

WITH THAT OUT OF THE WAY WE HEADED DEEPER INTO THE dungeon, far more cautiously than before. I quickly noted that the passage we were in hadn't shown any visible side passages and everyone was on edge. However, despite passing a half dozen dark patches, we ran into no other monsters.

And not much later we poked our heads out into a wide area. It looked like a cistern, a large area to hold water, only this one had dirt, glowing mushrooms, and an unfortunate number of deep shadows that made us all uncomfortable.

The overall affect was gorgeous and really made me wish I had a real camera to take pictures, as my phone didn't really seem to work well enough. Though it captured video just fine, the low-light situation rendered the video difficult to handle.

While the glowing mushrooms definitely gave some indication of the size of the round stone room, the creeping shadows hid most of the far wall from us. I could just make out another entrance far to the right. Before we went inside we pulled out the maps and sighed. Another reason people tended to stay from here, no one had explored further than two rooms in. The assumption was that the whole region consisted of rooms similar to this, connected by straight corridors. But no one really knew much. The general rule was to retreat if you ran into Lurkers. So the maps of this region were mostly unknown and we needed to avoid getting lost.

"Well, I say we move along the wall. Make a semicircle of skeletons and have Kathrine lob poison into the closest shadows. Repeat as necessary," Elizabeth whispered.

I raised an eyebrow at the low voice but nodded at the suggestion. I couldn't come up with a better solution to the problem. Mainly because I didn't trust our backs to

remain uncontested. At minimum I expected monsters from the greater dungeon to backfill the corridor at some point. So walls to our back were probably the best choice.

We slipped carefully out of the corridor and slipped left from the door. Mostly because there was a suspicious patch of shadows right against the wall to the right. There was another one to the left, but there was a lot more room to work with before we got to it.

Taking a tight formation, we were able to just fit the four of us and my two ranged skeletons inside a nearly tight formation of ten shield bearers and ax-wielding skeletons that had taken a knee. This formation had an unfortunate number of holes, as the skeletons weren't quite all facing in the same direction. So I switched it to a box, four minions parallel, as much as possible to the wall and three extending from the four to the wall. This was more cramped but the corners were the only major gaps. And that was easier to keep track of.

That issue sorted, I took a couple deep breaths and launched a Miasma Bomb into the closest, and most suspicious, patch of shadows.

It was like all the shadows in the room rose up and charged at us. Fortunately, the Lurkers weren't the fastest monsters in the world. Elizabeth was facing away from the wall, with the primary assistance of my ranged minions. To the left and right were Alex and Jordan. Red glowing feats surrounded my squadmates, and I was throwing poison at all the new patches of shadows I could find from the center of the formation.

Elizabeth was snapping from target to target as if she had an aim-bot active. Alex seemed to be firing sprays of bullets with every single pull of the trigger—I think it was some kind of multi-shot power—and Jordan was, on

occasion, firing large glowing red balls of something from his shotgun that exploded deep in the patches of shadows.

Other than the rather terrifying appearance of massive waves of shadows heading our way, the first few minutes were actually rather calm. Then the first Lurker managed to climb up onto a shield. It was killed quickly, but a second followed it. And a third.

Then a Lurker made it up onto a shield right next to the wall. It went down, but a second one happened nearby. I made sure I dropped a poison cloud right next to the wall and near the gaps in the corners.

One of my skeletons in the left corner took a direct hit and lost its ax hand. This wasn't a big problem, but if it had lost its shield arm it would be a disaster. So I exhaled a cloud of Toxic Breath into both corners to keep them more clear, and everyone doubled up on the killing.

Then the steady bomb of Jordan's shotgun slowed a bit. Looking over, I saw he was using something to allow him to single load his shotgun at high speed but that still was slower than before. Another poison cloud was dropped on his side, to help slow things down. Meanwhile, I was keeping tabs on mana use. This was clearly going to be a long one, based on the fact we couldn't see anything but shadows around us now.

I needed to help control the crap attempting to jump over the shield walls. My ranged minions were now focused almost exclusively on the corners, but rifles at close range that were unable to accurately target the monsters made them less effective.

However, there were all kinds of advantages to skeletons, and this was one of them. Using my area effect creation spell, I turned some of the corpses on the other side of the minion wall into dust, then forged that dust into a pair of spears. These were instantly handed to my

rifle minions, and I moved their guns to the side for later use.

My spears gave the minions about four feet of reach, and rather than a flat, wide tip you would normally associate with the spears, they had long spikes. The reason was simple, monster flesh could be stupidly dense, and the last thing I wanted was anything that could get stuck on the end of the spear.

I was fairly depleted on mana now. Almost ten minutes of bombs, and now two spear creations spells, and I was running low. Not knowing how much longer this would go, I made myself another spear so I could help even longer.

All the weapons I'd created so far, including the axes and shields used by my minion line, probably required the maintenance of about 1.2 mana a minute. I worked out the numbers once, mostly from boredom. So an extra spear wasn't a big deal. I then returned to my normal combat routine. Except now I could use a spear to stab at anything attempting to jump on top of the shield wall. This should reduce the demands of constant spell casting some.

I was rather poor at this, and even though the Lurkers were the most visible in their shadows when atop of the wall like that, I'd probably only grazed them the vast majority of the time. However, this did appear to knock them off-balance, which gave my ax minions a chance to swat them off. Which was the whole point.

If we survived this, I swore I'd put more thought into my own weapon. At the same time, I was careful to continue to target and attack anything I could.

Elizabeth was forced to flick her rifle out into a blunt attack in order to knock a Lurker back before she reloaded. Jordan snap kicked another Lurker off the shield wall, then shot one next to it. Alex pulled a move similar to Elizabeth but fumbled the reload.

A Lurker headbutted him, knocking the fighter back but allowing me to skewer the monster. It didn't die but, pinned to the ground, died a few seconds later. Just in time for a Miasma Bomb from me to help slow the tide and me and Alex playing catch up on the opposite wall.

One of my skeletons was almost killed at some point, with less than half its head gone, and I really needed to figure out a helmet of some kind. And four of them had lost their ax arms, leaving little for them to do but hold the shield.

Sometimes I resorted to just swinging my spear like a club, fearing missing more than simply knocking the monsters down. This was mostly the case when I could knock them near where my now spear-wielding skeletons were.

My arms burned as I pushed myself forward. I needed to do more work with my arms.

And finally the shadows began to thin as the room came back into focus. The numbers had to be going down. This thought gave us all more energy, the end was finally in sight. It wasn't long before there were no more enemies moving. Unfortunately, the number of Lurkers corpses around us made me, at least, uneasy with that assessment. After all, I couldn't see the corpses at all, just a sea of static shadows surrounding us. As a result, I dropped several poison bombs just to be extra sure, burning through the last of my mana for the second or third time this fight.

However, only silence rang through the room. In fact, the silence was loud enough that I had to let out an exhausted chuckle before sliding down and sitting with my back to the wall.

That set off the others, and soon the whole group was laughing. Though given how tired we were it couldn't have sounded great. Still, it was impressive. For the first time I

realized a level up notification was poking me in the back of my mind. I had no idea when that had happened but I was too tired to care right now.

“Let’s not do that again,” Alex choked out.

Elizabeth nodded and slid down next to me. I frowned at her hobbling over, which she explained. “I got hit in the thigh, just above my knee. I’ve got Durability X, so I doubt any real damage was done. But I do need to rest it for a bit anyways.”

I snorted at her use of “x” instead of 10. Alex shook his head, murmuring about people not understanding roman numerals, and the rest of us chuckled at her expense.

“I don’t think I can move my arms for a while. I’m not cut out to stab things,” I complained.

“Can you replace any of your skeletons?”

“No. Burned the last of my mana double-checking for monsters playing dead. Give me a little while to regain my mana.” I sighed. “Probably pulled something there as well. My mana itches. I think.”

With my eyes closed and head leaned back, I couldn’t tell what kinds of looks I was getting. But the question posed by Jordan told me enough.

“Your mana ‘itches’?”

“It’s kind of like pulling a muscle, but for casting too many spells in a short time,” I answered. “The human brain isn’t really supposed to be able to sense magic. There are skills that help that, sure, but sometimes the information is interpreted weirdly. Much like this. My mana itches. There are a few unfortunate mages who can’t even sense that much. Not everyone can even get a relative sense of how much mana or stamina they have.”

“More proof that we were never supposed to have access to the system.”

“The gods teach that the system came to protect us from the monsters. So I have to assume it was some kind of reactionary response to the appearance of dungeons,” I answered. “Or it could have been created in order to contain the dungeons by someone. Either way, it wasn’t a likely outcome humanity was evolved for.”

It was the oddest conversation I’d had in a dungeon, or with people who were effectively strangers. Where the system, and dungeons, came from was an old conversation with no real answer. And no solid path to an explanation.

“I still say everything that happened is natural,” Elizabeth answered firmly. “It’s the safest bet until we know more.”

“I don’t know,” Alex countered. “Priests are of the opinion that dungeons came from outside our universe. I’m not sure crossing those divides is possible through pure nature.”

“Plus, the way large concentrations of monsters drag crap back into the dungeon isn’t obviously anything,” I put in. “Then the question of why reckless monster thinning tends to result in dungeons creating absurd numbers of monsters and a dungeon break.”

My point was the big one. Early on, dungeon maintenance was attempted with mortars and what artillery could be reassembled inside the dungeon and disassembled. But the resulting dungeon breaks made it clear that such a tactic was counterproductive. Why this

happened had never been explained to anyone's satisfaction.

After a few minutes of conversation, we gave it up as a bad idea and got started on the next task. Which mostly composed of harvesting tentacle tails from these weird-ass monsters.

It took a while, but as our pile of cleared monsters got high enough, and my mana was sufficiently recovered, I created new skeletons to replace all the minions I'd lost. Honestly, none of the skeletons had escaped unharmed. One of the spear-wielding ones was missing an arm and the other one had an utterly crushed rib cage. If that damage had gone all the way through to the spine we would have been down a spear wielder, and who knew what would have happened from there.

Each casting of magic was painful as the "itch" in my mana grew worse. I knew I was making my life harder, but it was safer to have fully healed skeletons rather than not a single undamaged one. Between castings I pulled up my notifications. I had leveled up, and glancing at my status page told me I'd definitely been taking things too easy. I needed to up my game if I wanted to reach level 10 faster than I currently was.

Basically, I thought I'd need exactly this hard of a fight more often, hopefully without completely depleting myself, if I wanted to be level 10 before the end of the year. Which was a requirement now. The cost of living had just spiked, since I couldn't count on guild contracts for a while yet.



*< Magic Mass V has become Magic Mass VI  
Necromancer Lvl 8 has become Necromancer Lvl 9!  
Bone Walker bonus added  
Magic Mass VI became Magic Mass VII  
Polearms(Bone Forged) I has been created!  
Polearms(Bone Forged) I has become Polearms(Bone  
Forged) III >*

Also, neat trick. I had no idea that creating a weapon for myself would produce a specialized weapon skill. I didn't even need to check it, as all versions of that skill did the same thing, increase skill, accuracy, and hit chance with a specific weapon. It was also a knowledge skill, so I felt the extra information drain into my mind from the notification. Made me wonder if I could do better than a desperate creation. Hmm. Things to think about.

Other than that, we also filled up our backpacks from this one fight alone, which was a great outcome that saw me returning my two spear skeletons to ranged ones. Though I kept a hold of the spears until we made it back to the main dungeon area. Just in case.

I think we were all confident we'd rather not have to fight that kind of battle again today. Though all three of us were very happy about the progress we'd made. We were

all now level 9 and Alex had made a significant jump toward level 10, though he wasn't there yet.

Somehow, even as tired as we were, the fights on the way back just didn't seem that dangerous. We were all better coordinated in our fighting style, and I was able to switch back to four ranged skeletons. A result that definitely saw one Way Fisher killed even before it had a chance to throw out its tongue. Although the other three were more of a problem.

Given the fact that I was having difficulty casting spells thanks to the pain of my overtaxed mana, I choose to keep using my spear. This turned out to be a lot more effective when I could actually see the monsters. And attacking between my skeleton lines was a huge advantage. I wasn't at risk of getting attacked.

Still, we stumbled out of the dungeon with an hour to spare, and everyone was happy with the dive. I was already working out how I was going to edit my captured video to tell this tale. I was invited to join them tonight for drinks once we'd all taken a nap, which I agreed to only after remembering that building a relationship with other guilds would be really good as we moved forward with the mages' guild idea.

I also resolved to mention the mages' guild idea while hanging out. Zilena seemed to be backing the idea, so I couldn't exactly claim I had nothing to do with the effort.