

THE FIRST THREE RATS MANAGED TO BREAK FREE OF SAID cloud but quickly collapsed before they got close enough to trigger a use of my Toxic Breath spell. The cloud lingered, no wind and a confined space extending the time it remained. This was fortunate, as the sound of clacking claws continued. A quick glance behind showed that the unlikely event of monsters from the entrance hadn't happened, and I threw another ball of light into the cloud. Thankfully this cut down on the glare from my main light source reflecting off the gas, giving me a better view of what was happening.

More rounded the corner, and I dropped more poison on the area. All sources agreed that these early monster swarms were less numerous than the ones deeper in the dungeon. However, I had few defenses other than just massive amounts of poison, so burning through my mana was required.

And as the minutes carried on, more and more Ratigers showed up in twos and threes. This was the main danger of the Rat Way, overwhelming numbers, made even worse by the sometimes dangerously low numbers of people willing to brave the dark and depressing dungeon with poison-ridden monsters.

I filled up the corridor with gas and continued to watch what was going on behind me. So far that was free, but the drain on my mana was impressive. Not enough to concern me yet, but certainly a real concern. But it appeared the thick gas I was carefully maintaining between me and the incoming swarm was working well.

It wasn't the most exciting fight in the world, but that was how I liked it. And why I felt safe coming here alone.

Tight corridors and no wind meant my poison would hang around for its maximum time.

Unfortunately, the press of Ratigers continued for almost ten minutes, only slowing near the end. The pile of bodies helped less than I would have liked, apparently the Ratigers were quite agile and able to climb over the corpses of their own kind without much difficulty. Still, I only needed a burst of Toxic Breath twice. First when a Ratiger managed to jump over the body plies and made it outside of the cloud. And a second one when a larger-than-normal Ratiger managed to push through the old-fashioned way.

Finally the dungeon became quiet and I let my gas cloud dissipate. I took a minute to catch my breath. Almost all of my magic had been poured into that mess to keep it going long enough to kill everything off. And I could feel the strain that put on my body to pull so much magic for so long. Slow trickles were always easier on the body.

“Oh god, that’s nasty.” I took a minute to get used to the mess. “And this is why this place is so unpopular. I need to go through here and clear out as many tails as possible. Fuck, this is terrible.”

Just because I saw the massive pile of bodies build up didn’t make it any easier to deal with. Still, I had to get the job done. Which mostly included the bounty payout.

Collecting all those tails was more time-consuming than killing them had been, but there were fewer bodies than I expected. I mean, there were still a ton, but the number of bodies was deceptive thanks to the size, poor lighting, and how tangled up they were.

“Well, viewers, this is why I always say to research. I’m pretty sure, now that I’m up close and personal, that these bodies are too small for a single skeleton. My previous method of dumping bits and pieces on top of each other simply won’t be effective anymore,” I said for the sake of my “audience.”

“On a side note, damn, this is weird talking to no one. I mean, I know people are watching, but this is something else.

“Anyways, suspecting this to be the case, I’ve created a new Create Skeleton spell. The range is still crap, but hopefully it will allow me more flexibility in skeleton creation. This new spell works like an aura, targeting valid mass until it has enough to create a skeleton. All I have to do is get it running.”

Back at the beginning of the pile I began casting my create spell. Of course it took three attempts to get working, but it still worked well. Didn’t even have to hybridize so far. There was little else that had changed here, except that I was now using a different and hopefully better weapon. The skeletons were now using axes. I think this spell would more likely be my main spell. Not only was it easier, but it didn’t seem to be any more expensive, or at least not enough to matter.

I half-expected this would make minion creation faster, as it should be easier to incorporate the leftovers of destroyed skeletons. And if I could expand on that from here, it would be even better. I had high hopes for this update.

“I wonder if I could create some kind of aura spell. This is kind of like one. I doubt I could actually do something

like an AOE curse. But maybe add some poison to my minions if they're close enough?" An interesting idea.

*< Runic Magic (Contact) III has become Runic Magic
(Contact) IV
Golem Creation VIII has become Golem Creation IX >*

I did have to empty all of my mana, including everything I'd recovered while hacking off tails. And I even needed to wait a little longer to finish off the creation. By the time I was done I felt like I had traced all of the runes' effects in the spells, which highlighted some of the issues with using an aura spell in the first place, mostly surrounding the runes from contact magic.

At full strength with all eleven minions, I'd made several adjustments. My new shields were large squares tall enough to guard the skeletons' knees easily and could better protect my minions from short monsters like Ratigers. I'd also armed each of my skeletons with an ax. Other than the edge maybe or maybe not dulling far too quickly, they were a surprisingly easy make. Just a slab of hardened bone. Just not certain how effective my ability to harden an edge was.

There was one thing I wanted to check first. I pulled up my stats and checked my level progress. 4.89, so I was now 89% of the way to level five. Holly hell, I might actually make it to level 6, or close anyways. I'd started

today at about halfway through level 4. It would slow down as I hit level 5, but it shouldn't be too much; this was a small fight compared to what I knew was normal for this dungeon.

Whatever the case, I now had a small army of minions with me—well, only if you considered the size of the corridor—and it was time to hunt properly. I backtracked just a little before taking a different path toward the part of the dungeon I was aiming for.

No longer a modern utility tunnel, the dungeon looked like an older stone canal complete with an arched roof with a small stream of “water” running down the middle. The pipes in the ceiling, as if the canal had been updated for the modern world, were older as well, showing a lot of rust and other types of damage. The occasional drip of water fell from their rusted joints.

The canal was wide enough for four people to stand shoulder to shoulder, allowing me to completely block off the canal in both directions, with three minions for backup in case one got overwhelmed. Which was the whole reason I came here. Pulling out my map, I checked where I wanted to go and headed in that direction. Before too long it became obvious I was heading downhill, if only slightly.

Of course my skeletons had to walk in the water, which didn't affect them at all. It also revealed that the water was barely deep enough at the center to cover their toes. The splashing sound was more of a problem, but one I couldn't do much about. I guess I couldn't rely on hearing them approach.

“Welcome to the main section of the Rat Way. Having the ability to block off both sides of this tunnel is the

reason I felt safe coming here at this point,” I explained. “The big issue here is that sound draws in monsters, and the Rat Way is made of stone, meaning things echo. The sound of fighting will draw in more monsters, which will, in turn, draw in even more monsters. This clears a wide area around you, but each fight is also very drawn out.

“On the plus side, I don’t have guns, so the echoes could be worse.”

The next fight came within minutes as a group of Ratigers jumped out of a side passage and attacked. I dropped a Miasma Bomb instantly. Between squeaking Ratigers, bone on stone, and splashing water noises, we still produced plenty of noise. And a quick glance backward showed more coming from behind. Another pair of Miasma Bombs was sent through the back row of skeletons as I also started giving the skeletons orders.

I immediately found myself struggling to keep an eye on both fights. Fortunately, the skeletons were smart enough to understand “hold the line” and “chop things that attack” as orders. Even with that, I often had to step in and take control, as one skeleton or another would be mobbed by extra Ratigers. It also didn’t help that I didn’t know how many monsters it would take to overwhelm a skeleton and had no desire to find out.

Spinning back and forth didn’t give me a good chance to keep time, nor could I really tell how many Ratigers were around or if more were still coming. I eventually remembered to place glowing orbs deeper in the tunnel, specifically to get a better look. But I was spending so much time keeping an eye on things that a count wasn’t working well.

I fired off a Poison Bomb to keep the gas thick in the back, only for the bomb to hit the back of a skeleton's head. Coughing and hacking, I stumbled backward, struggling to see what was going on around me instead of fighting off the effects of the poison.

As the skeleton stumbled forward I had to scramble to tell one of the backups to get in the way. Panic made me flub the command, twice. Panic also brought speed, so even as the Ratigers were dragging the skeleton down its backup managed to mostly get in place.

I dropped a Miasma Bomb into the hole as well, just to be extra sure. Once the line was secure, I really had no choice but to get back into the routine. The sourness from the poison made every movement more painful, and the difficulty breathing lasted longer than I liked.

Fortunately it did all fade, not even a memory echo able to survive my need to pay attention to my surroundings.

"Coordinating the fight got easier by the end. I think the fight took about ten, maybe fifteen minutes," I explained to the empty air. My mana was low and I was just tired. "I need to be more economical in my energy expenditure. Plus, I'm now going to poison myself with every poison once. Knowing how that spell felt was the only thing that allowed me to keep my head fully.

"On other news, I can now say with complete confidence that poison, even a non-lethal one, in the middle of a fight is dangerous." I grinned at my phone, which I was using to record my speech. "Which means I should probably look into a way to protect myself from poison. Monsters use those, and I might hit myself again."

I frowned, trying to decide what else to talk about. "I kind of want to talk about tactics, but I need to figure that out more as I go forward. Figure out the best way to do this.

"However, toward the end that Way Fisher attack was something else. A tongue out of the shadows and it dragged my skeleton out of line. If I had still been poisoned and slow? What if I hadn't had a backup left?

"I'll have to manage my skeletons better, especially as I get tired and am more likely to make mistakes.

"Obviously, Way Fishers are going to be a real problem. I only have three backup minions. And I've proven that I'm not invincible here. Not that I really thought that to be true."