

100: Storm

The night sky above the dome was shockingly clear, with not so much as a cloud to obscure the magnificent vault of the heavens. The moon hung low in the sky, a pale crescent of waxing light, comforting in its presence.

Lying on his back and staring up at the stars, Rain wished that the air within the dome was as clean as that outside so he could get the full effect. The slight haze was noticeable, even at night, simply in contrast to the crystal clarity of the sky. Fires burned here and there in Fel Sadanis and in the Lee, but these were nothing compared to the light pollution of a modern city. The sheer number of stars was utterly breathtaking.

It was just before midnight. Rain had settled on a relatively dry patch of grass near the barrier with the intent of sleeping under the stars, but sleep itself eluded him. Instead, he found himself staring at what was clearly a planet, wondering if it had a name.

Ameliah would doubtless know, but she was asleep, just a few meters away on the other side of the barrier. It was still amazing to him that the cold didn't bother her. Snow was piled deep outside the magical dome, easily measured just by looking. It was deeper than Rain was tall in places, though the area beneath the sheltering stone pillar that protected the Lee had been cleared, likely with fire magic.

Elsewhere, the snow formed a wall around the city. It blocked the view of the surrounding land, other than to the north-east. There, the river flowed from the mountains to the north until it struck the barrier and was forced to divert, clearing away the snow in the process. It had finally chosen the path to the east, flowing in an ever-deepening channel around the dome until it was once again forced to divert by the stone pillar.

On the other side of the rocky obstruction, past the growing camp nestled beneath it, the river flared out into a sheet of shallow water. Eventually, it would find its way back to the riverbed and continue its journey south to the badlands, as if its passage had never been impeded.

Rain sighed deeply, thinking of the path of the water and how nice it would have been to just float down the river without a care in the world. It was peaceful out here, alone under the stars with his thoughts. Ameliah was there, of course, but he couldn't hear her quiet breathing as she slept on the other side of the barrier. Dozer, too, was asleep, having burrowed himself a bed in the mud next to the barrier. Only Rain remained awake, staring at the stars and soaking in the stillness. Time passed, and finally, his eyelids started to droop.

Sometime later, the sudden clang of a bell jolted Rain back to consciousness. His eyes shot open, then he scrunched them back closed in annoyance. *It's one in the morning. Why they feel the need to sound the hour in the middle of the night, I'll never— Wait, what?*

Rain sat up stiffly, looking toward the city. The bell had sounded again, and as he listened, it kept ringing. He flicked on his HUD, having disabled it to observe the stars, but this only deepened his confusion. It wasn't first bell, let alone second. It was only seven minutes past midnight.

Am I dreaming? He rubbed his eyes, his hands responding stiffly to his mind's commands. *No, not dreaming. What the hell is going on?*

Rain looked over his shoulder at the Lee, then did a double-take as he saw the entire camp in silent chaos. Ameliah was gone from where she'd been lying. He spotted her in the distance,

standing near one of the fires and pointing into the darkness. People were milling about everywhere, brandishing weapons and torches.

Crimson light flared. A bolt of fire flew from Ameliah's outstretched hand, illuminating the shadowy form of the object that it struck. Rain recognized it immediately as one of the mushroom men that he'd fought in the Fells, a Fungiform Stumper. The entire thing lit up, and by the growing light of the flames, Rain could see more shadowed forms lurching toward the camp in the darkness.

"Fuck!" he swore, clambering unsteadily to his feet.

His tired, half-sleeping brain had finally shifted into gear, connecting the ringing of the bell to the appearance of the monster.

This is rank shift. Rain looked back at the city, registering that a second bell had started sounding, its dissonant voice unsynchronized to the frantic tolling of the first. A hulking form shifted in the darkness near the wall. *And the barrier doesn't stop it.*

He spared one last glance at the silent battle on the other side of the dome, then turned away and sprinted for the city.

Ameliah and Tallheart are there. The Lee will be fine. Fel Sadanis, not so much.

He pulsed Detection, picking out a disturbing number of signals within the radius, though he could see only a few shadowy forms nearby. Some were clearly slimes, but others he couldn't identify. Fortunately for him, a Stumper hadn't decided to smash his head into the ground while he slept. The nearest of those was the first one that he'd spotted, over by the west gate. He ignored the signals around him, activating Velocity and tearing toward the city.

We're not ready for this! I needed more time!

Old Mazel swirled the dregs of the spiced ale around the bottom of her glass, then downed the liquid with a sigh. She reached to the bottle on the table and upended it, then let it fall to the floor in dissatisfaction when nothing came out.

She set down her glass and heaved herself up out of her plush chair, growling against the protests of her back. Her joints popped and cracked, pain shooting through the haze of the alcohol. The old injury made moving difficult, and it didn't help that Mazel was not a small woman, far from it.

Mazel Strongarm, they'd called her, back when she had worked as a merchant's guard. At just under three stride tall, she loomed over men and women alike. Even in the dim firelight of her living room and dressed in a blue linen nightgown, she cut an imposing figure.

Rubbing her eyes, Mazel picked up the candle and shuffled her way toward the pantry, limping heavily. Had her sister been around, she would have made an effort to walk normally. To hide the pain. She hated the way Carnilla looked at her. Hated to see the guilt and pity in her eyes. No matter how many times Mazel told her that it wasn't her fault, her sister had never forgiven herself for being the one to survive that horrible battle unscathed.

The pair of them had worked together. They'd been a team. Now, her sister was still out there, and she was stuck here, in the ass-end of nowhere, drinking up the coin that her sister sent and feeling sorry for herself.

Mazel paused in the hall outside the pantry, tightening her fists. Then she shook her head sharply, which turned out to be a mistake. She pressed her arm against the wall, then rested there for a few moments, staring at her slippered feet while she waited for the hallway to stop spinning.

Pathetic.

The last thing she needed was more ale. What she needed was a healer. A proper one. One that had the knowledge to break her bones in just the right way so that when they healed, the old injury would be undone.

She sighed deeply and pushed herself away from the wall.

Even if such a thing was possible somewhere in the world, it certainly wasn't in Fel Sadanis. Perhaps if her nephew became a famous adventurer one day, he'd think of his poor old aunt and find her the help that she needed.

Mazel sighed again. Her sister's son was a good lad. Strong, like his mother. Awakened, too. The pride of the family. Still, the kind of healing that Mazel needed wasn't something that a bronzeplate could afford. She never let her weakness show when her nephew was around, either. She didn't need pity.

No, what she needed was sleep. It was far too late to be up and around at her age and in her condition. Another bottle of ale wouldn't do anything but worsen her headache come the morning.

She looked at the pantry door, hesitating, then firmed her resolve.

No more ale. But, since I'm here already, I might as well get a little snack before bed. Perhaps a piece of hard cheese. Just a small one. Something to keep the ale company.

She pushed the door open, then froze at the unexpected sound of chitin clicking against wood. Holding up the candle, Mazel saw a large, fuzzy form skitter back from the light, armored legs clicking against the floor. It was a spider, larger than any spider had a right to be. She stared at it, blinking aside the haze of tiredness and alcohol as a thrill of recognition ran through her. *Am I dreaming?*

Any doubts were settled as the thing rushed for her. Mazel shouted, dropping the candle, the pain in her back forgotten. She didn't turn to flee, however.

They called her Big Mazel. Old Mazel. Mazel the Fat. Mazel the Cripple. But none of those were who she was.

She was Mazel Strongarm, and she wasn't afraid of some overgrown bug.

Her thunderous stomp landed atop the spider like the collapse of a mountain, driving its furry body to the ground and sending its armored legs splaying outward. A fountain of foul ichor splattered from the monster, covering Mazel and the contents of the pantry with gore and extinguishing the fallen candle.

"Fuck!" The last of the cheese had been on the bottom shelf.

I didn't think that through.

Any further lamentation was cut short by the unexpected clang of a bell. Mazel frowned, walking from the desecrated pantry. The ringing of the bell continued as she made her way down the hall, sounding more frantic by the moment.

Mazel wasn't an adventurer, but she'd served as a guard and traveled far and wide. She recognized a Coal Lurker when she saw one. The monsters were level two, weak on their own, but deadly because of the way that they swarmed. How one had gotten into her pantry was a mystery, but that wasn't important right now. Whether it had spawned in the sewer and found its way in somehow, or if the rumors of rank shift were true, it hardly mattered.

Where there was one Coal Lurker, there were always more. She had work to do.

Stopping in front of the fireplace, she reached above it and pulled down the spear that was hanging there, collecting dust. She swung the deadly weapon in a practiced arc, slamming the butt against the ground to steady her stance. Despite the pain, the motion felt good. It felt right.

Mazel Strongarm grinned in the firelight. "Now, where did I put my armor?"

Shouts of terror and the clamor of combat greeted Rain's ears as he approached the city. He'd slipped on his helmet during his run, anticipating that he would soon be in the thick of it. Light poured out through a crack in the wooden gates, which had been partially closed for the first time that he could remember. The pair of Watch officers who'd been standing guard earlier were nowhere to be seen.

Rain skidded to a stop, dropping Velocity as he slipped through the crack in the doors. It immediately became apparent why the gates hadn't been closed completely. The Watch officers were a little busy at the moment.

The Fungiform Stumper that they were fighting roared, swinging its club-like arm down toward the man standing in front of it. Rather than dodging back as Rain expected, the Watch officer stepped inside the blow, taking the opportunity to leave a deep gash in the Stumper's side with his sword.

There was a flash, and a bolt of arcane lightning slammed into the monster's back, causing it to roar again and turn from the retreating swordsman. The Mage responsible stood his ground, pelting the monster with bolt after thunderous bolt as the Stumper charged toward him. Each hit chipped off another small chunk of the creature's ridiculous health pool, which was already down to half. There was another Stumper nearby, lying dead where it had fallen. A few other, smaller monsters that Rain couldn't identify were scattered around, burned beyond recognition.

"Get the door!" shouted the officer with the sword, glancing at Rain for a moment before taking the chance to stab at the Stumper's back while it was distracted by the mage. Rain was already moving, having come to the same conclusion as the officer had. The square inside the gate was lit by torches, while the area beyond the walls was not. Thanks to Detection, he could feel monsters headed toward them from outside, drawn by his passage. Even more would be spawning by the minute.

The heavy wooden doors slammed shut with a boom as Rain pushed them closed, then he began looking for the drop bar. He spotted it nearby, a thick wooden beam leaning against the side of the guardhouse. "Shit," he hissed under his breath. The thing was massive.

Glancing back at the continuing battle, he dragged the beam down, letting it fall to the ground with a thud. He hauled it toward the door, one end dragging on the cobblestones.

A splatter of impact and a slight wobble told him that something, likely a slime, had thrown itself against the gate. He cursed, pinging several more times with Detection. Thankfully, there didn't seem to be any more Stumpers in range, at least for the moment. The number of other signals coming from within the walls was hardly comforting, however.

Rain struggled with the beam, even his boosted strength insufficient to easily lift the heavy piece of lumber. He grunted as he straightened his legs, dead-lifting one end and jamming it into the bracket. Lifting the other end was harder, as he had to negotiate it around the second bracket before he could get it into place. By the time he managed it, the Stumper had succumbed to the combined onslaught of the two officers.

Rain turned, panting from his run and the struggle with the beam. He let himself lean against the gates, waving at the two officers standing by the downed Fungiforms. It wasn't the same pair that had been here when he'd left earlier. The two monsters, on the other hand, looked exactly the same as those that he'd fought in the Fells. Fungiform Stumpers were around three meters tall, and had wide bodies supported by massive legs. Their arms were like tree-trunks that hung nearly to the ground, and their red mushroom-caps were patterned with glowing orange spots, though those had faded to a dull brown now that the monsters were dead.

The respite didn't last long enough for Rain to properly greet the officers, let alone for him to catch his breath. The sound of rapid footsteps heralded the arrival of a small group of people, sprinting toward the now-barred gate.

"Help!" the leader of the group cried, a ruddy-faced man hauling a small child by the hand.

"They're right after us!" said the woman next to him, flanked by what was clearly the rest of their family.

"Get behind us," said the sword-wielding officer. "In the guardhouse, there's—fucking depths!"

A tumultuous swarm of spiders flowed around the corner after the fleeing family like a wave. They ranged size from 'big-ass tarantula' to the significantly more alarming 'what the fuck is wrong with your dog?'. The system identified the big ones as level two Coal Lurkers, and the smaller ones as Coal Lurker Broodlings, also level two, but a swarm type.

"Ander, Lightning Wave!" the officer said, turning tail and joining the terrified family in flight.

"Not enough mana!" the mage shouted. "Stop running toward me, damn it! You'll have to turtle!"

"No!" Rain shouted, rushing forward. "I've got it!" He passed the family, charging directly toward the wave of spiders. At level two, these were nothing compared to Kin. Also, he'd been primed by a lifetime of video games for this moment. It wasn't a question of *if* he would run into giant spiders, only *when*. There was no time for fear, only action. He could think about all of the horrible scabbling legs and dripping fangs later.

Refrigerate blasted out from him in a sphere, creating an expanding cloud of snow as water froze out of the humid air. Rain's armor shone with the blue light of mana interference, but he didn't even notice as he waded directly into the oncoming swarm.

A cascade of dings overwhelmed his hearing as the system presented him with a torrent of kill notifications. It would have been over in an instant, had the bodies of the dead and dying

spiders not shielded their fellows somewhat from the spell. Nevertheless, the entire swarm was frozen solid in less than ten seconds, the spiders collapsing to the ground with a clatter like river stones falling on a tile floor. Only once the spiders were all dead did Rain notice that their legs were armored with some sort of hard shell. They didn't appear to have fangs, either, but rather, a suction-cup-like mouth in the center of their fuzzy heads.

They had the eyes, though. Plenty of eyes.

Rain shuddered.

"Damn," said the mage. "Nice work. Hey, what's this now?"

"Mana," Rain said, not even looking in the direction of the mage to see the blue rings. "You, man in the green shirt," he said, pointing to the ruddy-faced man who was still holding on to his daughter protectively. The family had huddled together near the gate, terror and relief warring on their faces.

"Y...Yes?" the man said.

"Grab some torches. The monsters are spawning in the dark. We've got to light up the city. Be careful, though. A fire is the last thing we need."

"In the guardhouse," said the sword-wielding officer, pointing. "We've got a bundle of them. Not enough for... Fuck, nowhere near enough, but it's a start."

A scream echoed through the square as a woman entered from another street, seeing the pile of frozen spider things.

"It's okay!" said the mage. "They're dead."

The woman hesitated, then looked behind her and ran forward. A pair of slimes oozed out into the square after her.

Rain frowned, reaching to his belt and snapping the Quickstaff open as he marched toward the oncoming slimes, his boots crunching through the frozen spiders. He wasn't about to drop Essence Well just to deal with a pair of slimes.

"Get the torches," he said firmly. "We need to move. There'll be more coming, and we don't have any time to waste. Torches, candles, anything you can find. Spread the word to everyone who joins us."

"You heard him," the mage said, steadying the panicking woman and guiding her over to the others. "We stick together. We'll head to the southern stronghold."

Rain slashed one of the slimes out of mid-air with the staff as it leapt for him, easily bisecting the gelatinous creature. He held off on Purify, even though he'd been splattered by the dying slime. He'd be needing his mana for more important things, and he knew it wouldn't be long before he was covered again. The second slime shared the same fate as the first at the hands of the swordsman.

"You must be Rain," the grinning officer said. "Category three, fucking hells. Those Lurkers didn't stand a chance." He pointed at his chest with his thumb. "Name's Cale." He nodded to the mage. "That there's Ander."

Rain nodded to the man, distracted by a sudden thought. The slimes had reminded him that he'd left Dozer outside. The link had grown hazy with distance, so he had to concentrate to

bring it into focus. Once he grasped the connection, the only thing he could do was to shake his head in disbelief.

How the hell are you still asleep?

“Die, ya spongy fuck!” Carten roared, slamming his shield into the Fungiform Stumper. There was a sickening crunch of impact, though not from either Carten or the mushroom man. It came instead from the unfortunate Coal Lurker that had been clinging to the metal shield.

Carten was swarming with the things. They were everywhere, trying to climb down the back of his armor and into his beard. Fortunately for the Coal Lurkers, Carten had bigger problems to deal with. The spider-like creatures were an annoyance, completely unable to harm him thanks to his base Force resistance. The Stumper was another story.

It swung both of its arms down at him in an overhead smash, and Carten slammed his shields together, raising them above his head. The blow crashed into him, the force pressing his feet deep into the dirt of the courtyard and making his teeth rattle. He took no damage, but his shields weren’t going to be able to stand up to this forever.

“My turn!” Carten yelled, smashing the creature’s leg with a Shield Bash. Carten didn’t see health bars, but he could tell with his intuition that the thing had barely even felt it. It roared in anger, its spots glowing as it prepared to use its magical attack.

“Piss in a bunghole! Not that shit again!” Carten griped, crushing Coal Lurkers beneath his feet as he scrambled to get some distance. He’d already been caught in the cloud of spores once,

and it was far from pleasant. He'd lost a quarter of his health, even with his Chemical resistance taking the edge off.

For the next few minutes, he ran in a circle around the incensed Stumper, waiting for the spores to clear. As he did, he made sure to get some good smashing in on the spiders that were crawling all over him. "Damn shits! Leave me beard alone!" he roared after a particularly big one got tangled in the coarse black hair. *I need a damn faceplate.*

Once the spores were gone, Carten found himself with the same problem he'd been struggling with for the past twenty minutes. The Stumper slammed its arms down on him, and he blocked. Neither took any damage. Shield Bash. Again, no damage. Rebound worked, turning the monster's strength against itself, but the stamina cost was too high for repeated use. He'd never win that way, and he did want to win. Running wasn't an option, not when Velika might be watching.

Damn it! If I only had Bramble Armor, I could make some progress. Damn level cap!

There was a sudden roar from behind him, and a second Stumper lumbered in through the open gate.

Carten pushed aside the first Stumper's arm, it having tried to grab him. He slammed the edge of his shield down onto its sensitive foot, just to make it stumble back and give him a little room. Only then did he turn to face the second Stumper.

He grinned. "Fuck, took ya long enough!"

The second Stumper roared, not slowing its charge. Maneuvering himself between the two mushroom men, Carten waited, then rolled out of the way. The sickening crunch of broken

Coal Lurkers was followed by a colossal thud of impact. The two Stumpers crashed directly into each other, collapsing into a tangle of spongy limbs.

Coming up from his roll sticky with spider guts and dirt, Carten surveyed the aftermath. "Yeah!" he roared, pumping a shield in the air.

The collision of the Stumpers had knocked off small, but not insignificant quantities of health from both of them. Carten banged his shields together in satisfaction, then beckoned. "Come on, dumbasses! If I can't kill ya, I'll make ya kill each other!"

Velika sat on the edge of her windowsill, her legs dangling out into the open air as she watched the spectacle below. She smiled as Carten managed to trick one of the Fungiforms into uppercutting the other one right in the sensitive gills of its cap. She reached into the bowl of walnuts sitting beside her on the ledge, crushing one and sorting through the bits of shell before popping the meat into her mouth. She'd wait a few more minutes to make sure that he really had it under control, then she'd go have some fun of her own. It didn't look like there'd be anything out there worth her time, but even a lopsided fight had a certain appeal. Hells, she might even save a few people if she felt like it. It wasn't like it mattered, one way or another. Not in the long run.

"Hurry up!" Myth shouted, standing in the archway between the workroom and the front of the shop. He was looking warily out at the dark street through the open door, a bulging pack strapped to his back.

"I am moving as quickly as I can," said Reason, still rummaging around in the workroom. The urgency of the situation and the fact that the two of them were alone had the chemist speaking normally for once, though his words were clipped.

"All that stuff won't matter if we're dead!" Myth hissed, looking back at him. "We need to get to the stronghold now."

"I disagree," Reason said. "This *stuff* is more important than our lives. If we can't refine chem-crysts, the city is going to run out of evertorches. We must consider more than just this first night."

"We can come back later! Besides, there're other chemists who—"

"Keep your voice down," Reason said, still working to disassemble the sensitive equipment on the worktable. "Listen."

Myth listened, hearing scraping coming from the storeroom. Something was in there. *More Coal Lurkers?* There were already a few of them trapped in the upstairs bedroom, easily topping the list of worst possible ways to wake up. The spider-like creatures weren't venomous, or even that dangerous, short of a full swarm, but still.

"Do you think we should..." Myth said, trailing off and looking down at the glass flask he was holding in his hand.

"No," Reason said. "And put that down, fool. Do you want to burn down our shop?"

"This is just some of your acid," Myth said. "It won't explode if I don't use Decohere, and it shouldn't catch fire. Probably."

"We don't know what kind of monster is in there," Reason said, attempting to stuff an alembic into his pack. "If it's just a Coal Lurker, that's one thing, but what if it's not? Besides, you know the kind of stuff that's in there. Throwing acid around would not end well. Speaking of, where did you put the naphtha?"

"In there, obviously," Myth said, pointing to the storeroom.

"Hells," Reason swore. "We don't have any out here in jars?"

Myth shook his head. "No."

Reason looked at the door to the storeroom, hesitating. Suddenly, the scratching sound stopped. A moment later, there was a shrill, keening screech and a splatter as the monster sprayed some sort of liquid against the wood.

The two men halted their argument, staring. Wisps of smoke were already curling through the gap between the door and its frame, the sizzling sound growing stronger by the second.

Myth glanced worriedly at Reason. The chemist had the familiar far-away look on his face that he got when he was using Chemical Intuition to analyze a reaction.

"No, the acid definitely isn't a good idea," Reason said after a moment. "Whatever it just spat on the door, it is dissolving the wood. Perhaps you are right that we should—"

The door shook, a distinctive barbed claw punching through and sending a cloud of acrid gas billowing into the room.

"Run!" Reason shouted, grabbing his pack and racing for the archway.

"Oh, sure, now you're ready to go!" Myth said over his shoulder, charging into the street ahead of him, torch in one hand, jar of acid in the other. His heart had leapt into his throat the moment he saw the claw. "It only took a Razorspine Dissolver in our closet to get you going! Honestly—"

"Yes, yes, you were right!" Reason said, tumbling out after him, struggling with the pack on his back. "Tell me about it later!"

There was another blood-curdling shriek from inside the shop, followed by the sound of smashed shelves and breaking glass. Myth and Reason paused, looking at each other, both of them mentally cataloging everything that had been in their shop. Then, they turned as one and took off down the street, running as fast as their feet could carry them.

Bartum stumbled as a blinding flash of light temporarily banished the darkness, accompanied by the mighty whoomph of a detonation.

"Depths below, that was a Fireball!" said an officer to his left.

Bartum's eyes scanned the darkness, quickly locating the source of the explosion. He and a group of other officers were standing on the roof of the instruction hall. The old stone building was still being cleared for monsters and dark rooms, but being four stories tall, standing up here gave him a decent view of the city.

"Not a Fireball," Bartum said, pointing. "Alchemy shop."

"Hells, what did those crazy bastards have in there?!" said another of the officers.

"They had a permit," said Bartum. "*Had.*" He motioned to one of the junior officers, a water mage. "Take a patrol with you and get over there. Stop the fire if you can, but above all else, make damn sure you keep it from coming this way."

"Yes, sir," said the mage. He dashed to the edge of the building and grabbed one of the ropes hanging there, then leapt over the side. The ropes provided expedient access to the roof, compared to the inside of the monster-infested building.

Bartum put the explosion out of his mind and returned his gaze to the courtyard of the stronghold. Large bonfires had been built, filling the entire area with light. Panicked citizens were milling about in clumps, shepherded by the officers that he'd assigned to watch over them. More people were dribbling in through the gates in fits and starts. As Bartum watched, a particularly large group arrived, guided by a returning patrol. Bartum waved to the patrol leader, then waited for the man to ascend the rope, hand over fist.

"Yes, sir?" the officer said as he came up over the side. Bartum reached for the man's name, but it escaped him, and he didn't have the time to worry about it.

"What's the strongest monster you've run into?" Bartum asked. "Are groups of five still enough for safety beyond the perimeter?"

"Fungiform Stumper, level eleven," said the officer.

"More than one?" asked Bartum.

The officer shook his head. "No, sir. There don't seem to be that many of them, and they aren't grouping up. Not like the Lurkers."

Bartum nodded. "How are the casualties among the unawakened?"

"Slowing," said the officer. "We're telling people to just light up their homes and stay put, like you said. Any poor bastards unlucky enough to get something worse than a Lurker under their beds are already dead, and most everyone else is either holed up or already here. We're running into fewer people on the streets, alive or otherwise."

"Acknowledged," Bartum said. "I am revising my orders." He gestured to the city, indicating the lit semi-circle surrounding the stronghold. "We're focusing on stabilizing the perimeter now. We've had too many incidents. Monsters are still spawning in abandoned homes and shops. Everyone is to come here. Additionally, they are to bring all of the candles and lamp oil that they own, as well as whatever food and supplies they can carry. You're to go building by building, making sure that they're clear. Once they are, lock them up and draw a cross on the door. An earth specialist will collapse it as soon as it is feasible."

"Sir, isn't that excessive?" said the patrol leader.

Bartum shook his head. "We can't afford to play Ranks. This is a war we are fighting, and we do not have the luxury of an elegant solution. Make damn sure you clear those buildings of anyone left alive before you make that mark. I don't want any more lives on my conscience."

"Yes sir," the officer said.

Bartum nodded. "If you see something stronger than a Stumper, do not engage. Draw it back here so we can kill it from the walls. Now, get the hells back out there."

"Yes sir!" the officer said, almost throwing himself from the roof in his haste to get back to his duty.

Bartum wished he could follow him, but he was needed here. He stared out at the city, marking the locations of the three other surface strongholds by the slowly growing rings of light around them. There were a few other illuminated areas, most notably the Guild and the bathhouse. Rain was on his way to the latter, having dropped off a large group of citizens at the perimeter and then departed before Bartum had a chance to speak with him. The officers who'd escorted the peculiar Guilder said that he'd been concerned for his own people and that they couldn't convince him to wait.

Bartum sighed. He could have really used him here, but there was nothing to be done about it now. He squinted in the direction of the bathhouse. The large form of a Fungiform Stumper was clearly recognizable even at this distance as it smashed through one of the barricades that Rain's people had set up. Bartum had stationed two officers there to keep an eye on the water situation, but it looked like they'd either been killed or had expended all of their mana and stamina. Bartum shook his head. One adventurer would not be enough to turn the tide, even if he got to them in time.

A crash echoed up from the building below him, but Bartum ignored it. He took a Message scroll from the dwindling pile on the table beside him, then focused on the face of the acting commander of the Eastern stronghold as he broke the seal.

[Officer Marghee, this is Officer Bartum. Confirmation: nineteen drake harvest sundown. Orders follow. You are to send ten officers to reinforce those stationed at the bathhouse. A significant number of citizens have gathered, and the perimeter is at risk of imminent breach. Signal acknowledgment. Do not use a scroll unless you have vital information, such as a

sighting of a monster above level thirteen. Confirmation repeats: nineteen drake harvest sundown. Stay strong. Message ends.]

"Where the hells is Rain!?" shouted Vanna, waving her torch at the enormous mushroom man in front of her. She gave a yelp as it turned to face her, then took off at a sprint. They'd long since learned that there was no point in fighting these, as an unawakened. Anyone that had tried had been killed, either smashed to a pulp or choked to death by the toxic spores. The numerous slimes and spider creatures could be dealt with by boot and club, but the lumbering mushrooms were on a completely different level. She didn't know what she'd have done if the Watch hadn't been here.

Bartum had sent two officers over earlier in the day to help keep order, and they'd still been around when the monsters had started appearing everywhere. Three more officers had arrived later, having been on patrol nearby. Their presence had been instrumental. Without them, they'd have never have been able to hold the monsters at bay long enough to get the barricades set up. Now, however, all five officers had reached their limits and were too exhausted to protect them any longer.

They were on their own, and a barricade wouldn't stop a mushroom man. That was where she and the other mental defectives came in. The things were unstoppable juggernauts, but they were also both slow and dumb. They could be distracted with fire, then led away by anyone idiotic enough to risk the sprint back through the darkness.

Vanna, the Stumper in tow, dashed through the remains of the broken barricade, pumping her arms furiously. She had to swerve around one of the spider things as it jumped at her from an alley. It was one of the big ones, and she could see more coming toward her, attracted by the

light of her torch. She ran faster, leaving them behind as the barricade fell away behind her.
Thank fuck for short, stubby spider legs.

She gritted her teeth, then glanced back at the Stumper. It was still on her. They were slow to react and not very nimble, but that didn't mean outrunning one was easy, especially not in a straight line. Once the creatures got going, their long legs ate up the ground with deceptive ease.

Satisfied that she was far enough, she flung the torch down the street in front of her and ducked into an alley. She almost immediately reversed direction, scrambling back out into the path of the oncoming Stumper.

Nope! Nope! Nope! Nope! Nope! Nope!

An insectile form had moved in the darkness, rearing up on its hind legs to well over her height, the light of the crescent moon reflecting off a pair of wicked-looking blades. A hissing screech followed her as she scrambled away, not even sparing a glance for the Stumper, which was still stupidly fixed on the torch.

She dashed diagonally across the street, headed to another alley that would take her toward the river. The water was far from safe, given what had been spotted swimming in it, but it was better than certain death by decapitation. *Please don't follow me. Please go for the torch. Please, please, please— Oh fuck!*

Vanna had come around a corner to find another of the mushroom men right in front of her. She attempted to throw herself to the side, but it was too close. She crashed straight into it, the air blasting from her lungs as she bounced off and fell to the ground in a heap. The monster made no sign that it had even noticed, though Vanna felt as if she'd run straight into

a wall. She pushed herself away as quickly as she could, scrambling like a crab along the ground as the monster pivoted to face her. *Shit shit shit! It saw me!*

A sudden blinding flash of light pierced the darkness, and the mushroom man halted in its tracks. Then, it roared, a deep, rolling thrum of outrage. Only then did Vanna realize that she was screaming too, her voice barely audible over the monster's.

Suddenly, a figure appeared in front of her, between her and the mushroom man. Vanna would have screamed again, had she had any breath remaining.

A white ball of light formed in the darkness and flew toward the monster. It didn't strike it; instead, it swooped around the mushroom's cap, dancing through the air. By its light, Vanna could see that the figure in front of her was human. A man, wearing a black jacket.

"Run," the man's voice said as he pointed his finger at the monster. There was another flash of light, and the pitch of the monster's roar deepened along with its anger.

"Run where?!" Vanna shouted at him. She pointed back the way she had come. "There's a—"

She gasped. The man had vanished as abruptly as he'd appeared. The glowing orb of light remained, darting around the mushroom man as it ponderously attempted to swat it from the air.

Teleportation? Invisibility?

Vanna clambered back to her feet, pressing herself flat against the side of a building. She was unwilling to run past the mushroom man, and even more unwilling to turn back.

"This way, stumpy," said the man's voice. Vanna spotted him standing on the far side of the creature. The monster started moving in his direction, and he vanished again, but not before there was another flash of light and roar of pain from the mushroom. She could see a small blackened circle on the thing's back where the man's first spell must have struck it.

The mushroom man slammed its fists angrily into the ground where the man had been standing, shaking the earth with the force of the impact. In doing this, it had moved over to the side of the street.

Vanna clenched and unclenched her hands. *If I can get past, I can take this street to the bridge.*

"Come on, you idiot mushroom!" the man's voice said, though Vanna couldn't see him this time. The mushroom man clearly could, lumbering away down another alley. The path was clear.

Go!

Vanna sprinted down the dark street, sparing a glance after the retreating monster. The man who'd saved her was nowhere to be seen. The light hovering above the Stumper had vanished, plunging the area back into darkness. An orange glow from the alley remained, flaring brighter in a sudden flash. Vanna looked away, running with all of her might. That light meant the spores were coming. Those spores would spread, and if she breathed them in, she would die. They were the reason why people like her were needed to draw the monsters away.

Her heart beat with terror and exhaustion as she dashed toward the safety of the barricades, and yet, somehow, it felt light in her chest. Even if she didn't make it, even if none of them made it until the dawn, she'd led the monster away. She'd made a difference.

"Come on, it's clear," Rain said in a hushed voice, the light of Purify fading and returning the tunnel to the dimness of the flickering torchlight.

He'd just finished off a pack of Plague Rats, Greater Slimes, and Popcaps, which were Fungiforms of some kind. They were small and easy to kill, but they'd be a death sentence for anyone without Purify. When they died, they exploded, sending their toxic spores everywhere.

Rain turned and continued leading the way down the tunnel, a group of at least a hundred civilians following him. When he'd left his first group of rescued citizens with the Watch, he'd been planning to rush to the bathhouse as quickly as possible. His people had been staying there overnight, having set up bunks in the main room, and Rain felt responsible for their safety. However, he couldn't just ignore those that he had come upon along the way. It was far too dangerous to send people back to the Watch stronghold alone, and that had led to the current situation.

The able-bodied adults had arranged themselves throughout the pack, holding torches and shepherding a terrified group of children and the elderly. The torches kept things from spawning in their midst, but Rain had to maintain constant vigilance with Detection to ensure that nothing was creeping up on them from behind or from down a side tunnel.

Before he'd seen the kind of stuff that was spawning down here, he'd considered guiding people into the sewers to take shelter. That plan was no longer even on the table. The Coal Lurkers were pure nightmare fuel, but they weren't venomous, unlike the aptly named Venomfang Plague Rats. Those were smaller, faster cousins of the Trundlers, and the sewers were thick with them. He had only brought these people down here because he'd had no other choice. There'd been a Stumper blocking a street that he'd needed to cross, and he

couldn't fight it and protect all of the civilians at the same time. Going back or going around would have been even more dangerous.

"Stairs!" a woman shouted, pointing past him.

Rain nodded, holding a finger to his lips to remind her to keep quiet. He'd memorized the layout of the sewers at this point. "Yes. Stay together," he whispered. "I'm going to go check if it's clear. Stay quiet, but yell if something comes."

He didn't wait for an answer, taking the stairs two at a time and holding his torch in front of him. When he reached the surface, he found the street completely packed with slimes—the regular kind, not the Greater Slimes that he'd been running into below. A Refrigerate Nova froze the filthy things solid, and a pulse of Detection confirmed that there wasn't anything big nearby.

"Clear!" Rain hissed down the stairs, though it was anything but. The buildings around him had shielded the monsters within from Refrigerate, but the civilians didn't need to know that. The sewers *felt* safe, for all that they weren't. He needed the civilians to leave the false protection of the stone tunnels and follow him back to the surface. Telling them about the monsters would only frighten them more. As long as they stayed quiet, they'd be fine. Detection had informed him of numerous Slimes and Coal Lurkers in the nearby buildings, but no Stumpers. There was also one of the worrisome 'somethings,' but it was far away, several streets over at least.

Once more, Rain wished that Detection would actually give him information about the signals it picked up, not just the fact of their existence. He had to ping multiple times every time he wanted to get a picture of what was around him, and his mana was far from infinite. Every time he got an unknown signal that matched the criteria 'monster,' it filled him with dread.

The rest of his group started filtering out of the tunnel. Rain looked around at the buildings as he waited. There were people in some of them, candlelight peeking out through cracks in shuttered and barred windows. Shutters would stop Lurkers, Slimes, and even Fungiforms, provided that the inhabitants stayed quiet and didn't attract attention. It was the 'somethings' that he was worried about.

Should I try to get them to come out?

A flicker of light caught his attention, and he looked up to see a person stand up atop the building across the street, holding a torch. Immediately, he recognized the man from the orange robe he was wearing.

"Mlem?" Rain said softly in disbelief. *What's he doing here?*

After a moment, Ava stood up next to her father, grabbing onto him as the merchant said something to her. He wrapped her in an arm, then reached into a pocket of his robe and pulled out something which he threw in Rain's direction.

Rain's eyes lost track of the object as it sailed through the darkness, picking it up only when it clattered to the ground at his feet. It was a small rounded stone, like a river rock. He was about to look back up when there was a pop, and Mlem and his daughter appeared directly in front of him.

"Ah!" Rain shouted, stumbling back as Mlem bent casually to retrieve the stone.

Similar cries of alarm echoed from the surrounding civilians, though they quickly recovered. The torch-bearers had formed a perimeter as he'd instructed them, watching for danger as the other adults managed the children.

"There you are, Rain," Mlem said. "We've been stuck on that roof for over an hour. I was starting to think nobody was going to come by."

Rain winced as the echoes of the shouts rebounded off the buildings. *So much for staying quiet.*

"How did you— No, not important. What are you doing here, Mlem?" He pinged with Detection, keeping track of the signals from the monsters in case something came to investigate the noise.

"Well," Mlem said, shifting the strap of the pack he was wearing. "The tailor worked late to finish your order, and I figured I might as well come to deliver it, but then the depths rose, and Ava and I had to get creative."

"Daddy fought a mushroom man!" Ava said. Rain blinked, staring at her. Unlike the other children, she didn't seem scared in the slightest. Then, Rain blinked again, looking up at Mlem.

"You killed a Stumper?" *I knew he was awakened, but I thought he was like level five or something.*

Mlem grinned at him, stroking his mustache. "Maybe, maybe. I'll tell you about it later, if we survive," he said cheerily.

"Wait a minute, that stone," Rain said, his brain struggling to play catch up. "If you can use it to teleport, why didn't you just—"

"Jump from rooftop to rooftop until we got to safety?" Mlem interrupted.

"Yeah," Rain said.

"Not enough mana for more than a few skips," Mlem said with a shrug, once more adjusting the pack on his back. "The drain from the barrier, you know. Makes it hard to keep things charged."

A mutter from the crowd around them caught Rain's attention. *It's called a skipping stone? Why the hell don't I know about these things?*

He shook his head, returning his attention to the task at hand. "Never mind, Mlem, I'm glad you're here. If you can fight, all the better. We're headed for the bathhouse."

"Now that is a grand idea," Mlem said. "You can count on me if we run into trouble." He laid a hand on a scimitar belted at his waist.

"Me too!" said Ava, pushing forward. "I can fight!"

"Hush, Ava," Mlem said, offering her the torch he was carrying. "I need you to hold this for me. Can you do that?"

Ava shook her head. "I want to fight!"

"Ava..." Mlem warned. "We've talked about this..."

"Lord Rain," said one of the torch-bearers, pointing into the darkness. "There's light over there!" The tension was clear in the man's voice. "Can we..."

"I know," Rain said, "We should move. Come on, follow me."

The group moved out, Mlem still arguing with his daughter as if he had not a care in the world and was just out for a late-night stroll. Rain urged him to keep quiet, but Mlem barely lowered his voice, which made Rain grit his teeth in frustration. *Every awakened I meet is out of their fucking gourd!*

Amazingly, the group made it down the street without anything more significant than a few slimes coming out to meet them. Rain let the unawakened deal with them, keeping alert for more serious threats. A palpable wave of relief washed over him as they rounded the corner where the light was coming from, seeing a massive barricade of broken furniture with a bonfire blazing in front of it. There was a cry of alarm from the group of club-wielding workers guarding the barricade, then excited shouts as they recognized him. The civilians around him broke, running for the safety of the light. Rain moved to join them, but stopped after a few steps, frozen. He turned his head, looking back the way they had come.

It seemed as though something had heard them after all. Something that hadn't been there before. His eyes searched the darkness, picking out the distant form of the freshly-spawned Fungiform Stumper. It was moving slowly but determinedly in their direction, picking up speed as he watched.

Rain felt the sudden presence of a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to see Mlem standing next to him, pack removed, scimitar drawn and held at the ready. Ava was standing beside

him, holding the torch in one hand and a dagger in the other with a fearless expression on her face.

"Shall we?" Mlem said, nodding to the oncoming Stumper.

"Yes, but just us," Rain said, flicking his eyes to Ava and giving Mlem a significant look.

Mlem jumped, turning to see his daughter standing there. "Ava, go protect the others," he said, pointing to the barricade with the scimitar.

"I want to fight with you!" Ava said, shaking her head.

"Ava," Mlem snapped, his tone suddenly serious as the monster lumbered closer. "Rule 1."

Ava hesitated, then took a step back. "Fiiiiiiiine," she said, disappointment clear in her voice.

What the hell is wrong with this kid? She WANTS to fight a giant mushroom monster? Rain shook his head and walked out to meet the oncoming Stumper.

Rain had started collating monster information in little custom dialog boxes a few days ago. The system didn't help with this in any way; he was brute-forcing it by manually adding text to blank panels. It was time-consuming, but it got a little easier with each one that he made, and it helped him order the ridiculous quantity of information that was bouncing around in his head these days. The one for the Fungiform Stumper appeared with a thought, but Rain barely even glanced at it before he dismissed it again. The mere act of summoning it had been sufficient to bring the information straight to the front of his mind.

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	Unknown Suspected weakness
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!

"How's your Heat Resistance?" Rain asked, glancing at Mlem as the pair approached the oncoming Stumper. He felt surprisingly calm.

"Middling," said Mlem. "Short of a direct hit, I should be fine."

Rain nodded. "I'm going to try burning it. Just scream in agony if the mageburn is too much."

Mlem laughed. "Just don't singe my mustache."

Rain snorted, then his face became serious as the monster roared, a deep bass thrum. It was nearly upon them. "Don't attack it yet," Rain said. "I need to test its resistance."

"Very well," Mlem said. "I'll just distract it until you're ready." He darted forward, dodging smoothly under the lumbering swing of the monster and spinning past it. "Yaaaaah!" he shouted loudly, waving his torch over his head.

Rain's concern for Mlem faded the moment he saw the man move. Mlem was middle-aged, bald, and had a bit of gut, but he had clearly seen combat before. The way that he danced casually past certain death spoke volumes. *He'll be fine.*

Pulling up the skill card for Immolate, Rain focused on Channel Mastery and tweaked the settings until he was catching the monster with the heat aura at precisely ten damage per second. He kept the range as wide as he could without hitting the buildings on either side of the street, which meant he had to stay closer to the monster than he would have liked.

Immolate (10/10)
9-10 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment
Sufficient damage causes ignition
Range: 2 meters
Cost: 2.5 mp/s

He left the spell there, watching the monster's health bar and following after it as Mlem led it away. As he'd expected, the bar wasn't moving. The air around him was uncomfortably warm even after barely five seconds, but it was as hot as it was going to get at this level of the spell.

Heat resistance is at least ten.

Rain doubled the intensity of the aura, bringing it up to 17-20 damage per second. He waited a few seconds.

Still nothing. Damn, I'll try for 30, and if that doesn't do it, I'll use a bigger step.

"Are you done yet?" called Mlem.

"Just hold on," Rain said, increasing the aura to 26-30 DPS. This time as the air warmed, he saw a flicker of change on the monster's health bar. It didn't react to the damage, and the bar only looked a pixel or two off full, but it was there, and it was real.

Rain smiled, dropping the aura.

Confirmed, they're weak to Heat, or at least, weaker to Heat than they are to Cold. I'll pencil it in at 25 flat resistance. If I don't use Channel Mastery, that should be 175-200 raw DPS. After its resistance, 150-175. At 12,000 health, it will take—

"Depths, Rain, what are you doing over there!?" Mlem shouted, skittering away from the monster's earth-shaking stomp. "I don't mean to rush you, but as slow as this guy is, I can't just dodge him all night. We'll be in trouble if something else shows up."

"You're right, sorry!" Rain shouted, closing in. Knowing the monster's resistance would be important in the long run if he wanted to conserve mana, but he already had the information he needed. He could work the rest out while he fought. The Stumper roared, and Rain had to wait for the noise to stop before speaking again. "Start attacking! I'm going to open up on it. Let me know if it gets too hot."

"Here goes!" Mlem shouted. This time after the Stumper swiped at him, he retaliated with a smooth, sweeping cut, tracking a line along its arm before he darted away. The Stumper howled in pain, losing a decent sliver of health. Either Mlem's sword was enchanted, or he'd used some skill to add damage to the strike. Probably both.

Rain set his questions aside and let Immolate off the chain.

Immolate (10/10)
175-200 heat (fcs) damage per second to entities and environment
Sufficient damage causes ignition
Range: 2 meters
Cost: 50 mp/s

His armor glowed red in the darkness beneath his cloak, and the Stumper bellowed in agony as the magic washed over it. It whirled away from Mlem, sending its spongy fist straight toward Rain as soon as it spotted him. Rain dodged away, and Mlem took the opportunity to stab it viciously in the back of the leg. His strike took off even more of the creature's health this time, easily matching the cumulative damage from Immolate over the last few seconds.

Rain kept up the aura, sweat rolling down his face beneath his visor as scalding air pressed in on him. The air temperature had already reached a peak and stabilized, but the heat was finding its way in through the gaps in his armor, and the metal itself would slowly be warming.

Ten seconds.

Twenty.

Thirty.

Still, Rain didn't drop the spell. He was keeping an eye on his own health, in addition to the Stumper's. He had only taken a point or two of damage, his equipment and his own resistance to Heat sufficient to protect him, at least for now. Mlem, likewise, hadn't complained. He had switched his stance and started chopping at the monster's legs like a woodsman, only taking breaks to dodge the creature's retaliatory strikes.

As the monster's health neared zero, it suddenly burst into flames. Mlem shouted and jumped back as the burning monster went mad, flailing its arms wildly. Orange light flashed from the spots on its cap, visible even through the brightness of the flames.

Rain dropped Immolate and joined Mlem in getting as far away as possible.

The explosion that followed was underwhelming, more gasoline than C4, but it nevertheless ended the fight. The last of the Stumper's health vanished, accompanied by the ding of a kill notification as its burning body fell to the ground.

Your party has defeated [Fungiform Stumper], Level 11
Your Contribution: 47%
0 Experience Earned

"Well," Mlem said, edging around the smoking pile of mushroom flesh. "That happened." He moved next to Rain, staring at the flames. "You have got to have one of the strangest fighting styles I've ever seen. You just stand next to things and wait for them to die? What the hells is that? Where is your sense of flair?"

Rain shrugged. "It isn't about looking impressive. It's about winning. Besides, I'm not much of a fighter."

Mlem laughed. "Ah, well. If it works, it works, but it's just so...boring. Also, you didn't win. I won. Fifty-three percent."

Rain snorted. "It wasn't a contest, Mlem." He started chilling the pair of them down with Refrigerate, just to take the edge off.

Unexpectedly, someone started clapping slowly. Rain whirled, seeing Val standing behind them, a broad grin on his face.

"Not bad, Rain," Val said, crossing his arms.

"Who the hells are you?" said Mlem.

Val laughed, shaking his head. He reached into the neck of his jacket and fished out his bronze Guild plate, dropping it to dangle freely on his chest.

"Val," Rain said, narrowing his eyes. "Were you there the whole time?" Detection had told him that there'd been people around, but he hadn't exactly had time to search for anyone specific or keep track of them during the fight.

"Yup," Val said, grinning as he summoned his Lunar Orb. "I wanted to see how you'd do, and I'm low on mana anyway, which is why I came looking for you. I'd have helped if you needed it, so don't give me that look."

"Clearly, you two know each other," Mlem said, sheathing his sword as Rain tried to decide whether he was mad or relieved. "Shall we discuss this back at the bathhouse?" He wrinkled his nose. "The aroma of burning Fungiform leaves much to be desired."

"Yeah, let's go," Rain said tiredly. He could have used Purify to deal with the smoke, but it didn't appear to be toxic, the fire likely having neutralized the spores. Rain shook his head, activating Essence Well to send Val what little mana he had left. "I'm worried about the workers."

"I've saved a few of them," Val said, a more serious expression settling onto his face as he fell into step beside Rain and Mlem as they made their way back to the barricade. He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at the smoking remains of the Stumper. "You won't believe how they've been trying to handle those. They're crazier than I am."

Tallheart grunted as the Stumper slammed its arm into his back. He skidded from the impact, his boots leaving deep furrows in the earth. With a frown, he turned to face the monster, narrowing his eyes in annoyance as it swung at him again.

Raising his arm, Tallheart caught the creature's downward swing with his hand, his gauntleted fingers digging deep into the spongy flesh. The monster roared in pain, but Tallheart didn't stop there. He pulled, dragging the monster down so he could ram his other fist into its shoulder. Once, twice, three times, he struck, blasting through the creature's health and weakening the joint. He ripped the arm free, the monster spinning away and falling to the ground. Without hesitation, Tallheart transferred the mushroom's arm into his other hand, then brutally battered the creature into the ground with its own limb.

No active skills were involved. Tallheart had none suited for the task, nor did he need any. It took less than five seconds to reduce the monster to a pulpy mess using brute force alone.

Tallheart held up the remains of the arm, then took a bite, chewing speculatively as he tossed the rest away. Fungiform was a delicacy, but he preferred it roasted, and this wasn't the time to be eating. He shook his head, then reached to his belt to retrieve his hammer from the loop at his waist. He had a job to do.

With a single blow, he felled the elm tree that he'd been considering before he'd been interrupted. He waited for it to fall, then lifted one end and began dragging it, his feet churning up the earth beneath the snow as he fought for traction. *Leverage is always the issue.*

Things became easier once he got the tree free of the forest and could maneuver it up onto his shoulder. He plowed a wide furrow through the snow, heading back to the Lee, unconcerned by the monsters that lurked in the darkness.