

Chrysalis 1131

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Chapter 1131: What To Say

Granin felt as if he had a headache coming on. Scratch that, he felt like a boulder split straight down the middle. Shock after shock had come from that gigantic ant until he felt as if the ground were shaking under his feet. It was even more aggravating that Anthony had no idea what he had become. To the people of the Cult, an Ancient was a god. A peerless being of almost fathomless power. The strongest creatures on Pangera, each and every one of them could destroy cities, or devastate armies, with contemptuous ease. And they had, during the Rending.

Anthony had become a proto-ancient, a demi-god, with power beyond what a normal monster would have. Every Mythic monster was powerful, but what he was now capable of went beyond that. Granin was certain that the young monster had no idea just what the Cathedral inside him would enable.

The ant had described the torrent of power that came flooding through the Vestibule. Hundreds of thousands, possibly more than a million ants were currently within range, so the flow of Will was doubtless enormous.

But the Colony was only what... a year old? Maybe two? What would happen in ten? Or fifty? With enough mutations, Anthony might be able to fit a *billion* of his siblings within the range of the Vestibule. What then?

After a long life working toward a single goal, to have that goal suddenly so close to hand was almost painful to Granin. The weight of the combined Cult members, from all of the Cults around Pangera, over thousands of years, pressed down on his shoulders.

Success here could stave off a second Rending. Would bring fruition to the grand design of the Ancients.

Failure would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"No pressure," he rumbled to Corun and Torrina, "but we need to give Anthony some advice, and it had better be good. He's finally opened up to us, we can't let him down."

"My mind is completely blank," Corun stated, still in shock. "All I can think about is centipedes."

"What? *Why?*"

"I don't know!"

Granin turned to his youngest student, almost in desperation.

"Torrina, please tell me you have something."

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes clearly critical of him. Her stare asked the question 'aren't *you* the teacher?' but she answered anyway.

"There's a few things we can suggest. I have a few ideas about what he might do with his acid gland, and there are some Skills that Anthony has definitely overlooked. Predictive Thinking would be an excellent addition, given his ability to see slightly into the future."

"That's a great idea, actually," Granin praised her, calming himself down a little. "What about the Nave, though? He wants ideas about mutating it."

"It would take a long time to patiently go through all of the options with Anthony, and we all know he isn't patient enough for that."

"Very true.... Any thoughts, Corun?"

"... Why do they have so many legs? And the claws as well? Centipedes are... so weird."

"Forget him. Thoughts on the Nave, Torrina?"

"His previous mutations concentrated the energy he received through the Vestibule, and that's not a bad thing. I think he should strongly consider taking that mutation at least once. His most powerful asset is the Altar, and that mutation will allow him to squeeze more power out of it. After that, he should carefully consider mutations that accentuate the unique properties of the Nave. It allows him to communicate with those contained within, right? Perhaps he can create more 'seats' which will allow him to host more 'orbs of Will'. Instant communication, regardless of distance, is absurdly strong."

"Not necessarily in a fight, but for coordination and communication, it could be invaluable. Perhaps there's an option which will allow others to talk back to him?"

"Probably not necessary, given the number of mind constructs he can host," Torrina refutes. "It would be trivial for him to check in on everyone within the Nave every five minutes."

"Good point. Well done keeping a cool head." Granin turned a hard frown at Corun who still seemed lost to the winds. "This idiot is going to get a stern talking to."

"Do you have any other Skill suggestions? There's a couple more I could suggest, but spreading out too thin is a real risk."

"Better to have higher rank Skills than many low-ranked ones. That's true."

The big golgari pondered for a moment.

"I've got some stuff which will work well for him right now. Let's go back."

They had to prod Corun a bit to get him moving, but the three of them were able to move back to the table at which Anthony was waiting. The ant was an intimidating sight; the force of his aura, even when he wasn't actively flexing his Will, was unshakable. Even as a physical presence, he was domineering. His diamond carapace gleamed a faint purple, along with his mandibles, and the light almost seemed to get *pulled* into him. Sitting on the ground, his legs propped up, the monster felt incredibly *massive*. Just how much did he weigh now? Probably a lot more than they thought.

[Thanks for waiting, Anthony. We didn't want to waste your time, but we don't want to be reckless with what we suggest. Given more time, we can cook up some more interesting combinations,] Torrina apologises for them and the big ant waves one antenna to brush it off.

[No problem. I've got a little time, and poking at people in the Nave is more entertaining than I expected.]

Please, Endless Worm, do not let me wind up in that thing, Granin silently prayed. Having Anthony pop up in his thoughts at random moments sounded like a nightmare.

They discussed Torrina's ideas for the acid array that Anthony had built, as well as their thoughts on his Nave, and then went on to suggest some Skills which would work well with his current capabilities.

[Predictive Thinking will really help push your advantage with foresight,] Granin said. [The drawback is that the Skill takes a lot of brainpower, especially at the higher ranks, but you should have enough to make full use of the Skill.]

[That sounds good!] Anthony clacked his mandibles happily. He'd been very pleased with the acid plan and everything else only seemed to make him happier.

[Then, there's a few other General Skills that you could really make use of. Efficient Movement pairs well with Stamina to help preserve your energy. It may not be especially useful for you, given the Vestibule, but the two Skills will fuse at rank 5. It's a common pickup for many monsters.

Observance is a slightly unusual Skill. Very weak at lower ranks, but it can help you track enemies in a chaotic fight. It effectively improves your visual tracking. Organs and mutations are far better at doing this, but you don't have any of those, so this Skill could help out.

Lastly, I think Coordination will round out your basics. Again, there are organs and mutations that can make a huge impact on body control, and those are frequently taken for up close fighting monsters. In fact, I think Tiny should seriously consider taking one *as well* as getting this Skill.

We could go into more, but weighing you down with too much stuff to train wouldn't help in the end. You've seen for yourself just how much more powerful rank five, and especially rank six Skills can be. None of our suggestions are all that radical, but they'll help you do what you're doing now a little bit better.]

[Sounds great!] Anthony enthused and Granin could tell he was busy purchasing those Skills already. [I'll be back in a few weeks to check in again. Thanks, all!]

With a cheery wave, Anthony retreated from the table, turned, and skittered off into the distance, leaving Granin and Torrina feeling exhausted, while Corun still drifted, lost in the clouds.

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Chapter 1132: Further Conversations

Well, chatting to the golgari proved to be less painful than I had expected. I'd half expected them to start poring over my options one by one, looking for optimal combos, or have me put together complex Skill schemes that would take a hundred years to train up into a set of fusions.

Thankfully, they restrained themselves. As nice as it would be to have that sort of thing in my back pocket, I just don't have time to sit back and train. At this point in my family's development, they still need protecting from the big bad things out there, and I fully intend to be the ant that they can rely on.

That means squashing these tier eight monsters running amok here in the third stratum, then going down to the fourth and making sure our grip on that stratum is secure. Eventually, the Colony will grow

powerful enough that I'm no longer needed to babysit them, but for the time being, I've committed to being their protector.

That's the commitment I made when I selected the Altar of Self.

So with a few suggestions locked away and a couple of nice General Skills added to my list, I start to climb up the pillar from the top of the nest and make my way toward Roklu.

Of course, with Granin's thoughts ringing in my ear, I make sure to continue practising as I go. The sub-brains keep churning away at Gravity Mana and managing the gravity construct, which will prove to be my ace in the hole once I get it strong enough. I can't wait to see what sort of nonsense becomes possible once I reach rank six with it, but that's a long way off.

Training Grip is another thing I need to focus on. By the time I reach the plate-city of Roklu, my poor claws are at the edge of their limits and my legs feel like they might just drop off. Holy moly am I *heavy*. Next evolution, I need to ensure I don't skip leg day and beef up my six little legs, not to mention my poor claws.

If the energy cost is minimal, I may even consider making them mutable so they stand a better chance of holding my weight! Crawling around upside down is just way too hard now!

After a short rest, I make my way into the city and start looking for the demon that I want to find. I haven't spoken to Al for a little while, but I've heard he's still floating around in Roklu, and I eventually find him in his house.

Demon houses are interesting. They aren't like a human house as I experienced them in my past life, or even what I've seen of them in this world. A human house would have furniture, food, storage, bedrooms, all that normal stuff, but the demons don't really need any of that. They aren't communal eaters, so there isn't a table. There aren't even cupboards to store food. You can't really store Biomass in the traditional sense; instead, there's something similar to a market where the demons go to grab food, which they usually eat on the spot. Like most monsters, demons need to sleep, except, ironically, the Sleep Demons, but they don't have beds, they just flop down in their house like any sensible monster would.

Why then, do they have houses at all? Well, that all boils down to their obsession. To a demon, a house is essentially a place to put all the stuff they need to feed their obsession. Pride Demons fill theirs with carvings of themselves, or paintings of themselves, or tapestries of themselves, you get the idea. Wealth Demons hoard precious resources. Murder demons hoard... you know what, I won't go into it.

For Al, he hoards knowledge. His little house is stuffed floor to ceiling with books and it's in there, flicking through his precious library with great caution, (he is after all, a flaming eyeball), that I find him.

[Hey there, Al. How's things?]

[*Pleasant*. The Colony has procured new texts for me to peruse and I am fully engaged in this pursuit.]

I feel like he's telling me to buzz off.

[Don't be like that, Al! I've got some juicy tidbits to trade with you. A few tender morsels of information that you may find completely irresistible!]

That great, lidded eye turns toward me, flaring with heat as his intrigue grows. Now that I've got his interest, I know better than to fail to deliver.

[I've got a name that might interest you. Does Torrifex ring any bells?]

Al stills for a moment, then flares, the heat rising rapidly within his house.

[Whoa there! You're going to burn your books!]

I quickly pump out some ice mana and create a few spikes, trying to cool the air down. It works, well enough that there isn't a fire at least.

[Hmmm. Thank you. Let us continue this discussion outside.]

We remove ourselves to the street outside, the tier seven demon smouldering away. Thankfully, he doesn't close his eye in disgust. I've seen that once before, and I'd like to never see it again.

[How did you know?] he demands of me and I shrug my antennae.

[I had a feeling you might know a little something about them. You collect knowledge, right? And I suspected that you were a bit older than you might let on. It's possible that you might know a little something about a big demon like that.]

I can feel Al's attention boring into me.

[And how did you learn that name? Torrifex has been asleep for almost five hundred years.]

[I fought him. Sent him packing after cleaning his clock.]

[... Interesting.]

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Chapter 1133: Old Friends

I mean... you want me to leave messages for EVERY caste now? Give me a break. What do I even have to say?! Really, this is my fault. The moment I did the first, every member of the council was going to come after me, asking me to leave a nugget of wisdom for their followers.

Listen well, hatchling, Don't let your siblings hassle you into things you don't want to do.

I mean, it's hard for me to say no to Bella and Ellie. The Core Shapers are near and dear to my heart, because the pets that I raised became such dear friends and reliable allies. I can't imagine what would have happened had I been forced to face the Dungeon by myself.

Treasure your pets. In fact, don't even think of them as pets. They aren't disposable, they aren't less than you are. They're your sword and shield, just as you are theirs. Don't even think of them as friends and allies, but as members of the family.

- The Eldest's message to the Core Shapers.

It's not easy to read a giant floating, fiery eyeball, but I can tell that Al is intrigued. Mainly because my eyeballs feel like they're boiling from the heat pouring off him.

[Answer a question for me, Al. Why the heck are you a burning eyeball if you're a knowledge demon? I'm not trying to pry, but it doesn't seem to line up. Shouldn't you be some sort of flame demon or something?]

He radiates heat like a mini-sun, for goodness' sake. What does flame have to do with knowledge?!

[I was a type of envy demon in the past, but took on the aspect of fire along with my desire for knowledge in my evolution to tier seven.]

[So you changed significantly in your last evolution?]

[Indeed.]

I guess that makes sense. I turn my attention to Invidia floating nearby, his eye fixated on Al. I wonder what he'll turn into during his next evolution? Right now, he's envious, of pretty much everything and everyone. How will that obsession change? Personally, I wouldn't mind if he became a little less broadly focused. A bridge to cross when we come to it.

[Now then. Time to get down to business. You used to live a lot deeper in the stratum, and you've been collecting information for goodness knows how long. I figured if anyone knows anything about these long sleeping demons, then it was going to be you. Care to share what you know?]

Al floats for a little while, contemplating his thoughts before he replies.

[I have... *some* understanding of the demon of which you speak, and his sisters.]

Sisters? Perhaps he means the other two?

[Nice! Considering the fact that I'm going to have to beat all three of them, any information you can give me will be welcome.]

[Are you... *certain*, that you will be able to defeat them?]

[I already sent Torrifex running once, why wouldn't I be able to do it again? And against three times as many monsters?]

Maybe that *will* be difficult. But I'll work it out.

[Hmmmmm. I will tell you, but there will be a price.]

Of course there is.

[Let's hear it then. Hopefully, there won't be any price gouging.]

[What is... *price gouging*?]

[Don't get distracted, we're already in the middle of a transaction. Unless you want that to be the payment?]

[... No. When you go to confront the Heralds, I want you to take me with you. That is my price.]

That's... a little unexpected, but the help will certainly be worth it. Though, I'd better make sure that it *is* help.

[You don't plan on allying with them, do you?]

The flaming eye flashes.

[They... would *not* welcome my help. That is not my intention.]

[Well, all right then. You can tag along. Now spill the beans.]

[*What are beans?*]

[Concentrate, dammit!]

[Ah, yes. I am sorry. Allow me to explain what I know of the Heralds.]

Al composes his thoughts, fire flickering around his eye.

[Arconidem is known to cultivate powerful demons that act in his interests. These are his Heralds. When he sleeps, they rest, hidden in the deepest reaches of the stratum, in places thick with mana to sustain them. When he wakes, he sends them to carry out his wishes amongst the demons. Creating havoc, driving out any non-demons, these are his usual goals. When they grow too strong to remain at this level of the Dungeon, they are called down to his court, by his side.]

Interesting. So that implies that these aren't the first round of servants the big jerk has had running around, but just the latest.

[Torrifex, Pyrixan and Somonax were last awake five hundred years ago, which corresponds to Arconidem's last period of activity. It was at that time I became acquainted with them.]

[Wait a second. You're over five hundred years old?!]

[I am.]

[How in the heck are you not tier eight, then?!]

[Evolving to tier eight would make remaining on my home stratum... difficult. So I have not.]

[Wait, but you *could*?]

[Yes.]

Holy. Moly. This guy has been sitting at level one gigabillion or whatever it takes for hundreds of years?! Yikes!

[So are your Skills at rank fifty or something?]

With hundreds of years to train. It boggles the mind.

[No. Raising Skills to a rank higher than your tier of evolution can be... dangerous. Our bodies are not strong enough to withstand them.]

I suppose that makes sense. If I raised Void Chomp to the eighth rank, I can easily imagine it being so strong my own face would explode from the pressure. That's something I've never thought about, and it's something Granin never brought up, but then, why would they? I don't have a Skill even remotely close to matching my evolution tier.

[I can also tell you what species the three Heralds are, though I cannot explain to you their abilities.]

[How in the name of heck can you tell me their species?!]

[Because I was almost one of them. Arconidem wished me to become his fourth Herald.]

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Chapter 1134: Heraldry

[Wait, so you were contacted by the big cheese himself to become one of his lackeys? And this was like... five-hundred years ago?]

[That is... correct. It was... difficult... to refuse, but I did not wish to surrender my obsession. Arconidem would not have allowed me to pursue knowledge freely.]

[I imagine he was super impressed.]

[Quite the opposite.]

[I know... it's... never mind. So there's only three Heralds right now, since you refused to be the fourth?]

[No. Only three demons, no matter how powerful, could not influence all of the third stratum. There are others, but these three are the oldest and the strongest. Soon, they will evolve to tier nine and no longer be able to sustain themselves in the third.]

[Any chance we can just wait this problem out, then? If they keep rampaging around, they'll eventually reach max level and then be out of our business.]

[They would not be forced to descend until *after* the wave. Would you risk three tier nine demons running amok in your Colony's lands?]

Uhhh... no.

[So that's off the table.]

[I recommend the opposite approach. We should hunt them down and destroy them before they have a chance to grow stronger.]

[Cool plan, I'm down. Now give me the gossip. You know about these three? Their species and evolutions? The tricks and tips?]

[I can give some general information. We will not go into battle blindly.]

[Awesome. Invidia? Try and remember all this, if you could.]

[I willsss remember all of it!]

[No need to make it competitive, but that'd be great. Thanks, Invidia.]

All eyes turn to... the big eye, who stares back at us, unblinking.

[First and foremost is Torrifex. At tier eight, he became a Pure Demon, which I speculate may be the path that Arconidem himself took to ascension.]

[Oh snap. So he's another proto-ancient in the making?]

[I think... not. If Torrifex were to evolve all the way to match his god, and I do not know what tier that would be, how would he hope to defeat a creature so much older than he? Also, if Arconidem holds power over the demons, he is unlikely to want to share it.]

That's a good call. I don't feel like any of the Ancients I've heard about are into sharing and caring all that much.

[As a Pure Demon, Torrifex embodies all that is typically demon and the nature of this stratum. As such, he possesses great control over fire and smoke, along with brute physical violence.]

[He really struggled to cut through my carapace, but the fire-blasts were something else,] I muse.

[I believe that Torrifex did not show his full strength against you. Though it is possible I am wrong. I don't know how strong you have become.]

The big eye gleams with avarice at the thought of learning about my capabilities. Probably another reason he wants to tag along.

[Let's get back to the enemy.]

[Of course. The most fearsome of Torrifex's powers is his mastery of fire, which he can wield in any number of ways. His entire body can ignite into demon flame, and I would not recommend being within reach if it does.]

[Gotcha.]

[His sisters, Pyrixan and Somonax. Pyrixan is an Empowered Ash Demon. Her aura of destruction is so strong, it can break an enemy down to nothing just for drawing too close to her form. Her power will eat away at anything she touches, annihilating it completely. If she gets ahold of you, escape as quickly as you can.]

[Oof. That sounds tough to deal with. Can she apply the effect at range?]

[She can, but it loses much of its power. The closer your proximity, the more deadly the danger.]

[Right, not a fan of that.]

Ash is a native element to the third stratum, and it's an absolute pain to deal with. Little flecks of ash fly everywhere, mixed in with the smoke and dust in the air, but when they touch a wall or bump into your carapace, they start to eat into it. If your buildings aren't made of the right stuff, or treated in the correct way, they'll fall over in a week.

Luckily, my diamond carapace has been dense enough, and regenerates quickly enough, that I don't really notice. It's a pain for Tiny, but Invidia keeps him healed up. Crinis has to constantly replace small patches of flesh to make up for the losses, but the demons themselves are immune. Something about their tough black skin resists the effect.

The home field advantage.

[Somonax is a Greater Massacre Demon.]

[That sounds... rough.]

[Indeed. She wields many, many blades, each formed from the blood of her enemies. In terms of cutting power, she is far above even Torrifex. I do not recommend you test your carapace against her.]

[I may not get a choice.]

[True. Her mind is lost in a killing frenzy most of the time. Her obsession beats strong within her, and that makes her powerful. The more we demons are in sync with our obsessions, the greater our strength.]

[I guess that means you're a pretty powerful chap then, doesn't it? I can't imagine you could get any more obsessed with knowledge.]

The big, floating eyeball considers my words for a moment before bobbing a little.

[There are always... limits. To throw oneself as deep as Somonax has, will grant great strength, but to all intents and purposes, she is lost to her need for massacre and violence. Were I to do the same, then little would remain of me outside of my drive for knowledge. I would become as she has, a thoughtless thing, drifting and aimless, consumed utterly.]

[Seems like that would make it *harder* to get knowledge, not easier.]

[Indeed. I must have control over my thoughts and emotions, otherwise I will learn fewer things. If not for that, perhaps I too would have given myself over to Arconidem and surrendered my obsession.]

The more I learn about the demons, the more I worry about them. They really do have a rough time of it, in more ways than one. Of all the monsters I've encountered in the Dungeon, I feel like they get the worst deal. As I ponder their harsh lives, I can't help but turn my eyes to Invidia. The poor little dude didn't have the best start in life, being captured young and raised by golgari shapers.

I wonder what he will become obsessed with as he evolves and how deeply it will draw him in. The idea of my little green-eyed monster losing himself to some sort of fugue state isn't a pleasant one.

[Alright then. I think we have what we need. Let's roll out!]

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Chapter 1135: Against the Tide

"How are the demon traps holding?"

"Barely!"

"Then reinforce them, dammit!"

"I can't just poke them with an antenna and then they become stronger. I need time to design, materials to build with, ants to do the building. Those are huge construction projects, we can't just 'reinforce' them!"

"Right, sorry."

Sloan rubbed her antennae against her carapace, trying to calm herself down. The carver, Carpentant, also soothed herself as they took the temperature out of the argument.

Which wasn't easy inside the third right now. With the mana thickening by the hour, the air only grew hotter and hotter, to the point it had grown oppressive. Ants didn't mind a bit of heat, not at all, but they weren't amazing at regulating their temperatures. If things got much worse, they'd need to distribute enchanted equipment to every member of the Colony in the stratum.

"Are the farms at least producing cores and Biomass? They're working?"

"Oh, they're working. Too well! There's so many demons crammed inside that we're getting double the amount of cores we expected. The workers in charge of maintaining and operating the farms are overwhelmed, but there aren't enough of us to help them. We need more ants!"

"If you get the numbers you need, will that stop the farms from breaking?"

Carpentant thought for a long moment. It wasn't a simple question, but the wrong answer could have grave implications. It was already a difficult proposition to contain the mess that the plains had become. If the monsters within the farms broke out....

"If you give me what I'm asking for, plus another ten percent, we'll have enough to properly run the farms *and* look to reinforce the structure."

Sloan almost collapsed as pain shot through her head.

"That's *thousands* of ants," she managed to squeeze out. "Everyone is desperately short staffed right now."

Carpentant shrugged.

"That's how many it's going to take. You're the one who has to distribute resources, not me. If you tell me no, I'll go back and make the best of it, but I think we both know what will happen."

The farms would fail, causing greater chaos on the plains and costing the ants an enormous haul of cores and Biomass, resources they desperately needed.

"I'll get you the ants you need," she promised, "but they're likely to be fresh graduates. Is that alright?"

"It'll have to do," Carpentant grumbled. "Feel sorry for them being thrown into a mess like this."

"It's not what I would have wanted for them either, but I'll provide extra security as well to make sure you all stay safe."

The irritated carver froze before she nodded with respect.

"That's appreciated."

When Carpentant rushed out of the chamber, Sloan sighed and went back to her planning documents, scratching out a few lines of scent and replacing them. The next wave of reinforcements from above had been allocated already, but now had to be changed. Again.

It was frustrating, but despite the over the top allowances the Colony had made when planning to resist the wave in the third stratum, the Dungeon had surprised them yet again.

After scribbling away using the new 'scent pen', she completed her new distribution plan and put it down with a sigh.

"Better go check on the fortress," she muttered as she rose up from her chair.

Ant chairs were becoming more and more common among the various nests, despite the need for varying sizes. They didn't really *need* a chair, they were perfectly content to work while standing, but it felt nice to rest the legs every now and again.

Even Smithant had created a custom built, swivelling chair that could rise up and down and wheel around her smithy. She claimed it freed up more legs to work with, which was another aspect to the rate of chair uptake.

Outside of her office, Sloan was immediately enveloped by the flood of messengers. A constant stream ran in both directions, toward the wall and deeper into the nest, requesting medical treatment, or supplies, or any number of things. She was kept updated, of course, but having a description was never quite the same as seeing the situation for herself.

She slipped into line and began to race along the paths, keeping pace with the ants on her lane.

A new innovation had been to divide the wider passages within the Colony into 'lanes', each with its own designated speed. This particular passage was six lanes wide, three in either direction, with another six on the roof, split the same way, and she was barely able to keep up in the middle one. To her right, scouts flashed past her as if she were standing still, whereas on her left, soldiers rumbled along at a much slower pace, slowed down by their bulk.

All for efficiency.

When she emerged from the nest, she found herself only a kilometre from the outer wall. The area at this exit was a staging ground and ants bustled all over the surface of the nest. Within the grand fortress, there were well over a hundred thousand of her siblings at present, every one of them dedicated to the preservation of the nest.

A general rushed up as soon as she saw Sloan heading to the wall.

"General! What brings you to the front?" she asked, snapping a one antenna salute.

"I wanted to take a look for myself," Sloan said, saluting back. "The situation is difficult to grasp from the reports."

"I can imagine. I don't believe what I'm writing half the time. Come and have a look."

The two chatted back and forth in the brusque manner of war-focused ants as they drew closer to the wall. The fighting was deafeningly loud this close, explosions, fire, ice, stone and whatever else the Colony could muster was thrown into the face of the neverending demon wave. With little effort, Sloan hauled herself up the wall and gazed out into the mouth of madness.

"In the name of the Eldest...." she trailed off.

"It sure is something," the general agreed.

The wall was enormous, fifty metres tall and twenty thick, covered in ant defenders who battled hard to prevent the demons from finding purchase on the fortification.

What Sloan saw beyond the wall... was an ocean. An ocean of monsters that heaved and thrashed as if gripped by a storm. Waves rose and clashed into each other, one devouring the other and rolling on through the mass until it was overcome by an even larger current.

Every now and again, one such wave would crash into the wall, sending demons flying and scurrying up the side and into the waiting jaws of the Colony.

It was absurd, insane even. And it had only just begun.

"Oh, speaking of the Eldest."

Sloan turned a little to focus on the dark purple patch of light that was starting to move away from the wall. Inside, she could barely make out the gigantic ant effortlessly carving a path through the roiling mass. She thought an antenna popped up and waved, then there came a flash of purple light.

In an instant, every monster within a hundred metres of the wall was flattened, crushed into nothing. The defenders had a few seconds to wonder what could possibly have happened, then the ocean surged again, and they were back to fighting.

Sloan couldn't believe it.

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Chapter 1136: Against the Tide pt 2

"MORE POWER, DAMMIT!"

"We don't have any more! We don't have the power!"

"It's so close. So close! Empty the tanks, we need every drop!"

"But... but that's madness!"

"It's not madness... it's BRILLIANT!"

Electricity crackled, lightning flashed and sparks fell like rain from overhead as the ants scurried to follow the orders of their leader. Atop her observation spire, Brilliant cackled, her mandibles snapping together in a staccato rhythm as the flashes and explosions lit her from below, projecting her demented shadow onto the wall.

"Th-th-the b-backup m-m-matrix is collapsing!" Assistant whimpered.

"It's fine, we have three backups!"

"This IS the third backup!" Experimentant roared.

"Not to worry, I installed a secret fourth backup matrix and didn't tell you!"

"That's just a lie, isn't it?!"

Another explosion rocked the chamber and Brilliant teetered on the edge of her spire, a hair's breadth from losing her grip and falling into the swirling maelstrom of light below. The many-faceted eyes of the mage were filled with an unearthly glow, and for a long moment, Experimentant was convinced she'd finally lost her mind.

"Dump the tanks and then hit the cages!" she shouted and hundreds of lab ants rushed to follow her orders.

"Th-th-th-th-th-this will overflow the matrix for sure!" Assistant said.

"That's why I'm carrying you to the cages," Experimentant replied as she snatched up the smaller ant, threw her on her back and rushed to the blast cages.

"But who w-w-w-will save the leader?"

"I think she's beyond saving...."

The tanks of liquid mana emptied, sending the volatile substance flowing through the underground pipelines and into the gate matrix. As predicted, the matrix blew almost instantly, rocking the chamber once more and sending deadly blasts of unstable mana arcing through the air.

"I CAN SEE EVERYTHING!" Brilliant roared. "I CAN SEE IT ALL!"

The dimension mage was hanging upside down from her spire, so close to the unstable mass of power she could reach out and touch it. Within her heart, Experimentant said a quick farewell to the disturbed genius as Assistant cried out from her back.

"L-l-leader! Be c-c-careful!"

"BAH! CALL ME BRILLI-"

The gate flashed white, then expanded rapidly, enveloping the entire room in a second. Brilliant never got a chance to complete her statement.

Within the blast cages, the ants ducked for cover as stone and debris rained down from above. The chamber had been built to withstand magic detonations, but that last one had been beyond even what Brilliant was normally capable of.

It took five minutes before the room stopped shaking and Experimentant felt confident enough to emerge.

"Can we get a quick headcount? Sound off."

"I'm here," Brilliant said, emerging from the smoke.

"Of course you are..." Experimentant said flatly.

"Do you want to know how I survived?"

"Not really-"

"Because I'm Brilliant!" she boasted, slapping herself on the carapace with a front leg. "And that was the best experiment we've run so far! The results were spectacular!"

"Y-y-you're alive?" Assistant mumbled.

"Naturally! Come on, all of you out of the cages. We've got to check the data!"

"Haven't all of our sensor arrays melted?" Experimentant grumbled as she helped the rest of the lab-ants emerge from the protective cages.

"Only the main ones. But that's fine, I got a good look at what they were detecting anyway."

"Can I extract your brain to study it, then?" Experimentant said, then realised she said it out loud, went to apologise, then shrugged and kept doing what she was doing.

"No need," Brilliant remarked off hand, "I can project it if necessary. My brain, that is. Come on! We are on the verge of a breakthrough after this one, I can feel it!"

Filled with energy, the little mage raced off in the dust and began rummaging about, shouting and exclaiming all the while. Assistant hesitantly made her way from the perimeter as the rest of the staff began to clean up and rebuild.

"Come on, come on, come on, come on... YES!" Brilliant punched the air with her two front legs as an array embedded into a reinforced stone pillar flickered to life. "Someone extract the data from that, now!"

Then she rushed off to another one. When that refused to work, she savaged it with a bite before running to the next. In short order, she'd either repaired or fatally damaged all ten of the outer detectors and started poring over the printed scent-pages of information along with her team.

"Look at this! LOOK AT IT! The kick of power we got by infusing the liquid mana was *just* what we needed. See these readings? Are you seeing this!? Look at the stability!"

"Stability?!" Experimentant boggled. "The gate blew up in your face, and you're talking about stability?!"

"Of course it blew up! We didn't design the manifold array to handle that kind of power. I'm talking about *this*."

She stabbed a leg down on the page and Experimentant extended an antenna to check the data.

"Tha... that *is* odd."

For a period of time, the dimensional weave had been... *stable*.

"If w-w-w-we can replicate th-the conditions w-w-with a better array..." Assistant mumbled.

They'd have created a stable gate.

The thought hung heavy like a weighted balloon for a full second before Brilliant punctured it.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, poking through the rest of the pages. "We had to expend an *enormous* amount of mana, even committing our precious liquid mana reserves. I know exactly how fast that stuff accumulates, because I discovered the method to create it. It'll take months before we have that much energy on hand. Besides, do you *really* think that much power is necessary to form and operate a gate? If so, nobody would ever use them."

Experimentant flopped down for a moment before she drew herself back up. For a shining instant, she'd glimpsed the end goal.

"Fine. So what *have* we learned? Did this mess," she gestured to the exploded lab, "move us forward at all?"

"Of course it did! We stabilised the weave, which is our goal! All we need to do now, is find a more efficient method of doing so. Having succeeded once, even for an instant, is going to guide us on the right path. We've overcome our greatest hurdle! It's time to celebrate!"

"Oh? How are we going to celebrate?"

"Rebuilding the lab! I have some redesign ideas... and we'll need to adjust the matrix, of course. Plus I should probably put in something to dampen the explosive side effects...."

"Wait. You could have done that all along?!"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1137: Against the Tide pt 3

Leeroy's heart was afire.

"Onward, sisters!" she roared, her pheromones rolling across the battlefield like a wave. "Surely today, we will find that which we seek!"

"We seek!"

Her own call was obliterated by the reply of the massed Immortals. They numbered five thousand now, and for Leeroy, charging at the head of their ranks was like being locked to the peak of a collapsing mountain.

The reliquary of the fallen Immortal covered all of them in its blessed light, and Leeroy felt her soul singing as the massed enemies loomed ever larger in her eyes.

As the wave had gone on, the number of powerful monsters who descended from the sky, or rose from below the ground, or emerged from the depths of the lakes, never ceased to swell. The defences of the mountain had been as well constructed as the Colony could manage in the time they'd been given, but even with all their preparations, it proved impossible to clear the monsters from their mountain fortress fast enough.

So the number of rampaging monsters grew. And grew. And grew.

They fought each other, mostly, but the Colony strove desperately to push them away from the mountain-nest to prevent damaging it. Now that they had secured a safe haven on the fourth stratum, they would do anything to keep it.

Including letting the Immortals loose on the battlefield.

"We Seek!"

The tidal wave of pheromones released by the armoured column was so thick it hung like a fog over their heads. As they charged, that fog was caught by their legs and frames, swirling around their feet until it appeared as though they ran atop a cloud.

In the field ahead, Leeroy could see an immense pack of monsters thrashing and fighting before the gates of the nest. To many, it would have appeared like a nightmare brought to life, a whirlpool of death and destruction. Powerful monsters battled there. Sinuous lizards that swam through the air like eels, emerald scales glittering in the light; spirits of wind, water and earth towered a dozen metres into the air, manipulating the elements to their will. Horrific, bloated creatures of the deep, thrumming with a powerful aura and overwhelming life, forced themselves onto the land, fanged maws a bottomless pit of hunger.

To Leeroy and her followers, it was like a glimpse of heaven.

These monsters weren't tier one riffraff, freshly spawned, not knowing up from down. These were powerful, tier six and seven beasts, fat from feasting on the abundant weak prey the wave produced and desperate for something more satisfying. Some of them looked as if they could squash Leeroy with one stomp.

Please, she begged within her mind, *please squash me!*

Down the mountain they charged, gaining speed until she felt sure her legs, even as reinforced and mutated as they were, would snap from the strain. They held, but only just. As her spirit screamed for release, Leeroy braced herself, angled her carapace, and crashed into the first rank of the pack.

From a distance, it looked like an explosion. As the tip of the wedge slammed into the massed beasts fighting outside the gate, the first enemies simply vanished... popped like balloons as thousands of tons of massed ants smashed into them like an Ancient's fist. To Leeroy, this was the moment she lived for. Ahead, monster after monster stood, so closely packed together they may as well have been a solid mass. Behind, thousands and thousands of her sisters, each carrying ten tons of the Colony's finest steel, pushed her forward with the unstoppable momentum of a mountain collapsing.

She heard the metal of her armour scream as it warped under the pressure, felt her carapace buckle and crack as she was compressed between an unstoppable object and an immovable obstacle. This time, she hoped, it would be enough. This time, the enemy would stand firm and she, at the head of the formation, would be broken. No chance for the Phoenix Fire to build up and activate, no last second healing, only the ultimate sacrifice.

As ever, she was disappointed.

The first monsters gave way to the charge, pierced through by the metal-clad spear of the Colony, as did the second, as did the third. The Immortals trampled over the battlefield, running wild through and over their opponents until they finally ran out of steam, more than half of the horde flattened in their wake.

Then the fighting began.

Under the pulsing aegis of the reliquary, the Immortals fought with a frenzy that even the mana crazed monsters could not hope to match. They battled recklessly, leaving themselves wide open, throwing

themselves on their opponents' fangs and claws, intercepting projectiles with their bodies, paying no heed to their personal safety.

Yet... it didn't matter. Their carapaces were so thick, further protected by the finest layered and enchanted metal the forges of the Colony could produce, that it simply didn't matter if they protected themselves or not.

Leeroy fought alongside her sisters, trying to ignore the sour feeling building in her gut. A long serpent raised itself high, jaws open, a burning light flickering within, and she leapt, flinging herself into the open maw! Bright green fire licked her armour, burning her antennae, but she crashed into the monster's teeth and shattered them, sending it reeling back.

Not enough!

Nearby, one of her sisters had pinned down a writhing elemental of earth. The creature raised up a portion of itself, hardening the shifting stone into a shining spear that plunged down toward the Immortal's back.

Leeroy calculated the point at which the strike would reach its peak momentum and rushed forward, taking the blow at the perfect moment. The stone shattered, showering her with rubble, and she cursed.

NOT ENOUGH!

As the fight raged on, and small injuries accumulated, she knew that the Phoenix Fire organ was growing hotter within her, preparing to unleash its cleansing fire. If she wasn't struck down before it was ready, then she would have to hope enough monsters remained after her revival to finish her off again.

That didn't seem likely.

There has to be something.... Anything!

She turned again and saw a leviathan hauling itself out of the water. Surely, a tier seven beast, its open maw was the size of a human house, and its writhing tentacles were as thick as trees.

This was perfect!

"FOR THE COLONY!" she screamed, and rushed forward, her heart igniting with precious hope once more.

How could she fight something this strong? Impossible, not even the Eldest could fault her for making a flawless sacrifice play! Deep down, she knew the Eldest would tell her to simply retreat, but she squashed that voice. This was her moment!

The leviathan lunged forward, and Leeroy was there. Without hesitation, she flung herself into the creature's mouth, kicking with her legs to shove herself deeper into its gullet.

"Choke on me, you filth!" she cried, almost weeping with joy as she felt the powerful muscles of the beast begin to force her into its stomach. Everything around her went dark as she slid into its belly, and Leeroy rejoiced. Surely, in digesting her, the beast would be defeated. A glorious triumph!

Something else bumped into her in the dark of the monster's gut.

"For the Colony!" another Immortal cried.

"A brave sacrifice, sister!" she welcomed her comrade, and the two hugged amidst the sloshing acid.

Another bump.

"My life for the Colony!" the third Immortal cried.

"We-" before Leeroy could finish greeting the newcomer, another bump rang out in the dark.

"I sacrifice myself for the glory of the Colony!" the fourth Immortal declared.

She wasn't even finished with her cry before the fifth arrived, then the sixth.

"Wait...." Leeroy said, a sinking feeling in her abdomen.

Watching from the fortress wall, Advant could only pity the sea monster which had dared to reach land in front of the Immortals.

Armoured ant after armoured ant had forced themselves into its mouth until the beast had collapsed, writhing in pain as hundreds of those morons continued to try and pry open its mouth, which the leviathan resolutely kept shut. It was too late. Eventually, the acid in its belly triggered the Immortals' unique regeneration, and the tier seven monster was burned from the inside out.

Advant shook her head. Such a horrible way to go.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1138: Worm Dreams

Granin paced up and down in his chambers, mind buzzing. He'd thought that after centuries of living, nothing would surprise him anymore, yet here he was. Something glinted in the corner of his eye, and he caught himself in the mirror.

His second skin was as rough as ever, granite, plain and solid, covering his huge frame as it always had, though he thought he may have detected some crumbling in places. A closer inspection confirmed it was all in his mind.

"Not that old yet," he rumbled to himself.

At least he hadn't completely lost the vibrancy of youth. As he took in his own expression, he couldn't deny the glittering excitement in his eyes. An Ancient in the making, his latest prospect, Anthony, had proven to be so much greater than he had believed possible. Despite being so against it himself, Anthony radiated with power and potential, and he would only get stronger from here on out.

His ant species had been such a detriment to him as he'd started, but now it was proving to be a powerful boost. The first tier seven ant in the history of the Dungeon was unimaginably more powerful than he'd thought possible. What about the first tier eight ant? Or tier nine?

Now that Anthony had completed his three part evolution, what would come to him next? Perhaps the Vestibule-Nave-Altar trio would be built on even more, further enhancing the Will he was able to draw from the Colony and how he could spend it? Or something else entirely?

The Gravity Mana that Anthony could control was incredibly deadly, though somewhat cumbersome. Perhaps his next evolution would lead him down that path, improving the mastery he had over that one, strange branch of mana.

Without realising it, Granin had begun to pace in his room, his stony brow furrowed. It wasn't all smooth sailing for the proto-Ancient. His Skills were lacking, for one thing. Generally speaking, the accepted progression rate for Skills was for them to keep pace with evolution tier. That wasn't obtainable for all Skills, of course, not for young monsters, anyway, so at the least a few core abilities should raise their ranks in pace with evolutions. Anthony didn't reach that benchmark, not even close. He had so many Skills that needed to be raised, since he'd made himself such a generalist, that it was impossible to bring up everything he had to work on.

Perhaps Granin should work on a priority list for the big ant? Anthony would hate that sort of meddling. In fact, he seemed to hate organisation of any sort, but it may still be worth it. Gravity Mana specialisation was the most important by far, followed by Void Chomp and perhaps Dash. At least the Altar compensated by boosting the power of Skills, but if the effect only brought Anthony up to where he should be, it wasn't working at its full potential. The sooner he had rank seven Skills and the ability to demonstrate the power of a rank eight, the better.

The golgari caught himself and chuckled wryly. If he kept pacing like this, he was going to wear a hole in the carpet, which would have been a shame. Intricately woven and embroidered, it was a work of art that he was trampling over with his stone covered feet. In fact, wasn't that Anthony woven into the corners?

Obsessing over every little thing wouldn't help, and if kept it up, he'd make a bad example for Torrina and Corun. The two of them had been frothing at the mouth since their last talk with Anthony, working themselves to death poring over documents and workshopping ideas. At least a little of that manic energy had come from Granin, he knew that, but being as close as they were to witnessing the birth of the 20th Ancient, who could blame them?

Feeling a yawn build in the back of his throat, he let it take over, opening his mouth wide and stretching. The rock coating his lower back ground and cracked, causing him to wince. Sleep beckoned, and he decided to go to bed. The Colony was right about a lot of things, and not working without proper sleep was a good one. If he turned up to the meeting in the morning refreshed and alert, he could scold his two apprentices for pushing themselves too hard with proper authority.

Once again, he had to thank the Colony for their dedication to hospitality. True golgari beds weren't easy to find outside of the Empire of Stone, given the size and weight of his stone-covered people. He eased back into the soft mattress with a sigh. Trying to push the buzzing thoughts of Ancients and ants to the back of his mind, Granin grew drowsy and eventually slipped into sleep.

Then he began to dream.

At some point, as his consciousness swam and blurred through the disjointed imagery of his sleeping mind, Granin found himself in a pitch black room. Although, was it completely black? Overhead, there was a subtle light, a deep brown, like rich soil, it glowed ever so faintly, just enough that he could see his hands in front of his face.

He tried to see the edges of the room, but was it a room? No, it wasn't. As his eyes adjusted, he realised it was a chamber, or cavern. Not a particularly deep one, he stood on the floor and could almost touch the ceiling, but it was long and wide. He peered into the distance as the light edged a touch brighter, emanating from the rock above all around him. He still couldn't see a far wall in any direction. Just how vast was this place? And where was he?

He tried to take a step. The ground below wasn't as rocky as he'd expected it to be; in fact, it was unnaturally smooth, and curved. Frowning, he squatted in place and ran a hand over it, barely able to make out any details in the faint light. Yes, there was a slight slope beneath his feet, running downward. He followed it down, and the incline grew steeper as he went, until it dropped suddenly away into darkness, before rising up again thirty metres distant.

That was odd.

He turned and walked back, cresting a peak only to find the ground sloped down beyond that, ending in the same precipitous drop that rose up again thirty metres beyond.

What was he standing on? Where *was* this?

Only at this point did Granin realise his dream was oddly lucid, and he felt a hint of danger touch his mind. Something was different. Something was very, very wrong.

Wake up, he told himself, but he didn't.

Humans said that they pinched themselves to try and wake up. He looked at his stone covered arms for a second before he let them drop to his side. Perhaps... he could poke himself in the eye?

The ground beneath his feet began to fall, taking Granin with it. The sensation of dropping rapidly nauseated him, as he felt his guts rise into his chest, but his feet remained in contact with the ground below, if only barely. He cried out, arms spinning as the world around him *shifted*, grinding and twirling in impossible ways.

Who knew how far he fell, or for how long; it felt like minutes, but could have been seconds. All around him, he glimpsed enormous rivers of stone and earth, twisting around each other in the air, but it was so dark they may as well have been nothing. Was he bound in the roots of the Mother Tree?

What was happening?

When the world stilled around him, the ground settling beneath his feet, Granin slumped on his hands and knees, trembling from head to toe. Total darkness enveloped him now, but he could hear something. The air shifted in the distance, as if a wall of wind were pushed back and forth by a giant.

He shivered, wishing he could wake. Light blasted into his eyes and then faded.

He stood in a vast, open space, the walls an interlocking knot of enormous coils, each unimaginably huge. Except they weren't coils, there were no scales, this was no snake. They were rings, he realised, interlocking rings of flesh. That's what he'd been standing on, one of those rings. The drop had been the gap between one ring and the next.

He was surrounded by a worm.

The worm.

Granin flung himself to his knees and pressed his face into the ground.

Not the ground. This isn't ground.

[LOOK AT ME.]

Granin felt as if the world itself had rumbled in his mind. He lifted his head.

The face of Yarrum was like that of any worm, pointed, eyeless, the rings of flesh grew smaller and smaller until they terminated at one point. The only difference was the size. The Ancient was enormous beyond words, beyond comparison.

"I see you, Ancient Yarrum," Granin stammered, heart hammering in his chest to the point he feared his stone skin would rattle off.

The worm beheld him for a moment before it opened its mouth and Granin felt certain he was about to die, dream or no. The flesh peeled back, widening and widening and widening yet further to reveal a city sized opening, lined with ring after ring of building sized teeth. That maw, and those teeth, seemed to go on forever, each ring flexing and spinning independently of those next to it, as if Yarrum's mouth was a grinder designed to chew mountains apart. Perhaps it was.

[There isn't much time. He MUST succeed.]

The worm lunged forward and Granin snapped alert in his room, falling out of his bed with a shout. He lay on the ground, panting and trembling, as he tried to get his nerves under control.

He was okay. He was safe. He was alive.

The old golgari squeezed his eyes shut, only to snap them open again as the visage of Yarrum filled his mind's eye. From the floor, he checked the time. Only a few hours had passed since he'd laid down.

After thirty minutes had passed, Granin trusted himself to rise from the floor. After another thirty had passed, he sat at his desk, pulled open a book and began to make notes. A vision from the Worm itself, he *had* to record it for the Cult. Then, he should spend more time working on Anthony's build.

After all, he *had* to succeed.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1139: Big Game Hunting

Ah, to be back on the road again, my good friends by my side, such a wonderful feeling. I've got the breeze blowing through my antennae, a wide open plain before me, and fresh, crisp air in my lungs.

Except the breeze is in fact filled with smoke, ash and death, the wide open plain is in fact choked with demon monsters in a fighting frenzy, and I don't have lungs.

Who needs 'em, anyway?! What have lungs ever done for anyone?

Even the friends aren't quite "by my side" so much as "running rampant smashing everything they see, clinging to my carapace and greedily blasting things with green lasers."

At least Al is being cool. I mean, he can't really be cool in a temperature sense, due to his nature as a knowledge demon formed entirely from fire, but he's... cool... in a different way.

My mastery of words continues to impress!

It didn't take us long to make our way to the tunnel opening between this layer and the next, despite the rampaging demons. The gravity domain continued to be amazing for this. Reinforced by the Altar, it kept the weaker demons squashed flat.

My sub-brains continued to grind on my magic Skills as we travelled, blasting gravity spells at random targets. The levels tick along steadily. Gweheheh.

The issue we face is....

[How in the heck are we supposed to get down?]

We stand around the pit that was once the entrance to the tunnels. I say pit, it's more like a lake. Of lava.

[I see that this might prove an obstacle for you,] Al notes.

[Well yes, my body is comprised of non-flame elements. Not to mention, I lack the inborn demonic trait of heat resistance. Swimming through lava is not really my thing.]

[Pity....]

I can tell he's looking down on me. I suppose, to him, it *is* fairly odd to not be able to get through something like this. Demons continue to climb up through the molten goop constantly, after all.

[Is there a solution? If we need to swim through a kilometre of melted rocks and angry demons to get down, we might be better off staying here.]

[I'm sure we can arrive at a satisfactory solution.]

In the end, I had to create a tunnel of reinforced stone that went diagonally through the blockage to the next layer. It was only possible at all thanks to the Altar, and we were all a burnt mess when we managed to clamber out the end and onto the roof of the next layer down. Except Al and Invidia, of course....

[It's toooo hot,] Crinis groans as she melts across my carapace.

[Is the enchanted gear working?]

I'd secured all the heat resistant gear I could and given all of it to Crinis in the hopes she'd be able to resist the heat during the wave.

[It is, but I'm weak to this much heat. I'm sorry, Master.]

Poor thing. As a shadow monster, this environment is like kryptonite to her. It's only thanks to the efforts of the Colony that she's been able to function at all.

[Don't worry too much. Once we've blasted our prey, we can descend to the fourth and you'll be way more comfortable.]

Me too. The Call is constantly yanking on my guts even now. If anything, I think it's getting stronger as time goes by. Stupid Ancients. The sooner we annihilate these stupid tier eights, the faster we can get the heck out of here.

[For now, let's find our way down, I can't cling upside down like this for long.]

[Master Grip (IV) has reached Level 12.]

Eyyyy, nice! Seriously though, I need to get some ground under me. Naturally, when we descend on a platform of force and arrive on said ground, we find ourselves back in the thick of the demon rampage. Except it's worse.

How in the name of heck can it be *worse*?!

Somehow, they pulled it off. More larvae, fighting more insanely. It's honestly impressive to see. That all translates to more higher tiered demons, though, which is great news for us!

The other issue we find is, Arconidem's influence seems stronger as well. Any demon that has succumbed to his Will turns on us the moment they lay eyes on us, breaking off their fights and sprinting through swathes of opponents before they get punched into another dimension by Tiny.

That is not normal behaviour. The urge to annihilate anything that isn't native to this stratum has overcome their instinct, and it's revealed in the manic way they attack us. The more we move around, the more we run into roaming packs, looking for things like us to attack.

I sigh.

It isn't hard for us to wipe them out at this point. After a few days, or weeks, it'd get tiring, especially if the demons get stronger. We need to find our prey, take them down, then get the heck out of dodge.

[Al, any thoughts on how we might find these friends of yours?]

[They are not... friends.]

[Fine. Can you track them?]

[As heralds of Arconidem, they will attract those demons who have succumbed to his Will. They will not be hard to find....]

In other words, they'll be surrounded by hordes of demons, meaning we need to fight like mad to even get to them. Great.

[Alright then, so let's just fight everything we find as we roam around. We're sure to find a big army of demons somewhere out here.]

So we set off.

It doesn't take long to find a demon army, as it turns out. We crush it, but there aren't any tier eights around. We dust ourselves off and continue.

The second army takes a little longer to find, but we crush that too. Still no tier eights.

The *third* army looks promising. Some strong demons in there. We crush it, and there's still no Torrifex.

This... sucks.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1140: Big Game Hunting pt 2

Look, I don't know what they expect me to say. You'd think I'd get better at this, since I've left messages for a few of the other castes, but it really isn't the case.

You're Soldiers. You Soldier. You get it, I get it, we all get it. In many ways, this was the easiest of all of the evolutions I designed for our species, all you had to do was get bigger and chunkier. All of the stuff I found useful for fighting up close, I made sure you would also get. Inner-carapace plating, healing gland, mutable muscles, all that good stuff.

I suppose if I had to say something, it would be this: Remember Grant. She was one of the first ants I ever trained myself, a member of the Council, and she died heroically to protect me from Garralosh.

Without her sacrifice, I would not have survived that battle, and all I did for the Colony after would never have occurred. I still wonder if it was worth it. A noble, intelligent and selfless ant like Grant, what would she have been able to achieve, had she lived?

In many ways, she epitomises what it means to be a Soldier for the Colony. You are the biggest, the strongest, the toughest. It's your role to put yourself in harm's way so that others don't have to. Where the fight is thickest, where the hunt is most intense, that is where you are to go.

I only ask that you make sure you come back.

It isn't always possible, I know that, and it breaks my heart... but do your best.

And forget Leeroy. She was born stupid and not much has changed.

- Message from the Eldest to the Soldier caste.

Our hunt for the tier eight demons, Torrifex and sisters, continues to be both unfruitful, and a massive pain in the back-zone.

I feel like a cork bobbing in an ocean as we wander around, surrounded by an ocean of demon larvae who scratch and tear at each other in a neverending melee. Of course, higher ranked demons appear constantly, popping out from the waves of weaker monsters, seeking each other out or throwing themselves at us in a blind rage.

It's exhausting.

And of course, the crazed monsters who succumb to Arconidem's compulsion love to group up, and once they start to do so, they gather an unstoppable momentum. The more they group up, the faster they run into more recruits, so the horde grows even faster. It all snowballs so fast into a roaming pack of thousands of monsters that it makes my head ache.

We crush these groups whenever we find them, no matter how large or how small, but none of them are hiding our targets, and despite our overwhelming strength, we lose a little bit of energy, and take a little bit of damage, during every fight.

Well, the others do. I'm fine. My unique advantages make me immune to the rigours of drawn out combat. My muscles never get fatigued, my glands never run out of energy, and I heal superficial damage to my carapace without even having to trigger my healing gland. I can do this for months!

Tiny, on the other hand, just accumulates wounds like they're going out of fashion and even Crinis loses a lot of shadow flesh during each conflict. The two of them need time and Biomass to recover, one of which is fairly easy to provide in this environment, but the other, not so much.

Nestled within my gravity domain, they're relatively safe, but even then, strong enough demons can break through and threaten them.

On the whole, this experience is really pounding into my thick head just why the waves are so terrifying, *especially* on the third. Without the Vestibule, I'd be too tired, too injured and too mentally fatigued to keep fighting after just two days.

And I'm super strong!

No wonder most of the races just pull up stumps and get out of town. Leave the disaster zone and come back once the mess has died down. Not the Colony, though! We'll seize the unprecedented opportunity of the wave or die trying!

[Come on, Al. I haven't sensed anything like a tier eight core, and we've been out here for *two days*. Are they really down here?]

The flaming eye glares at me. Well, he looks at me. Al, due to his nature as an eye *on fire* basically always looks like he's glaring.

[They are,] he confirms, [but they may have retreated deeper still. It's possible Torrifex is hoping to lure you away from your base of support.]

Well... that would suck. No way he figured out my Altar combo that fast!

[Why would he do that?] I hedge. [The big moron seemed happy enough to come at me the first time we fought.]

I've never explained to Al how my species works and the unique organs that I have, and I don't intend to. Being as smart as he is, with the knowledge that he has, he probably has an inkling, but I don't feel the need to advertise my unique abilities.

[From what you have said, he was compelled to fight you by Arconidem, a test, perhaps. Torrifex is a loyal servant of the Demon God, but he has no wish to die. Rather, as close as he is to evolving and joining the Court, he and his sisters would much rather avoid a truly dangerous fight.]

So he only came up to fight me because he thought it would be easy. Great.

[So you think he's hiding from me? He ran a few layers down where he thought I wouldn't follow?]

[I believe so, but he is compelled to remove you and the entire Colony by Arconidem's Will. I imagine he is hoping to draw you to him until you are weakened by the journey, then fight you alongside his sisters and win safely. With you dead, there will be nothing to stop him leading a demon horde against your family and wiping them out.]

Huh. Cheap tactics. I never would have expected this from a demon who talked so much smack!

[So that means I only have two options then. Either I go back to the Colony and wait until Arconibutt runs out of patience and sends them at me, or keep moving lower until we find them?]

[That is... correct.]

Sigh. I hate it when I get two options and both suck.

[I guess we're going down then. Where's the nearest hole in the ground?]

I can't afford to lose the time it would take to draw them up to me. The Colony is bound to be struggling on the fourth, so I need to get down there. As the wave progresses, the danger will continue to rise, and eventually, monsters from the fifth, and possibly below, will rise to the fourth.