

101: Fireside

Three officers sat in a circle near a large bonfire. The adventurer, Rain, sat a little distance away, guarded by one of his followers. The area outside the bathhouse was fully illuminated, with barricades sectioning it off from the rest of the city. Thousands of citizens had gathered, working tirelessly to light the area and block off all of the streets that they could. Now, their work done, they sheltered in the bathhouse and the surrounding buildings.

Fifteen officers, two adventurers, and one crazy merchant. That was all they had to keep the terrified masses safe, not including a handful of merchant's guards and volunteers. All of those were unawakened, and thus, useless in a real fight. No nobles had come, the baths being in the wrong section of the city for their kind.

Other than the omnipresent torches, there were also three large bonfires to the north, east, and south. Those were set up near the main barricades where they'd been having the most trouble. The wandering Stumpers seemed to prefer open spaces, and the three bonfires corresponded to the three largest avenues into this section of the city. They'd stationed four awakened at each, but they'd since been forced to drop that number to two as the mages started reaching their limits. Even with seemingly unlimited mana from the Night Cleaner, soulstrain could not be ignored.

"Do you think he's asleep?" asked officer Sarl, nodding to the immobile adventurer.

"Lord Rain would only rest if the danger had passed," said the annoying worker, who was standing 'guard' next to his 'lord.'

Sarl glared at the man. "Didn't ask you. Mind your own business."

"Be nice, Sarl," said Wolf, the female officer giving him a reproachful look. She drew a card from her hand and tossed it down onto the pile. "That's six."

"What?" said Sarl, staring at the card. "Hey! You can't do that!"

"I just did," said Wolf, grinning at him. "Are you going to do something about it?"

Sarl flinched and looked away from her bared teeth. They were perfectly normal human teeth, of course. But there was a reason that they called her Wolf. Sarl didn't even remember the woman's real name.

"He isn't sleeping," said officer Moston, playing a card. "And I'd appreciate it if you would speak quietly. Four." He set his cards down, rubbing at his temples.

"How can you tell?" asked Sarl, looking at Moston. The Fire Mage was surrounded by glowing blue rings, the visual effect of whatever spell the adventurer was using.

"You can't cast when you're asleep," said Moston.

"He can, though," said Wolf, pointing at the adventurer. "You know that better than anyone, Moston. You were there at the stronghold when—"

She cut off as Moston held up a hand. "Sorry, I should clarify." He grunted, rubbing at his eyes.

"Damn this headache. You're right that he can keep something going in his sleep, as crazy as that is on its own. What I meant was, he can't *cast*, you know? As in, actively select and use a spell. Watch, it will just be a few more seconds..."

The group of three card-players waited. After a moment, the blue rings surrounding Moston flickered out and vanished. Four seconds later, the magic reappeared as if it had never left.

"See?" Moston said. "He just did something."

"Detection," said the adventurer's voice.

"Shit!" Sarl swore, almost dropping his cards. "I thought he couldn't hear us?"

Wolf laughed, slapping him on the back. Sarl flinched away from her touch, then tried to play it off as mere startlement. He wasn't afraid of Wolf, of course, but there was something about what she *was* that just cut through his rationality and made him react like a fool. Wolf just grinned at him, showing more of her teeth than she needed to, a mischievous glimmer in her eyes. "That's just when he's freezing our asses off," she said. "I would have thought you'd have picked up on that by now."

Sarl looked back at the silent adventurer, considering. Wolf was right; he should have already noticed that. In his defense, the outlandish aura skills that the adventurer used were entirely new to him. He wasn't familiar with their unique quirks, and he had no other examples to compare them to.

The reason for this was obvious. The Watch assigned premade builds for their members, leading to a compartmentalization of their individual capabilities. A Fire Mage was a Fire Mage, and a Swordsman was a Swordsman. There were different variants of the archetypes, of course, but everyone followed one of the well-known progressions that had been laid out by generations of past Watch pioneers. Only very rarely were new builds tried, and never anything as outlandish as what the Night Cleaner seemed to be going for. Even Warden Vtreece had based her build on an archetype, though who knew how it had diverged once

she passed beyond the realm of humans and into the territory of legends. It and the builds of the other former Watch heroes were recorded somewhere in Vigilance, but a lowly officer like him would never be told the details.

The Guild, he knew, took a hands-off approach when it came to builds. The freedom sounded nice, but the uncertainty of whether a misplaced skill point would jeopardize your entire future was something that he was glad he didn't have to deal with. It made sense to him, therefore, that the well known builds still dominated amongst Guilders. There was danger in going outside of the norm, so the tried-and-true appeal of something like Fire Mage won out. There was just too much risk of ruining your life when it came to going off the beaten path.

The Night Cleaner, though, was something else entirely. The man laughed in the face of such wisdom and didn't appear to have a single skill that Sarl had ever heard of, other than Winter. Sarl had once thought that the man was an escaped beacon or something—one of the aura slaves used by the Empire—but that clearly was not the case. He hadn't spoken to the man at length, but every time the adventurer opened his mouth, the possibility that he'd been born in the Empire seemed more and more remote.

It was a mystery, and not one that stemmed just from the adventurer's curious choice in skills. The Night Cleaner's armor was better-crafted than anything Sarl had ever seen, but from the way he treated the unawakened, he clearly came from a common background. That made the fact that he had such expensive equipment all the more confounding. And that wasn't even touching on the issue with the man's soul.

Having never been the best at Reading, Sarl couldn't make out any fine detail, but even he could see that there was something seriously, seriously wrong. A normal paling was calm and opaque, like frosted glass, or perhaps ice. Rain's, however, shined brightly with an angry red

light, and its surface was spiderwebbed with cracks. That wasn't even the worst part; it was the flickering energy that was leaking from within that would haunt his dreams.

Sarl wasn't a religious man, but that light had him thinking of Hell Rezkakurax. Rezkakurax was a dark god, and his hell was synonymous with rage and destruction. The contrast with the adventurer's personality couldn't have been more jarring. How such chaos and evil could lurk within the soul of such an unassuming man, he couldn't fathom. *Unless it is all an act*, a tiny voice whispered in the corner of his mind. *Unless demons are real*.

Sarl shook his head. Such superstition was unbecoming of an officer of the Watch. The man was injured and had melodramatic fashion sense, nothing more. Whatever was wrong with the man's soul was something new; it hadn't been there the last time he'd encountered the adventurer, which had been before Westbridge's attack.

He'd discussed the issue with the other officers outside of the adventurer's hearing, and they'd decided as a group to discuss it with Officer Marghee once they made it back to the eastern stronghold. Until then, they would keep their lips sealed. Reading was not to be discussed with outsiders, not without permission.

"Rain," a new voice said. Sarl turned to see the other adventurer, Val, approaching from the east. As he crossed the chalk circle that had been drawn on the ground surrounding Rain, blue rings formed around his feet.

"What is it?" Rain asked.

"Nothing," Val said. "I'm just out of mana again. You, Fire Mage, you're up."

Moston groaned, pushing himself to his feet. "Fine. I think I can handle one more shift. Where's Elm?"

Val sniffed. "He couldn't take it any longer. He's on his way to go rest with the other children."

"Hey!" Sarl shouted. "Fuck you, Elm is one of our best—"

"Quiet," Rain said, his armored head pivoting to look at him. "Sarl, Val, I'm too tired for your shit. If you start another argument, so help me I'll cram you so full of mana your heads will explode."

"Can you actually do that?" said Moston. "With the way my head feels right now, I almost believe it."

Rain shrugged, gesturing to Val. "Made him puke once. I've been meaning to test it on slimes, but animal testing is unethical."

"You're so *weird*," Wolf said, laughing as she grinned at the adventurer. "Slimes aren't animals, everyone knows that."

Rain shrugged. "Val, how are the guards holding up? And why the hell did you leave them alone?"

"Oh, relax, they're fine," said Val, waving him away. "There's nothing out there right now. Besides, you met Carten's aunt, right?" He laughed. "I see where he gets it from."

The seated adventurer nodded. "Yes, I met her." His voice didn't sound amused, only tired. He turned to face Moston. "Are you ready?"

Moston nodded, looking like he immediately regretted the motion.

Sarl grimaced. Just the look on Moston's face was painful enough. He couldn't even imagine how bad the headache must be. *Hells, I'm glad I'm not a mage.* He looked at the seated adventurer. *The amount of mana that this guy puts out is insane. How isn't he bleeding from his eyes after giving away that much? What is he?*

"Alright then," Wolf said with a sigh, tossing down her cards. "Damn it, and I was winning too." She got to her feet, looking at the seated adventurer. "Well, if you're going, I might as well get back on patrol. I'm gonna shift. Top me up once I'm done, would you?"

"Of course," Rain said, nodding to her.

Sarl looked away as a series of sickening cracks and pops came from Wolf's direction. He'd watched her change once, and he'd regretted it ever since. The worst part was the knees. They literally bent backward, the bones breaking and reforming as the joints reversed themselves into ankles rather than just sliding to where they were supposed to be.

"Aw, that is just wrong," Val said. Clearly, he hadn't been around when Wolf had changed earlier.

"I know," said Rain. "What the hell happens to her clothes when she does that? And where does all the extra mass—"

"Not that," said Val. "Well, I suppose there's that too, but did you see her legs? The way that they just—"

"Stop!" Sarl said, getting to his feet. "I'm going too. My legs are feeling better, and I don't want to think about kneecaps, ankles, shattered bones, or anything like that."

"Wait," Rain said, raising a hand suddenly. He pointed off to his left without looking. "One of you go relieve officer Tilson on the north side and send him back here to rest. We can't afford anyone else burning out like Elm. Hurry, there's a pack of Lurkers coming toward the barrier."

Sarl hesitated. He didn't do well with spiders. Moston, however, had already started moving. Sarl frowned as he realized what Moston taking the north side meant. *That means I'm going east to replace Val. Now that Elm's had it, I'll be alone.*

Seemingly reading his mind, the adventurer's head turned to him. "If you run into trouble, send one of the guards to get me. I'll deal with it. We've only got an hour until sunup."

"Lord Rain, we would gladly guard the barriers again!" said the annoying worker. "You don't need to trouble yourself. I will go wake Vanna and—"

"Tarny, enough," Rain said. "Let Vanna rest. She earned it. All of you earned it. I am here now, and I won't let you or any of the other workers endanger yourselves. Not when we have actual fighters here to hold the line. You're already doing enough just patrolling the streets inside."

Sarl yelped as an enormous wet tongue licked the side of his face unexpectedly. "Ah! Damn it, Wolf!" he shouted, jumping back and glaring at the bulky monster towering over him. The entire right side of his head was drenched with slobber.

Larger even than a normal specimen from the badlands, the Musk Wolf transformation was terrifying, especially to anyone who hadn't seen it before. The blue rings of Rain's spell looked

out of place surrounding the transformed officer, scaled up to match the ridiculous size of her body.

Wolf let her mouth hang open in a lupine grin, settling back onto her haunches and staring down at him with her shining yellow eyes.

Sarl gritted his teeth as Moston and Val laughed at his futile attempts to wipe the slobber from his face. *She's not even that strong, she just looks impressive. Damn it all. Stupid longsword archetype. I don't even get anything good until tier three.*

Suddenly, the laughter was cut off as the Night Cleaner shouted. "Quiet!" He pointed to the south, still seated on the ground. "Stumper just spawned near Mlem and Dani. Wolf, go."

Wolf sprung to her feet and dashed away, moving far faster than a creature of her size should have been able to.

"Get to the east barricade, Sarl," Rain said. "Just hang in there one more hour until dawn. I'll send Val back over to you as soon as I can. It shouldn't be long; maybe ten minutes."

Sarl hesitated, then nodded. *How did I end up following his orders? There is something seriously wrong here.* He shook his head. "You'd better get off your ass and come help me if something comes."

"I will try," Rain said, then hesitated. "But I can't be everywhere, and I'm not much of a fighter."

Sarl nodded. He understood, though he had his doubts. He didn't like Guilders as a rule; they were a bunch of selfish assholes. Rain was different, however. The damage to the man's soul made reading his intent trivial. The adventurer had never lied to him, not even once.

He still found it amazing that he was working so casually with a known category three, and in the middle of a city, no less. The threat that the man represented to the populace was incredible, whether he thought he was a fighter or not. However, in a crisis such as this, such concerns tended to fall to the wayside. Without Rain's mana, they'd have crumpled hours ago, or at the least have been forced to abandon the citizens.

Sarl shook his head and turned away, lost in his own thoughts as he hurried to the barricade.

I'm starting to see what Mel saw in him.

Rain watched the retreating swordsman, pinging with Detection to verify that the barricade he was headed toward wasn't in imminent danger. There were five unawakened guards there, including Carten's aunt Mazel. Rain had watched Sarl take down a Stumper basically on his own earlier, and hopefully, with the guards to back him up, they would be able to hold until Val had recovered. Still, he didn't like only having one awakened at the eastern barrier. It was the one that had given them the most trouble.

The only concern would be if a large pack of Lurkers appeared, or a new monster type that they had yet to encounter. Sarl lacked any significant AOE capability, and five unawakened weren't enough to hold off a large pack of the horrible spider creatures. The things actually sucked blood, it turned out.

"Whew," Val said, slumping to the ground. "I thought he'd never leave. I think I'll just pass out now."

"Wouldn't that be nice," Rain said with a snort. *He doesn't want to let the Watch see, but this is really getting to him too. Useless bravado.*

"Hey," Val said, sounding oddly offended.

"What?" Rain said, tilting his head. *Oh.* "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I meant it would be nice if I could do the same."

"Ah," Val said. "That sounds more like you. For a second, I thought you actually learned how to banter."

Rain shook his head, scanning the rooftops. He wasn't really in the mood to talk. They'd distributed the torches as best as they could, but there were still pockets of darkness everywhere, chimneys being the worst offenders. It was far from ideal, but they didn't really have any options unless they wanted to start setting buildings on fire. That had been suggested, along with a few other plans, such as attempting to shepherd the mass of citizens through the monster-infested city to one of the Watch strongholds. Ultimately, the more moderate approach had won out with the decision to take shelter until dawn as best they could.

The issue was that monsters just kept spawning, no matter what they did. They had a lot of torches, thanks to his foresight, but not nearly enough to banish every shadow. There was always some darkness remaining, and that was all it took. Fortunately for those huddling in the wooden buildings, Stumpers needed deeper darkness to spawn than things like Coal Lurkers and Slimes. None of the large mushroom men had appeared inside the illuminated perimeter.

Still, it wasn't like they could just ignore the problem and hide everyone inside. Coal Lurkers had surprisingly good hearing and would try to break their way through barred shutters and blocked chimneys. The monsters needed to be cleared away frequently, before their numbers became unmanageable. Unawakened volunteers were constantly patrolling, killing lone monsters, and running from anything too dangerous to deal with.

That job had become significantly more dangerous an hour ago when Officer Tesh had finally run out of stamina. He and Wolf were the firefighters, so to speak. Both officers were incredibly fleet-footed, and they'd been using that speed to deal with any issues that arose. Now, it was down to just Wolf. *And me, I suppose. With Elm out of it, I'll have a little mana to spare, now.*

Rain looked in the direction Wolf had run off, but she was already out of sight. Detection revealed that Mlem and officer Dani had already engaged the Stumper, having been standing guard at the southern barrier. He couldn't see them either, as the battle was being waged out in the darkness. He looked away, continuing to scan for other threats.

They'll be fine.

The first time Wolf had transformed had been quite the shock. It wasn't the sickening reconfiguration of her bones that had gotten to Rain, it was what she had turned into. Rain had been thinking that the Musk Wolf that he'd encountered had been unique, but that was far from the case. Apparently, the monsters were common in the badlands, though they were only supposed to be level five.

Wolf had acquired one to take as her form on an excursion expressly for that purpose. Shift was a Tier-1 spell in the Arcane Shifter tree, and it did what it said on the tin. You needed to 'bond' a monster, and then you could transform into it at will for as long as you could sustain

the ongoing mana cost. Basically Animorphs, but with slightly different rules. There was a Tier-2 metamagic to let you store more than one pattern, but Wolf didn't have it. Her archetype focused on one form and one form only.

Once again, Rain compared Wolf to the real thing, and there was no contest. The Watch officer was faster, stronger, *better* in every way. Seeing what a Musk Wolf could do when it wasn't weakened by the low rank of the surface was a terrifying experience. *I am so glad she's on our side. She'd tear me apart.*

He looked away, unsettled. Without a depth gauge, he didn't know how far the rank of Fel Sadanis had shifted, or even if it was done changing. He'd still yet to encounter anything stronger than a Fungiform Stumper, but he knew there were *things* out there. Vanna had described an insect creature which the officers had identified—with significant concern—as a 'Razorspine Dissolver.' Dissolvers were level fifteen "reaper class" monsters, a name that the Watch used for things that were stronger than other monsters of a similar level.

Rain shook his head, then activated Winter and pulled it down to two meters. Worrying about it didn't do any good. All he could do was try to be prepared for anything. He'd have a few minutes before Tilson arrived, and Val needed a bit of Winter time before he'd be ready for more Essence Well.

Of the two spells, Winter was much gentler on the soul. Rain suspected that it actually helped with Focus soulstrain, rather than hurt. That was based on his own experience and how the others were reacting to it. It did cause Clarity soulstrain, or perhaps overmana soulstrain, if that was a thing, but that wouldn't be an issue here. Other than him, nobody had the base Clarity for it to make a meaningful difference in their mana regeneration, not on the timescales they were dealing with.

The Watch mages did, however, have deep mana pools, and it was all that he could do to keep them topped off. By his estimate, most of them were in the level eight to level fifteen range. He'd been alternating between Winter and Essence Well for over five hours, struggling to keep up.

It had been enough. Barely.

In total, he estimated that he'd provided his allies with somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty thousand mana. The speed of Essence Well was the limiting factor, not his own regeneration rate. He'd even gone as far as to drop the efficiency, just to keep up with demand. It galled him that the water mage, Cera, had turned out to be right on that front. Essence Well was indeed too slow. Unfortunately, there was little alternative.

Val and the Watch officers were more efficient at using mana than he was, and that remained true, even after paying the tax for boosting the transfer speed. He could help against a large swarm, but that was about it. His role was to sit quietly and generate mana like a good little dynamo while the *real* mages dealt with the threat.

Rain shook his head, smiling to himself. *They changed their tune pretty quick once they started running out of mana.*

The prejudice against support classes was real, and something that he was sadly getting used to dealing with. Honestly, he didn't care what people thought. He would do what was best for everyone, even if it wasn't very glorious. In this case, what was best for everyone was for him to stay seated right here.

After all, it wasn't like generating mana was all he was doing. His other role was to keep his radar on, so to speak. Detection had been vital for finding and eliminating threats within the

perimeter, be they freshly spawned monsters, or ones that had wandered in from outside. Monsters were on his mind, of late. As hectic as the first few hours had been, things had now settled into a lull, giving him time to think, though the tension remained high.

The awakened talked of the 'lesser wall' at level ten, the point at which it was generally agreed that monsters passed humans in terms of strength. The gap only widened from there. The real 'wall' was at 25, but the name had less to do with how strong the monsters were, and more with how few people crossed that threshold.

Blues were much more common in lairs than they were outside, but the party cap of eight meant that killing one was difficult. Outside of a lair, the limit on party size still applied, but nothing stopped you from just bringing more parties. That made it slightly easier; however, only one party—the one that delivered the killing blow—could receive credit.

Without outside help, the wall was practically impenetrable. There were anecdotal exceptions, of course, but the general wisdom was that to raise your cap past the wall, you needed a group of people who were already there to carry you through. Hence, the hereditary power structures of the nobility and countries such as the DKE. Power beget power.

There were systems for this, of course. The Watch raised its members to silver based on merit and need for their archetype. High-level members of the Guild took a much more mercenary stance; basically, 'pay me, and I'll get you your blue.' The going rate for that kind of thing was frankly absurd, given the amount of money that even the average bronzeplate guildier had access to. It only got worse as you approached gold. Rain was sure that similar systems existed in the Empire and the DKE, but he had little hard information to go on in that regard.

Rain glanced at Val, thinking to ask a question, but stopped himself when he saw that the man had closed his eyes. He shook his head, closing his eyes as well, not to sleep, mind, only to

give them a little rest. They felt dry and gritty from the smoke of the fire. After a few seconds, he activated Aura Focus, controlling the radius of Winter to keep it at two meters. There was no reason not to, now that Val was asleep.

Rain sighed, sitting in the darkness of sensory deprivation. Trapped inside the barrier, there was no hope of a blue spawning that he could actually benefit from. At level eleven, Stumpers were evenly matched with individual Watch officers, more or less. A blue at that level would likely be stronger than an average level eleven creature, though how much stronger, Rain wasn't sure. Killing one would be quite the achievement, and also utterly worthless for raising his cap.

On the other hand, any reasonably-leveled essence monster would be a godsend, as it would let them awaken some of the citizens. Apart from the combat benefits that this provided, they could also use healers and other support classes, perhaps even another aura user like himself. The possibilities were endless, but he hadn't heard of a single essence monster spawning anywhere in the city. 'Rare' really did mean 'rare,' it seemed. He wasn't sure about the odds, but a low-leveled blue wasn't something that they could count on.

A high-level blue, on the other hand, presented an entirely different issue. If a monster of level, say, 20 or higher spawned, they'd be basically fucked. With an anchor.

Thank you, Alestorm, for that wonderful image. He shook his head. It was difficult for him to stay focused at the best of times. Being up for almost twenty-four hours wasn't helping. In any event, Velika would be their only hope if things like that started spawning, but who knew what she was up to at the moment.

Rain frowned, turning his thoughts back to monsters once more. They couldn't count on the Citizen for help. His current project was to fit some sort of curve to the stats of the monsters

that he'd encountered. He'd made progress, thanks to the monster cards that he'd been making, but getting an accurate fit was quite the challenge with the sparse data that he had. Until he gained access to a proper bestiary, the error bars would remain enormous. Working on the problem helped him stay focused, even though it wasn't very efficient, given the current state of his mind. However, he couldn't let himself sleep, not until the sun came up, and perhaps not even then.

He pinged a few more times with Detection to make sure that nothing terrible had happened in the past few seconds, then pulled up a bunch of the monster cards that he'd made over the past few days.

Slime

Class	Slime
Level	1
Aspect	Chemical
Bounty	25 exp 0-1 Tel Chem-cryst (rare)
Health	~50 (varies)
Force Resistance	0?
Cold Resistance	0
Heat Resistance	Weakness. Also, don't.
Attack	Weak acid of some kind. ~2 DPS. Will try to suffocate you. Can you take damage from stench?
Description	You know what a slime is. Don't get any on ya.
Variant 1	White with yellow streaks. Forest outside of Fel Sadanis.
Variant 2	Green and brown. Fel Sadanis sewers.
Special	Can be Purified into a Crystal Slime

Greater Slime

Class	Slime
Level	4
Aspect	Chemical
Bounty	? exp 0-3 Tel Chem-cryst?
Health	~400 (varies)
Cold Resistance	~3
Heat Resistance	Weakness?
Force Resistance	Immune? Stuff just gets sucked in. Maybe try something sharp?
Attack	?
Description	Like a slime, but more so.
Special	Can be Purified into a Greater Crystal Slime??? No immediate reaction at non-AF Purify levels.

Chem Kin

Class	Kin
Level	6
Aspect	Chemical
Bounty	? exp 0-2 Tel 0-1 Chem-cryst
Health	~1000
Cold Resistance	?
Heat Resistance	?
Force Resistance	?
Attack	? Some sort of poison aura? Not sure.
Description	Chemical variant of Kin They look like freaky babies with entirely too many teeth. Proportions are all wrong. Heads are too big, arms and legs are too thin, body is tiny. Definitely not a Yoshi.
Special	Kin eat constantly, but where do they put it? They barely even have torsos!

Mucus King

Class	Slime
Level	7
Aspect	Chemical
Bounty	? exp ~6 Tel ~1 Chem-cryst Crown (mostly lead, some gold)
Health	~4000
Cold Resistance	~25
Heat Resistance	~25
Force Resistance	?
Attack	?
Description	Nasty ball of sewage the size of a house that thinks it's people. Wears a tiny crown. Somehow, it's even less regal than it sounds.
Special	Can be Purified? Crystal Mucus King?

Fungiform Stumper

Class	Fungiform
Level	11
Aspect	Chemical
Bounty	1650 exp 3-15 Tel 0-2 chem-crysts
Health	~12,000
Physical (Force?) Resistance	Considerable Does blunt/slashing matter?
Cold Resistance	~80
Heat Resistance	~25
Physical Attack	Blunt. Slow. Extremely powerful. Don't get hit!
Spore Cloud	Effect unknown Purify mitigates
Description	Three-meter tall mushroom guy. In Soviet Fel Sadanis, Goomba stomps you!

Sitting in Aura Focus with Winter running at full blast, the plot that he'd drawn in his notebook came to mind easily, the memory shockingly clear. The problem was that he didn't have enough hard data. The officers had tried to answer his questions, but the numbers that they'd given him were often confusing or contradictory.

From the spread of the stats, there seemed to be a few different types of monsters; swarms, tanks, bruisers, reapers, etc. Each type probably had its own progression, or there could be some sort of point-buy system, or hell, full-blown builds, stats, and skill trees for everything. Talking to Wolf was no use—the woman was infuriatingly cagey about her build, even when it was clear that he already knew most of the skills involved. All of the officers were, in fact. His

best bet would be Rina. As a fledgling tamer, the young noblewoman might have some insights about monsters she'd be willing to share.

If she's still alive...

Rain shook his head, pushing away such dark thoughts. He pinged again with Detection, conscious that it had only been a few seconds since his last scan. It cost mana to check so often, but it helped him feel better. It *seemed* safe for the moment, but the danger was all around him, and it could strike at any time. He couldn't afford to get complacent, especially with what the numbers were telling him.

It wasn't clear if the progression for monster strength was linear, quadratic, or exponential. Exponential *looked* like the best fit, but honestly, that might have just been his pessimism influencing him. Running a proper fit without a computer was hard, and picking and choosing which points to include for which classes of monsters was fraught with uncertainty.

An exponential curve *looked* like it lined up with the average, but there were a few pretty glaring outliers. It also agreed with what everyone said about the strength of monsters compared to humans. Rain's opinion was that the reason humans fell off had more to do with lack of optimization, rather than any real difference in inherent power. Looking at his own numbers, and those of some of the other builds he'd been toying with, it wasn't even that unbelievable for monsters to have an exponential progression. They'd need it, just to keep up. With proper skill selection, exponential power was easily in reach, though he was unsure where the limit truly lay.

Still, some of the health numbers that he'd calculated with his preliminary fit of $40 \cdot 1.5^{\text{level}}$ were terrifying. A perfect example of this was what had happened when he'd used it to estimate the

stats of the Razorspine Dissolver that Vanna had encountered, and of the Musk Wolf that had tried to eat his face.

Razorspine Dissolver	
Class	Razorspine
Level	15
Aspect	Chemical
Bounty	?
Health	18,000???
Resistances	100??
Razorspine Blades	? Force Damage Very Fast
Acid Crescent	? Chemical Damage Medium range.
Acid Spray	? Chemical DOT Short-Range AOE
Description	<p>According to the Watch, Razorspines are giant bugs with slashing blades and quills. Some of the smaller ones are supposedly like porcupines or sea-urchins, though nobody seems to have heard of either of those animals.</p> <p>The Dissolver is a bit different, and it has a reputation as being particularly deadly for its level. It is a giant praying-mantis thing that spits acid.</p> <p>Its "razorspines" come in the form of a pair of distinctive blades that can slice an unawakened in half. As if that wasn't bad enough, it spits acid that can eat through steel, and it launches bolts of chemical magic that dissolve whatever they hit.</p> <p>Oh, and it's smart. Yay!</p>
Special	Reaper Classification Unclear what this means in terms of stats

Musk Wolf	
Class	Wolf?
Level	18
Aspect	Force?
Bounty	Awakening Pelt (worth > 100 Tel) ?
Health	59k????
Resistances	350???
Attack Damage	?????
Description	A wolf the size of a refrigerator. Yeah. This is the essence monster version. Base monster is level 5 and is common in the badlands. Very bite. Much shaggy. Wow.
Special	Essence Monster Encountered outside Fel Sadanis. Weakened (how much?) by low-rank zone.

Rain shook his head. *I was definitely in a silly mood when I was writing that description for the Musk Wolf. I really should go back and update it to be more descriptive. Also, I can't believe I spent twenty minutes just trying to get it to make the text blue on the name.*

With a sigh, he dismissed all of the cards. Tilson was getting close, and he could play with the numbers some more later. After he'd slept, preferably. Interrogating more people for monster information would also go a long way, short of finding a proper bestiary.

Rain dropped Aura Focus and flipped up his visor so he could rub at his eyes. *Fifty-nine THOUSAND health, and that's not even accounting for the fact that it was a blue. The projection is just using the data I have from normal monsters. For all I know, an essence monster's stats might be twice that. Fucking insane. It can't keep going exponentially; it just can't. Otherwise, something would have cracked the planet in half by now...*

Then again, the stones are supposed to be stronger in the depths, so maybe not. Damn it, reliable information is so hard to come by.

A sudden flash of memory struck him, unbidden, then he started laughing aloud to himself. *I want to get online! I need a computer!*

"Guilder," said officer Tilson, interrupting his outburst.

Rain winced. *Oops. I've officially been awake too long, and drinking all that coffee was a mistake.* "Officer Tilson," he said, looking up to see the old officer standing there, carrying his massive bow slung over his shoulder with the string tight across his chest. Rain gestured to the ground next to the slumbering Val. "Sorry, don't mind me. Have a seat. I'm recovering my own mana, and I'll be ready to give you some in a few minutes."

Tilson nodded, making no comment about Rain's apparent insanity. The man just looked tired as he unslung his bow and slumped to the ground beside the fire. Rain closed his eyes again and reactivated Aura Focus.

Tilson was the leader of the group of ten officers from the eastern stronghold. He was an Arcane Archer by his own admission, though Rain hadn't been able to get any details out of him about the class. From the skills Rain had seen the man using, it appeared to be

reasonably balanced in terms of mana and stamina usage. The fact that the man was still standing was proof of that.

In general terms, stamina-users had better endurance—no pun intended—than mana-users did. With Rain around to replenish the mages, they'd kept up with the fighters admirably, but there was obviously a limit. Hybrid fighters like Tilson, Wolf, and, surprisingly, Mlem, were more resilient, able to lean on Rain's mana replenishment to preserve their stamina.

Rain pulled up his own status to watch his mana pool as it refilled, the number rapidly climbing before his eyes.

Richmond Rain Stroudwater

CLASS	LVL	CAP
Dynamo	18	18
EXP	NEXT	TOTAL
22,749	22,750	454,832

Vitals

	CUR	MAX	RGN
HP	940	940	250/d
SP	177	520	340/d
MP	4,167	6,157	1.4/s

Dark Revenant's Armor

	CUR	MAX	RGN
DUR	12,721	13,338	0
SAT	0	13,202	-92/s
CHG	174	14,209	-65/d

Attributes

139/139	EFF	TOTAL	BASE	BUFF	SYN
STR	13.2	47	10	37/37	28%
RCV	10.5	25	10	15/15	42%
END	8.06	26	10	16/16	31%
VGR	15.3	34	10	24/24	45%
FCS	10	10	10	0/49	100%
CLR	247	247	200	47/61	100%

Resistances

50/?	FLAT	PERCENT
HEAT	2.6	0%
COLD	2.6	0%
LIGHT	2.6	0%
DARK	52.6	0%
FORCE	2.6	0%
ARCANE	2.6	0%
CHEMICAL	2.6	0%
MENTAL	2.6	0%

Idly, he triggered his training overview as well.

Training Overview

It was blank, as he'd expected. He was already sitting at the experience cap, and he was still holding off on purchasing any more skill trees. He'd begun summoning the dialog regularly, starting several hours ago, concerned about how much Essence Well he'd been using. Spreading out the strain would be better than letting it pile up. Even though the dialog was blank, he knew that every time he summoned it, it did *something* to his soul. He could tell that just from the reaction of the officers the first time he'd done it, though they refused to tell him what they'd seen. Most of them still treated him with distrust, Sarl being the only one he'd ever met prior to today.

The first summoning of the dialog had been the most difficult mentally, though it had ended up being painless. Prior to biting the bullet, he had briefly considered the insane idea of just pushing off his training overview indefinitely, but that had been the sleep deprivation talking. He was now confident—reasonably confident—that he had chosen the correct course of action.

Thirty seconds passed, and Rain paused Winter to do his customary 4-second scan with Detection. It went: Humans, Monsters, Stumpers, Unidentified Monsters. The last category used IFF to screen out anything that he'd personally fought.

It was a signal from the final pulse that made him shoot to his feet, an icy spike of dread piercing his heart.

"What is it?" Tarny said, the worker's voice fading in as Rain's senses returned.

"Unknown monster," Rain said. He kicked Val lightly in the side. "Val, get up."

Val's groggy protests were interrupted by Tilson, who spoke right over him. "Where is it?"

Rain didn't answer; instead, he took off at a run, headed west, toward the bathhouse and away from the barricades.

"Shit, inside?" Tilson said.

"Follow!" Rain shouted, not looking back. "You too, Tarny, Val." He activated Velocity, keeping the intensity down to avoid disorienting the others. He pumped his arms, sprinting as quickly as he could.

His footsteps sounded loud against the cobblestones, though he barely felt the impacts thanks to the layer of Forceweave between his feet and the ground. The material wasn't enchanted, but its base magical properties distributed force in a way that he still hadn't quite gotten used to. He'd taken the time to change into the bodysuit he'd commissioned, and the difference between it and the lumpy padding he'd been using before was striking. It barely felt like he was wearing armor at all, not with the incredibly soft fabric covering him from head to toe beneath it.

He pinged again with Detection, homing in on the signal. To his immense relief, it was coming from a dark alley near the river, not the bathhouse itself. A torch must have gone out, allowing monsters to spawn. Indeed, he could already see a few Lurkers milling about at the entrance to the alley, though they weren't what he was concerned about.

A blood-curdling screech echoed from the darkness as he charged toward it. He dropped Velocity, fighting for traction on the cobblestones as he arrested his momentum.

"Fuck!" Officer Tilson swore, coming to a stop beside him and unslinging his heavy longbow from his back. "I know that cry. That's a Razorspine."

Rain's blood ran cold. Val, on the other hand, looked excited as he caught up, skidding to a halt on Rain's other side.

"This should be fun!" he said, summoning a Lunar Orb over his hand.

"Tarny!" Rain shouted, glancing over his shoulder. "Run to the barricades. Get the other awakened to meet us here, and tell everyone else to stay away!"

Mercifully, Tarny didn't argue. Rain looked back at the alley, and he barely had time to register what he was seeing before the sickle of green magic struck him.

"Argh!" he gasped, stumbling back, less from the impact, and more from surprise. Val also shouted in alarm. The crescent-moon blade of energy had been flying straight for his head before it had curved at the last second to hit Rain in the shoulder. *Acid Crescent*, the Watch had called the attack. From the shape, it was clear why.

Rain's HUD had a bar for his armor beneath his one for his health. When the magic had struck, a blue transparent overlay had appeared, indicating the armor's saturation, or the amount of magical damage that the metal could absorb before it reached its limit. The single blast of Chemical energy had filled the bar by around a tenth, which meant approximately one-and-a-half *thousand* damage from the single strike. The armor would purge that mana over time at

the rate of ninety-two points per second, which was nice, but hardly a comfort, given that a second crescent of green magic was already flying toward him from the alley.

This time, the projectile was headed for him directly. Rain threw himself to the side in a frantic attempt to dodge but was still struck directly in the torso as the spell homed in on him. *It's the metal. It's attracting the magic!*

Officer Tilson didn't seem fazed by the close call. He'd drawn an arrow and planted his bow in the ground, the massive weapon almost taller than he was. Both the arrow shaft and the bowstring started crackling with lightning as he prepared to use what was probably Shock Arrow, unless Rain missed his guess. There was a crash of thunder as he released, and the arrow shot toward the alley, bending around the corner unnaturally.

There was a flash followed by an inhuman scream of outrage, then the monster rushed out of the alley, headed directly for them.

Rain's eyes widened as the torchlight glinted off the wicked, scythe-like blades of the massive insect. The monster was green, with an angular, horse-sized body covered with numerous deadly-looking spikes. Its six legs ended in barbed hooks that shattered the cobblestones as it charged toward them. Its two longer bladed arms sprouted from a torso bearing a triangular head with massive, dripping mandibles. It was like a centaur crossed with a spider and a praying mantis, but with a healthy dose of eldritch abomination thrown in for spice. Its name and level were displayed along with its health above its head.

Razorspine Dissolver – Level 15

Oh, fuck me!