had to wonder if she was putting in the extra effort for future rewards. Of course I couldn't really know that right now, but it was something I thought might be important to consider.

That aside, we moved on once I had a small army of skeletons. The next fight was very different. I only created two skeletons with guns, and that was all I'd be creating this time around. Mainly because my main goal today was to keep the Styires off Ms. Koven long enough that she'd be able to layer on a lot of spells. For this reason, my skeletons were limited in how often they were allowed to attack as well, focusing mainly on thinning the numbers enough that they could continue to just constantly defend themselves.

After the last weekend, which was only really interesting for its full length, this was rather boring. My skeletons blocked, the Styires charged, and that repeated. Nothing really interesting here. If we had hunted down Hardbacks or Drakes things might have gone differently. But we weren't going down that path, because Ms. Koven wanted to stay safer and I didn't feel it was my place to say anything.

The commands given weren't that complicated, not after all the refinements I'd made so far. "Block and stay in line" just didn't take that much effort for me or my skeletons at this point. So I only had one thing to experiment with, trying to attach poison to my skeletons' bullets.

And so the slow slog began. Creating more runes, getting into shop talk with my client, and just simply experimenting with the spells. With limited time to properly sit down and review available runes, I pretty much had to play it as safe as possible. The energy levels I was currently working with were high enough to be dangerous.

Whatever happened, this was going to be a long, slow day for me, which was just fine I guess. I was getting paid more than I would have been paid before, and Ms. Koven wasn't having to spend as much either. It sounded like a win-win-lose to me. And I'd always be happy when Dot lost.

Not nice of me, but fuck that bitch. I'd had it with her. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure she was trying to deny me money and force me out of the guild. Well, jokes on her, I had backup plans and would most likely end up working independent of any guild at the end of the day. Thanks largely to the bullshit that were the Sanctified Devils methods of being. Or whatever.

By lunch time Ms. Koven was quite willing to extend our contract overnight just like was originally planned with Dot. This made me very happy, as she agreed to tell other people to go straight to my personal web site for this style of job again. The best kind of advertisement. Free. Seriously, it cost way more than it should to advertise.