

THE ONE TIME I'D USED BALEFUL LIGHT BY SLAMMING THE hammer into the ground, it had created a wave of a pale white light that somehow felt like it was made of bones that radiated out. All the Styres caught in the wave were poisoned, but it burned a chunk of my stamina. The thing was, I wondered if each of the "weapons" on the end of the crow's beak counted separately for this "ability" or not.

My tests proved that they didn't, kind of. The ability was always a wave extending from the weapon. If I thrust it forward with the spear tip I got a circle of light that expanded as it raced forward. A horizontal swing resulted in the longest reach, a crescent-shaped projectile that ran forward further than the other two, but it covered the least total area, meaning I figured it would be easier to dodge.

All the same, the ability to poison entire groups of monsters was super useful. Well worth it, even with the cost in stamina. Of course, the fact that I was choking and gasping from the overuse of stamina wasn't surprising, given my enthusiasm to test it. Three uses in less than thirty minutes was definitely pushing it. But that was fine, as I was able to get enough knowledge to know how to use it.

I also ended up with my brains. Which was the whole point of coming out here. Heading down to the ground, I ate Ice Drake sushi while trying to rest up for what was going to be the most annoying part of the entire day. Dealing with crabs.

Honestly, this was the hardest part of the trip. My normal method for killing these things was to bash through their skulls. This wouldn't work today, as I would definitely end up damaging the brains.

So what to do? The best idea I had was a little weird. I was going to dump as much poison on the monsters as was practical, then attempt to flip them with my monsters.

Even if it was only for a few minutes, the crabs on their sides would be very vulnerable, and I should be able to kill them without damaging the heads.

Getting at the brain would be both easier and harder, as the crabs didn't have much of a skull thanks to their use of an exoskeleton and I'd never had to extract the brain without damaging it because it had never been valuable before.

No idea what someone wanted the brains for either. I couldn't claim to be all that good at looking up scientific documents, or even understanding them. I kind of wished scientists would insert some character into their documents. Because on the whole, the literature was boring as hell to read. Even when the subject was interesting.

Perhaps because of that I was unable to discover a suggested or known use for monster brains.

Regardless, it was time to hunt. I headed toward the rocks, a prepped Poison Bomb in hand. I'd been slowly updating this spell to focus on slowing monsters down and attacking their muscles. I would have liked to make the Poison Bomb have a wider area of effect, but its best utility came from the fact that it was fairly cheap to use. Maybe a modification to the Remote Detonation spell?

Regardless of that, these properties made it perfect for small, fast monsters and for slowing heavily defended monsters that needed special tactics.

*Right. Focus, Kathrine.* I needed to remember what was going on. Close enough, I launched my spell and watched it crash amongst the rocks. And I waited. Nothing happened as the smoke cleared out. Damn it, I got all nervous and everything...

Sighing, I moved to the next group of rocks and repeated the process. By the third I was frowning. I should

have run into a crab by now. This seemed a little weird, previous trips here had the crabs more common than this. However, around the fourth patch of rocks I triggered an attack.

The creature immediately charged, and I ordered my ranged skeletons to target its pincers as I spread out my other skeletons. The creature continued to charge, so I dropped a Miasma Bomb into the mix as well. The large, oversized shell of these monsters was stupidly difficult to smash through, but I guess levels had their advantage, as I could see the bullets that missed take chunks of the rock armor with it them. Still, I doubted I could count on that chipping through the armor any time soon.

However, I had noticed something else I could use. The creature's legs just barely poked out of the side of the shell, just visible as they planted on the ground.

Once the two sides met, it was a complicated dance. My skeletons were more dangerous and harder to kill than before, so the Hardback was struggling to land any blows. The crabs pincers were no longer a real threat, the left one was done for, the damage from the range shots overwhelming it, and the right one was easy for my skeletons to avoid, so long as it was only one. Even if they did get caught, I wasn't certain it would cut through their bone in one go like it did before.

This led to an odd dance, where my skeletons would take potshots at everything but the head, then be forced to dodge back or get clamped. It was quickly clear that this was going to be a long one. I lost two skeletons because multiple hits on their legs eventually got through the bone, but I just started rotating which skeletons were near the pincers. More micromanagement was annoying, and it made it harder to find time to launch spells, but this was a

trend I'd noticed. I would need to find a balance between controlling my minions and using spells. Or my weapon.

Getting in with my crow's beak wasn't as useful as one would expect. Largely because I lacked the accuracy to hit the monster's legs intentionally, but I also couldn't aim for the head. Still, I managed to use the hammer head to weaken or even remove bits of the crab's shell around its legs. The resulting damage turned out useful, as it made it easier for my skeletons to target the monster's legs as more chunks of shell disappeared.

Still, my skeletons had come a long way since the last time I'd fought one of these monsters. While they weren't more accurate than I was, they were more numerous and able to take chances. The result was that the skeletons did managed to chop into its legs, damaging them and slowing the crab a little bit. But it was still far too mobile.

The crab compensated by turning around in a circle, forcing me to constantly change the orders of my skeletons to compensate for its change in orientation. This left about half of my six remaining skeletons with damaged legs, though thankfully I seemed to have avoided losing another for now.

The difficulty of targeting its legs while the monster turned in circles meant I needed a new plan. My first goal was to make the monster less dangerous, so I ordered all my skeletons to target the pincers when they were in range. I even rushed in when it wasn't spinning like a top and tried to land blows on the claws when possible.

This didn't take long, about two minutes, and the last pincer was left hanging like useless meat. That made the fight more achievable.

Now without a weapon, the crab's only offensive option was to run over my skeletons, but it wasn't fast enough to actually do that. Which made the whole task a simple test

of patience as I ordered by monsters to start attacking the armor around its legs and then smash up the legs as they got room to swing.

As the third leg on one side went out, the crab finally tipped over, its shell digging into the ground. Then all we had to do was tip it over like the end of every other crab hunt and kill it from underneath. This took way too long, but it was the only method I felt would preserve the brain.

At least I had a process now. Destroy pincers, take out legs, flip over, and kill. Kind of cruel, but the question was out as to whether or not monsters felt pain. Oh, they had nerve endings that would warn them of damage, but they didn't act like pain was a thing. Which was where the open question came from. I didn't think they could feel pain, personally. They only seemed to act angry or injured, often attacking, like with this crab, when crippled as if nothing else mattered. Even with both claws destroyed, this beast ignored any attempt to protect itself and kept going.

I shook my head. I'd heard of injured soldiers and hunters powering through pain that should shut them down, and every single one I'd seen interviewed had agreed. Monsters didn't act like they should if pain was a thing for them. Hell, lots of people questioned their self-preservation as well.

Right, too much introspection. I'd replaced the lost and damaged skeletons, one good thing about the oversized monsters. I also had to replace a number of axes as well, the hard exoskeleton having damaged their edges. I might have better luck with some maces, but I thought my own weapon was much more useful in the breaking of hard shells than a one-handed mace would be in this case.