

## The Search for Sentience

"There you are.." I cackle quietly as I sniff the familiar putrid stench of toxic mold on a humid day. The quiet footsteps that were masked by the sound of rushing water quickly turns into echoes in the empty tunnels of the sewers. My heart skipped a beat as I move closer and the stench grows stronger. I began to salivate, imagining its warm moisture on my tongue, its sour and bitter delight on my taste buds...

"Focus!" I thought to myself. The sewer king wasn't here to simply enrich himself in the beauty below. He had a much more important job. My pace slows as I gaze upon the source. The center of the fungus was in front of me and half my size. I placed my hand on the soft texture and imagined its color in the dark: a sickly green. I grab a metal scraper from my pouch and a small empty cask and began work.

When I was finished, the cask was filled to the very top. I set the cask and the metal scraper back in the pouch and took out my journal and my green crayon. Inside the journal's stained yellow pages was a checklist for the concoction I planned to make.

I check next to the ingredient "Squirty Mold" and made my way through the tunnels. "I'm almost there!" I squeak joyfully, looking at the fur behind my back. "Almost there to my army!"

The fleas and roaches that inhabited my skin showed no response.

"Heh.. After today, I'll have Subjects MY size! Maybe even bigger.. Hopefully it's bigger! What do you think?"

Still no response.

I open the journal again and looked at the list. "Hm.. you're right.. something seems to be missing here. Life of mold.. Structure of metal.. Stench of sludge.. what el-"

"Crack!" I froze. The ominous sound of glass echoes in my empty tunnels. My fur quickly camouflages me on instinct as I made my way to its source. In the distance, I saw a faint green light of a lanterns and on the wall was the shadow of a human laughing at nothing. I repulsed at the figure, witnessing a lesser surface dweller taunt me. It laughs at enjoyment for invading what should be MY land, MY turf, MY kingdom, but then I chuckled at its audacity. All invaders will suffer the same fate down here by my hand.

I tip-toe closer, seeing it in full. It was a brown male in overalls with goggles on its head and a flask in its hand. It carried with him a black bag whose content was hidden by its dark color. The human was stealing. Heh.. It was stealing from the sewer king! My! They never learn! My hands shake as they approach the weapons on my back. I raise the venomous cask... and slam it to the ground! "IT'S ME!" I shout as the gas began to expand. I raise my crossbow. One

shot. Two shots. It squirms on the spot. Three shots. Four shots! The thief pathetically gasps for air while its legs are pulsing! Five shots! Six shots!! It lays limp on the ground, and the bottle drops from its hand!! The finger twitches for life, but it lays still as I pin the body to the ground.

" Hehe.. Thought you can get away, and look at you all SKEWERED! HAHA!" I cackle. "Now... let's see what's rightfully mine.." I open the bag and peer inside only to find.. bottles. Bottles of an unfamiliar, clear substance with the name "*Sh-i'm-mer*". I open one of them and sniff it carefully. It smelled of some sort of acid, bringing pain to my nose at the first whiff. Then, I smiled. "Strength of Sh-i'm-mer!" I shout victoriously.

I scurry over to my lair as quickly as I could. I went inside a large pipe to see a room filled with piles upon piles of valuable stuff the humans decided to throw away. In its center was the light of a green lantern dangling from a chain and a single cauldron, made from the remains of a golden steam golem. I lit the fire underneath with a spare match in my pouch and poured all of the ingredients together. I grab a nearby metal crowbar and mixed and mixed and mixed. The liquid's color turned to bright green and the acidic stench filled the room. I knew it was going to work! It has to work! As it boiled, I took from my many pouches a rat, a rat that came to one of my traps and willingly took the initiative to be the first.

"Don't be scared.. you'll live!" I reassured the rat as he squeaked for his life. I hold him over my creation and thrust him in. He squirmed and squirmed as his screams are never heard. I can feel him pulsating.. Was he growing bigger? I thought I felt the spine expanding as I held him. Yes! Yes! It was working! It has to be, but then.. he stopped moving. Stopped growing. I took it out, and I didn't see the plague rat mutate into something like myself, just another dead rat to add to the pile.

I throw the body to the floor with the other rat bones and buried my frustrated head into my hands. "How could this be?" I scream. "It has all of the components: the stench of brown sludge, the life of mold and mushrooms, the structure of metal! It's supposed to work! It's supposed to-"

"Clank!" A metal sound was heard. I raise my ears and imagined what it could be. A human trying to steal from the sewers? Another steam golem sent to take all of my materials? It's always surface dwellers meddling, stealing what's mine!! They know what I'm doing, and they're ruining everything! It's them... not me...

I grab my crossbow and ran to the sound, ready to fire at...

.....Where is it? It was here!