

I SIGHED, SIGNED OFF, AND STOOD UP. TEN MINUTES hopping back and forth took it out of me. I felt fully rested after a few minutes of waiting, at least physically, but a glance at my stats made it clear that I wasn't back up to full stamina. I'd need to monitor that carefully to avoid exhausting myself here.

Fortunately, even if this fight was a bit of a close one, it was a profitable one.

*< Necromancer Lvl 4 has become Necromancer Lvl 5!  
Bone Walker bonus has been added  
Mana Channel XVII has become Mana Channel XVIII  
Mana Control XVIII has become Mana Control XIX  
Magical Accuracy V has become Magical Accuracy VI  
Conditioning IV had become Conditioning V >*

The Bone Walker bonuses so far had been refinements of the normal spell shape I'd been using to create skeletons. But as I pondered this level's bonus it became clear it was something more. It was an all-new spell shape, one that was smaller. I think this was the clue I needed to create weapons free from the shape of a minion. I was sure there was a lot to do with this spell form. I just needed to figure it out.

The increase in Magical Accuracy just felt like an insult. I hit myself with an AOE, so I got a chunk of experience. I know that's not what happened and it was

just a coincidence, or I'd learned better how to judge the area of effect, but whatever.

After spending way too long harvesting tails and replacing skeletons, I headed over to the Lurker. This monster had four legs, was covered in hard armor, and could spit out a rather massively long tongue. They didn't really look like anything other than themselves, at least to me. Maybe there were beetles or underwater crab-like things they were comparable to. But the nice thing was that they were considered more palatable than Ratigers and were worth more to the guards. So I would be eating Way Fisher for lunch today.

The Way Fisher had managed to flee around a corner before being killed. Apparently by poison and whatever blood loss had happened when it lost the end of its tongue was enough to kill it. Not the most robust monster in the world.

Replacing my skeletons and waiting for mana regeneration took way too much time. I was going to need to regulate my mana usage somehow. I just didn't know how. So far I'd felt I had to use mana every time I did. I guess that might not be true if I managed my skeletons better. I'd just have to experiment and be ready to use Toxic Breath.

The next thirty minutes were quiet until I hit another Ratiger patrol, and the long fight began again. This was the standard order of fights here in the Rat Way. Between the time the fights took, the time gathering materials, and the time traveling to the next fight, it was about one every hour and some change. Yet it was still a lot harder to deal with than the more common, shorter duration fights in Balltown.

It had been a long day, and I was more than ready to head back. The question was, should I? In theory, the road back would be easier. And that was good and bad. Mostly, the issue was based around the need for more level progress. I'd certainly gotten insanely good at relying on my skeletons.

Pulling out my phone, I decided to record a little bit. "One more battle and I'll head back. I'm tired. But I really shouldn't push too hard. I might have to rest a little more on the way back as well. Hopefully the monsters haven't filled back in fully."

Of course I barely made it two steps before the next fight occurred. I really should have kept my mouth shut.

The fight started much the same as those that came before. Ratigers swarming around from both sides. I dropped a spell per side about once every minute or two, but instead I focused on keeping the skeletons moving.

When a skeleton was getting ganged up on I forced the ones nearby to attack the monsters facing it. Being simple creatures, the Ratigers never suspected it and thus were rather simple to kill. My axes were quite useful—each strike dug deeply into the monsters, and at least Ratigers didn't have enough defense to survive a solid hit.

I quickly developed a routine. I mostly left the skeletons on a two-part rhythm. Defend unless you're lucky and launch attacks when you have a chance. Poison usually only came out when the Ratigers got all clumped up.

Keeping an eye on everything had caused me to take up a position on one side of the tunnel so I could watch most of the lines at the same time. This also had the advantage of letting me lean against the tunnel wall, something I

tried to avoid doing, as I didn't want to get too complacent.

Scanning the lines, I noticed a Ratiger had slipped under a shield and bitten down on the legs of one of my skeletons. A simple pendulum swing of the ax nearly cut the creature in half. Another glance around left me frowning. Something was up, but I had no idea what. So I dropped some poison out just to be sure.

Needing to stay focused, I started pacing up and down the line. And I realized the problem. The bodies of the Ratigers were piling up in an odd manner that forced the Ratigers into clumps or to climb over the bodies. They'd climb, but the easier path was easier.

A thump from the left side had had me spinning. A Ratiger was hanging onto one of the shields. It bounced off, but what the hell?

Another thump had me spinning again. I dumped another bomb. Something was happening.

A few minutes later I actually saw it. One of the Ratigers climbed up on the pile of bodies and jumped at the line. The thump was thunderous, and worse, this one clung on.

What did I do? The weight of the Ratiger had lowered the shield. And the angle was awkward for the slightly uncoordinated skeleton. Without much choice, I launched a Miasma Bomb to land right on the other side of the combat line. It kind of helped, but not before another pouncing Ratiger threw itself at the line.

I quickly realized that the bottlenecks were the problem. For whatever reason the monsters had originally come in asymmetrically, and it was causing this problem. Now that the easier path was around the pile of corpses,

some, rather than getting bottled up, were going over the top. And pouncing.

I needed to focus. No way I was letting some unsupported Ratigers get through my lines.

First I dropped some more poison. Burning mana too fast would be a problem as well, so I had to be careful. The skeleton by the right wall, facing back toward the entrance, suddenly had its ankle chomped on, again. The entire minion tilted toward the wall.

Rushing over, I breathed out a quick burst of Toxic Breath and pulled one of my backup skeletons over. Fortunately, the wall held the damaged skeleton up long enough for the hole to be plugged by shoving the damaged skeleton into the mass of Ratigers and dumping the fresh one in its place.

Two more pouncing Ratigers attacked while I was fixing the line, and I almost lost a skeleton to one that got high enough up the wall to start chomping at the skeleton's head. Fortunately it was killed first. This was getting problematic. Maybe I needed bigger shields.

For a couple of minutes things seemed to hit a new rhythm. The sudden thumps of pouncing Ratigers became uncomfortably common. It seemed they were learning from each other. Even as the pile of bodies became symmetric, they continued to use the tactic.

Finally, the problem happened. A Ratiger ended up on top of the shield and bit down into a skeleton's head. I didn't wait for the skeleton to go down; instead, I ordered another backup to use its shield to shove the compromised one into the mass of bodies and take its place. Surprisingly, this dislodged the Ratiger, allowing the

nearly dead skeleton to make it most of the way to its knees before it was torn apart by the surrounding swarm.

I was down to a single backup and had no idea how long I'd been fighting. So no idea how long until the monsters petered out.

With nothing for it, I continued as if I was expecting the fight to last a long time. I focused on keeping the swarm down and switched to mostly using Poison Bombs. And I pulled the fighting lines a little closer together. I was worried about not having room to maneuver now, assuming something went wrong.

But it seemed to work. Fewer Ratigers attempted to pounce, and those that did never got as high as before.

Down to one backup. If a Way Fisher showed up right now... A little frantic, I was doing everything I could think of to keep a handle on both sides. Which is why I managed to spot the tongue as it shot from the dark and slammed into a shield. I sent a Miasma Bomb toward where I thought the monster was.

The tongue lashed out again a few seconds later from a slightly different spot. This time it skimmed across the top of a shield and wrapped around the skeleton's neck. The minion was dragged forward, but I had the last backup ready.

The hole was immediately plugged. The caught skeleton fell to the ground but continued to be dragged. I managed to order it to cut at the tongue holding it, and at the same time I launched another Miasma Bomb, just in case.

Surprisingly, the skeleton managed to cut the tongue on its second attempt. It even made it back to its feet but didn't survive much longer than that. Isolated, the



Ratigers attacked it from three sides and tore it apart. The pause in the attack meant I hadn't needed perfect timing on the backup. But I kept a weather eye on the side. There wasn't a second attack by the Way Fisher, however.

Maybe two minutes later a Ratiger managed to chomp on the ankles of a skeleton, but it survived just fine and was able to kill the monster.

I didn't have much to do after that. The fight was still going, but I needed to rest and was leaning against the wall. I needed to calm down and slow my heart rate. This was too much. Clearly it was time to head back.

The last Ratiger went down, and I leaned against the wall, supporting my upper body on my knees. I was tired. Checking my stats, I would have about 60% of my stamina left after five minutes of rest I think. I should be good to return.

I just had to replace my skeletons. Checking the time, I'd been at it about five hours now, a little less. Definitely worth it to turn around. Actually, If I was turning round, it would be fine to take a longer rest. And recover a bit more.

So after replacing my skeletons I sat down to make a Way Fisher stew, adding a few vegetables and some spices. It wasn't bad, but much like Styire meat, Fisher meat was relatively weak in flavor and didn't cook as well as I would have liked. Still, it was worth its price, which was free for me. So yeah, it was a good meal.

On the way back out I found the fights marginally shorter, but I couldn't really tell if I'd learned better how to handle the Rat Way or if it was the results of the monsters not having fully filled back in. I could have counted corpses, but because I didn't do that on the way out here it wouldn't do me any good.

Either way, I made decent time on the way out. Yet the fights were getting harder, and I was losing more skeletons than average. The reason was simple. I was getting tired and had overestimated my ability to run this dungeon.