

**Dungeon Time**  
**Sunday – 09.17.62**

DRAGGING MYSELF OUT OF BED AT 3:30 IN THE MORNING, I had several things to do before I could enter the dungeon. Most important was the sacrifices to the three gods I'd chosen. This wasn't that complicated of a process, you had to make a small sacrifice of the right type for each god. In all three cases it was incense, and a little something extra to also burn. The extra was different for each god: Toohr was looking for a symbol of your coming journey, Syaos was looking for a written plan of investigation, and Zilena wanted a token of mortality. For Toohr I drew a map of the dungeon's Scrag section, Syaos got my plan for developing my minion spells, and Zilena got an actual flower I had found. You also had to make a request of the gods' assistance in a little prayer for all such sacrifices. None of which was defined.

Once done right your offerings would be burned, without any need of a lighter or risk of the fire spreading. Since I had to set up Zilena's shrine in my room, I went ahead and did the same for the other two. No reason to split things up and take an unnecessary trip to risk being late.

Before leaving I pulled up my blessings page, which had the information on the blessings handed to you from any gods. I have to say, it was an interesting read, and if Zilena's goal was to get me thinking, she'd achieved it.

< *Blessings* >

< Toohr's Blessing of Exploration: As you travel through the world and the 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 are looking for, but the unexpected discoveries are often the most important. *Lasts two days.*

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 your actual abilities. *Lasts three days. Thanks for the new shrine. >*

Zilena's blessing description was the most personalized, and Syaos' had a small message as well, but I didn't know how common such messages were. Seriously though, why did I get slightly personalized, or very personalized, messages from Zilena and Syaos? Zilena's alone sounded like she took a personal interest in my request, while Syaos' could be one of several "more personal" auto-responses. Actually, did gods have auto-response things set up? And now I was imagining prayers as emails sent to a manager's inbox.

My research into the gods proved that they were limited in ability, even if those limits aren't always understandable. For instance, the way gods handled blessings suggested they couldn't just bless everyone, but

at the same time they could apparently edit the world in otherwise impossible ways. Some of the big miracles that have happened are just utterly ridiculous if you try and figure out how they work physically.

Shaking my head, I slipped on my armor and rushed to get dressed before the taxi arrived. I didn't want the driver waking my roommate, who'd finally dumped her boyfriend and was back in the apartment. And on the hunt for a new boy toy. Still, Zilena's blessing, and the message contained within, continued to run through my head.

The only other time I'd gotten up this early was when I was joining a caravan to leave Charleston and come here to Columbia. So the stillness of the city was quite new as I rode the cab toward the Devils' guild hall. Once in the Diver district though, things really began to change, as it was clear our guild wasn't the only one getting ready to head out of town, based solely on the number of armored busses around. They must also be heading toward Balltown, it was the only nearby dungeon outside of our walls.

I found Sandra fairly easy: much like her gloves, she was in all-pink armor. Like, neon pink. Pinker than pink. I just walked up and she burst out laughing. I have no idea what my face said, but it must have been good.

Sandra just shrugged as she calmed down. "I like pink."

"Clearly," Adam said as he walked up. His armor was a simple clam blue.

Mine was a darker shade of blue than his. It was clear, however, we had all ordered our own armor. The Sanctified Devils had a deal with Thor's Armory, and most of the others were using that.

Thor's Armory produced heavier armor that was well regarded for being good for keeping people alive. All their

armor, even those for more agility-based jobs and magic users, incorporate full metal armor plates, which while far better at stopping attacks, were much heavier than the material our armor was made of. The mage's armor was something like 50% heavier than normal, and I could already tell that the weight of my lighter armor was going to tire me out.

This made it fairly simple to pick out the magic users. I think there was only five of us. The other two wandered closer but didn't say anything. No idea why.

"So I see we all had the same idea, get a better armor for our class than Thor's. What did you guys go with?" Adam asked, clearly interested.

"I'm using Alchemy Integration's level I spellcaster's kit," I answered quickly. "I might have gone with Composite Safety, but they were too expensive, and I didn't think it was worth the extra price right now."

Adam nodded. "Makes sense. I thought about AI as well but ended up with Public Safety Equipment. I just felt like the more tested materials would be a safer bet. I've heard that AI has some treatment issues with their alchemy soaks."

"Yeah, but no one else has this color!" Sandra interjected. "At least no one else I would trust not to fail completely against a drake ambush. It was a bit pricey for me, however. Adding a special order color to the armor and all that."

I nodded and tugged at the collar. "I don't fucking understand how you guys wear ties."

Adam grinned. "Yeah, it does help getting used to that collar. But with the number of monsters who go for the throat, I actually don't mind this one."

Sandra nodded. "And yet, I still feel like I'm being choked. Still, I would rather be uncomfortable than

dead.”

I grinned. One aspect of all Diver armor was a high armored collar designed to stop a monster from latching its jaw around your throat. Such an attack would still likely choke us, but it was unlikely to tear out our throat. All the ambushers in Balltown favored throat attacks, so I wasn't about to trust any armor for diving dungeons that lacked that feature.

We continued to talk about random things for a few minutes before we were herded onto the busses. I saw the Monk from earlier, and it was easy to see who was regretting their choice to go partying. The glares sent her way were being completely ignored, however.

Once we were on the bus we were assigned our teams and pointed to the team leaders. All told the group was thirty-five strong, as we were split into groups of four, one of which was down a man. It appears someone was late, which was grounds for termination based on my memory of the contract. I wasn't surprised they hadn't made a group of all magic users, but I was pissed to find out that the overly enthusiastic Monk was in my group again.

The bus ride was interesting. The vehicle had weapons mounts on top, armor plating, and we joined a convey of several other busses as we left the city. It was nowhere near as big as the conveys that moved between cities, but it wasn't going very far. The trip to Balltown was about an hour and fifteen minutes long; the sun wouldn't rise until well after the dungeon opened around six.

The first sign of life we saw outside of the city was the massive fortifications that surrounded the dungeon entrance to try and prevent outbreaks from being too dangerous. Unlike the Rat Way, these fortifications didn't have to worry about a surrounding city and were lit up

almost as bright as a noonday sun. We could see them for almost fifteen minutes before we actually arrived.

massive anti-air guns of some kind were spread around the area to handle the flying monsters that lived in the dungeon. Massive walls, standing two or three stories up, were built in a hexagon around the entrance, and it was clear that the walls were designed to be rapidly evacuated, complete with slides and wide stairs.

Surrounding the walls was the motor pool, filled with armored transports all pointed away from the fortification. Everything had been cleared out so all the transports could leave at the same time. The National Guard was clearly on ball for an evacuation.

As we unloaded and gathered into our groups, our leaders pointed out other important buildings. A small tavern/cafe thing if you were waiting on someone to join you, or for the buses to leave. A small clinic/hospital with its own helicopter for when you needed help. A shrine was attached to the hospital, as the priests often offered healing to dangerous cases, or when dealing with injuries that weren't well understood. And a small store where you could grab minor things you might have forgotten. Though the price was higher than in the city.

The guards' barracks and facilities were also pointed out, mostly so we knew not to bother them. This was more of a small town than a base or outpost, and I could see more businesses close to where the National Guard were stationed, clearly placed there to service those guys.

And then we just had to wait. Not that we were in any way alone. There was quite a large number of people around, from multiple guilds if I had to guess. One group looked experienced, though it was honestly hard to tell.

It appeared that our guide didn't like to waste time, as he drew us around him in a circle so we could talk easily.

“Alright, my name is Zack, I’m a Fighter specializing in heavy weapons. My main role is to teach you some of those skills that requires hands-on effort to learn, and to keep you safe during this dive. Be aware that we don’t expect this to be all that dangerous, but we find that people sometimes freeze their first time staring down a monster charge, and it’s a good idea to pay attention to that problem.

“This means I will only step in to keep you safe. I expect each of you to handle all the monster fights. I’m a safety net, not a crutch.” Zack looked at each of us in turn.

“Now, I want each of you to introduce yourself, tell us your job, and what you expect your role in the fighting to be. Don’t worry, we’ll have to change things up.” Zack gestured to me, standing at his right side.

“Kathrine. I’m a Necromancer. I create minions, skeletons in my case, from corpses, so I haven’t had any time to practice or test those spells. So I will be spending some time practicing that. No promises on a useful minion today. Other than that, I use poison-based AOE and debilitating spells. So don’t go rushing in right at the beginning.” Despite myself I glanced at the Monk.

“Aww, come on, we know that’s not how magic works,” the dude across from me said.

“Actually it is,” Zack said. “It is a problem; however, we are only going to be in the dungeon for a few hours. You’ll need to do whatever practice you need to in the fifteen-minute breaks we’ll take after each fight. And the way we’re dividing loot is that each person gets an even number of corpses. What you do with each one is up to you.

“The goal is to get you as close to level 3 by the end of this trip as possible. That means we can’t take much time between fights. Sorry.”

I sighed, this wasn't a good sign. Why wasn't I put with someone who was more helpful to my need to grow faster? Of course, it's not like I expected any group would be allowed to stay in the dungeon longer than normal.

"Well, I'm next. Kelly, Monk, level 6. I got most of my experience via sparing matches and the MMA tournaments I've been able to attend since becoming an adult. I punch things, and dodge other things." Kelly shrugged.

"Andrew. Fighter as well. I have an assault rifle and an ax, just in case. So I guess that's medium to short range." Andrew was the one who didn't understand how magic worked. He also seemed to be pissed. Though I guess it could also be nerves.

"Jack. Thug. I have a shotgun, didn't see the point in anything else." Jack didn't look like a Thug: he didn't seem particularly tall or unusually strong. But I guessed firearms sort of eliminated the need for that kind of build. Or at least reduced it.