

"BEFORE I WAS AVERAGING ONE DEAD SKELETON PER FIGHT. Now I'm up to two. If I run across a bad fight, I could have a hole in my line." I closed my eyes, thinking through the implications. "I think the best choice is to attempt to create a new skeleton mid-fight. I need to try this before I need it."

I shot a grin I didn't quite feel at the camera. "I don't think I'm going to need it. I'm fighting through areas I've already been. With Way Fishers being rare enough that I fought less than one per battle on the way here, it's quite possible I won't see one on the way back. And I know how to handle the pouncing Ratigers now. Start with more room in the 'pocket' and then shrink it as the bodies pile up."

I shut off the camera. I didn't feel as confident as I suggested. Yet the more I thought about it, I wasn't afraid of failing. It was harder than expected, and I was going to take every precaution I could. But I didn't expect to actually be in any kind of danger.

In the next fight I was actually starting to run out of energy. However, my test turned out quite effective. The spell still created a skeleton right in front of me but it had just enough range, barely, to turn Ratigers on the far side of the skeleton line into dust. Perfect for creating more backup. A little worrying though, because I couldn't really pay attention to the fighting at the same time.

Still, it was an option with some preparation. And having the option let me relax a little bit.

I was about halfway back to the entrance, assuming I'd managed to track my position effectively, and I was getting really tired. I was starting to eat into my buffer time. If I

slowed down too much more, I'd risk being trapped by the poison gas in the morning.

Because of this the next fight left me a bit frustrated. It was clear that the region I was in had mostly backfilled, and the only positive was that I hadn't seen a Way Fisher yet. Yet the fight was mostly simple. Even as I became exhausted I was able to keep up now that I'd gotten a full method hammered out.

As one of my skeletons went down, I filled the hole with only a minor increase in heart rate. It was now basically routine. Even still, I made sure to spray a little Toxic Breath onto that side of the fight, not wanting to risk anything.

As I watched the last of my Toxic Breath poison return to mana, I had to keep an extra vigilant eye on things. I was trying to keep a close eye on both sides of the fight, the small excitement from the moment of loss enough to clear out some cobwebs. Yet even then it was difficult to focus. The fighting was really simple and reactionary. Keep the skeletons in a line. If the Ratigers mob one, get the others to help. Drop the occasional Miasma Bomb.

The difficulty of actually casting a spell, mentally forcing things to move, was the best thing I had to keep focus. So I cast a number of spells and decided to drop a few extra Miasma Bombs. With that extra breathing room I decided to replace one of my skeletons.

The crunching of bones caused me to spin around mid-cast. As I staggered from the speed, I bumped into the nearby wall. Not that this was a bad thing, as a Ratiger had somehow managed to get its teeth into the shield arm of one of my skeletons. Fortunately it was the one on the far

end of the tunnel, so I took a few steps back and prepped both a Poison Bomb and Miasma Bomb. Doing this was harder than doing one spell twice, but I'd practiced just for this situation.

I fired off both, only for the Miasma Bomb to collapse in my hand. A burst of unfocused and poorly formed poison magic went off in my face, causing me to slump backward into the wall while fighting off my own poison for the second time today. My ragged breath forced a coughing fit on me.

Quickly I glanced up at the skeleton in trouble, but I couldn't see through my tears. Gritting my teeth, I realized I had no way of seeing the condition of my skeletons without my eyes, a weakness I'd never considered in my ability set. Unfortunately, I had no way around this problem right now.

I blinked rapidly and tried to focus my eyes on the far section of the skeleton line. After a few seconds I was fairly certain the Ratiger had been dislodged and wasn't about to pounce on me from behind the combat line.

That cleared up, I leaned back and tried to take stock of my situation. But a splash of water on my right cheek insistently started a burning sensation that seemed to spread as the area left behind went numb. Jerking to the left, I bumped into a skeleton and jumped back. I then, very carefully, cast another Toxic Breath spell over this section. Just in case.

Calming down, I was able to ascertain that I hadn't killed myself, but whatever the burning poison that splashed onto me was, it was continuing to spread, even if it was, hopefully, slowing down a little. I didn't want to

find out what would happen if it made it to my eyes. Not that I had anything I could do to stop its spread. Another hole in my ability set.

For the rest of the fortunately mundane fight I was distracted by the spreading pain and numbness. In some ways this was better than being distracted by fatigue, but whatever the advantage, not being able to deal with the poison wasn't good for my health.

Once I no longer had to keep my eye out for monster attacks, I turned to figure out what the hell had managed to poison me. Unfortunately, that was a simple realization. The wall I had leaned against was directly under the pipes. I normally kept away from them, but mostly because I didn't want whatever nastiness was in those pipes on my armor. Turns out it was poisons, or maybe toxic, a poison either way, so far as the system was concerned.

And right there, a slightly darker section of dark stone. Evidence of something dripping from the pipe and getting the ground wet. The plus side, the poison had stopped spreading. I guess my eye was safe, but the numbness in my cheek was enough to make me wish I had poison that strong.

Shoulders slumping, I staggered toward the far wall, double- and triple-checking to make sure there was no chance of being splashed on, and sat down. I should be doing a lot of things. Including replacing my skeleton. But I just needed some rest right now. Leaning my head back, I felt my eyes slide closed.

Yes, I shouldn't close my eyes in the dungeon. But I should be safe for a little while, as the fighting would have cleared out a decent portion of the surrounding area.

Unfortunately, if I sat here too long monsters would wander into the area, but honestly I was finding it hard to keep moving without some kind of rest.

I got complacent. I had thought I had everything in hand and let my guard down. I had no need to replace my skeleton but thought it would be a good way to clear my mind for a few minutes. Yet, it caused me to make a mistake. And I even bumped into one of my own skeletons. I wonder how close I was to losing the skeleton I bumped into. I'd be able to check the video.

Oh, and I only had two hours of leeway time. Shit. I was in trouble. I was fairly certain I could make it. Probably, maybe. I definitely wouldn't make it if I made more stupid mistakes, like not pushing off from a wall dripping with dangerous substances.

So I pulled out my cell and started a timer; five minutes should be enough to banish some of the weariness in my limbs.

My next real worry was that the poison left a visible mark on my face. That could be enough to end any kind of tolerance from the guild, given I wasn't supposed to be working alone just yet. Or ever if they remained true to past form. The numbness should fade, hopefully without needing medical aid, as that was more money out of my bank account.

*< Conditioning V has become Conditioning VI
Poison Resistance I has been created!
Poison Resistance I has become Poison Resistance II
Magic Mass I has become Magic Mass II >*

Checking my notifications explained part of what had slowed the poison. I hadn't been aware that there were resistance skills; they definitely belonged to the more "game-like" set of skills, but I didn't remember reading about this one.

With effort I cracked open my eyes and checked the alarm. Only seconds left, and I still felt tired as fuck. Cutting off the alarm, I considered my options. A longer rest was possible.

Yet I needed to fix up my skeleton. Probably only had a half hour before the area was backfilled and another fight was on my hands, if we went by the time that happened around lunch. And finally, the longer I took to get out, the more tired I'd be.

In favor of staying was my stamina taking longer to recover. Worse than that, I'd expended enough effort that I was sore and my feet were protesting against the hard stone I was walking across. This meant my expenditure of energy was going up. Yet more proof that I hadn't taken everything into consideration.

There was a similar effect to magic, but part of the Mental Fortitude attribute's function was to resist magical exhaustion like Endurance did for physical exhaustion. So it would take a lot more for me to reach such levels of tiredness.

That left a major, but somewhat uncomfortable choice. Prayer. Unlike before the system, prayer served a specific purpose. It was an attempt by those without religious jobs

to ask for a miracle. So praying without need, or with a frivolous need, was becoming something of a taboo. No one wanted to annoy a god with insistent pleading. Especially as you could now demonstrate the truth of gods.

I seemed to have the attention of Zilena already, if the personal notes I'd found in all my blessing from her so far were anything to go by. Which had left me even more uncomfortable with prayer. I knew Zilena had her eye on me. If I prayed to her and annoyed her, what would happen? I had no idea. I didn't even know how to judge that; between leftover cultural views of gods from before they talked to us and just never being that religious, I had no idea what parts of my beliefs were real and which parts weren't.

Still, nothing like the present to find out, and I was pretty sure this was the best chance for exiting without problematic injuries or death. Despite everything, and probably in rejection of reality, I still didn't consider death a likely option. I just had to keep the truth focused in my mind.

So, Zilena. I could use your help getting out of this situation unscathed. I think I need physical stamina. That will allow me to fight at closer to full strength and make it back to the start of the dungeon hopefully uninjured. So long as I don't do something stupid or have really bad luck. Which I might. I know this is probably not a fully life or death situation, but I've clearly bit off more than I can chew and don't want to risk that I am, yet again, underestimating the danger.

< *Answered Prayer* >

< Kathrine. Your prayer has been answered. You will be filled with strength—use it wisely, as it's possible to wear yourself out again. All I ask in return is that you dig into my teachings. Learn what it is to be a follower of a goddess. And myself in particular—Zilena, Guardian of the Valley of the Dust. >

As I read the message from a goddess, which appeared in my mind without prompting, I felt the fatigue leave my body and my energy return. Pushing off the ground, I rolled my shoulders and realized the soreness in my muscles had retreated as well. It would be super tempting to rush forward at the same pace as the start of my dungeon crawl.

However, my face was still numb, which prompted me to pay more attention. I wasn't back to full strength. The warning in the message made me curb my enthusiasm. It took more work than it should have.

A more cautious path would be smarter. After all, I got the feeling that squandering this gift would not result in a second answered prayer sent my way. The warning could also be a suggestion of something unexpected happening on the way back, though I could also just be paranoid.

I needed to look into how gods, or at least Zilena, gave warnings if I was really serious about seeking the favor of a goddess. I didn't mind being a caretaker, or helping get her following started here in Charleston. But beyond that, I'd need to do the research. Which was the condition put

on the answered prayer. Kind of indicated that Zilena had a handle on my personality. Not surprising for a goddess, and clearly a result of my reaching out to her for blessings.

I would curse about the unfairness of having to do more research not pertaining to my ability to support myself inside a dungeon, but having access to divine favor was a major advantage. Under normal circumstances a secondary job often took a couple of years to pick up, but divine jobs were different. You could only gain them if the god in question handed them to you. And you could actually lose the job, as the god or goddess could remove the job if they felt they should. This was, of course, mostly related to your actions in their area of influence.

If I remembered my Zilena lore, dungeons and soldiers definitely fell under Zilena's influence. But it does make me wonder how accurate such a view was. After all, shouldn't the gods care how their followers were perceived by those around them? I was guessing the answer was yes.

But theological debates were for another time, so I started turning the monsters into skeletons. Thanks to my lack of focus, I'd gotten to replace a number of damaged skeletons as well. My backpack was now full so I didn't even bother to grab extra tails, streamlining the experience heavily. Still took longer than I would have liked to replace all the damaged skeletons. I really, really needed that repair function. A spell to create a shield without needing to create the skeleton would also be great, as over half the "damage" I needed to repair was to the shields anyway.

It was then time to head toward the exit again. This time I went cautiously but no longer held back by

exhaustion. The next fight went much better than the last, and I felt safe to step up my pace just a little.

It took me a grand total of ten hours and forty-seven minutes round trip. Yet, thirty minutes before I hit the exit I ended up with a notification.

*< Necromancer Lvl 5 has become Necromancer Lvl 6!
Bone Walker bonus has been added
A new perk is available for Necromancer job!
Magic Mass II has become Magic Mass III >*

This triggered during a completely mundane, and slightly easier, fight. I wanted to complain, as this didn't make for really good online content, but it probably reflected 90% of all level ups, as well as 90% of all progress gained. Still didn't make for good content. Well, I could work with it.

As long as I didn't wait until my next level up I could grab my perk at any time. If you leveled up with a chosen perk it was done automatically. And there was still debate on how the perks were chosen. Were they weighted? Was it purely random? Was it chosen based on your past choices? Were there perks you could only get through random choice? With so many unanswered questions, I didn't want to take the risk.

I also realized I hadn't recorded anything for a while. So I pulled out my phone and started recording as I headed toward the exit. "Hello one and all. I realized I haven't recorded more of these little videos for a while.

“My only excuse is exhaustion. However, in order to ensure I can get out without any more injuries or death I prayed to Zilena, asking for physical strength.

“I know, it was a gamble, but I don’t think it was a big gamble. In exchange for saving my ass, Zilena only asked me to research into her church and teachings. If enough people are interested, I’ll likely make a short video on what I learned.

“Anyway, I’m recording this because I just hit level 6. The fight was no different than any other, but who cares. Objective achieved. I don’t know what perk I’m choosing just yet. That will have to happen tomorrow.”

Divine energy or not, I feel myself nodding off as I turned over my gathered Ratiger tails and Lurker parts to the Guard. They gave me a receipt and promised that the money would be transferred in two to three days. Which was pretty good for a government program if you asked me.

Either way, one glance at the amount made explained why anyone entered this dungeon. I had made about thirteen hundred dollars. About average for what I’d been making in the last couple of trips. No contract this time in, but I was still making enough for it to be a stable part of my income. Stability was a useful trait. And if I could find a way to protect a camp, letting me stay overnight in the Rat Way? Yeah, I was sure I could make some money just for that spell. Hopefully my knowledge of poison magic made it a possibility.