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Chapter 571: Attack on Rylleh pt 7

I swear I sensed something for a moment, those damn flickers that pop up in my Vestibule for a few seconds before they vanish once again. My suspicions are starting to firm on that front, and I'm not happy. There'll be words with the council when this mess is done, but I can't be distracted by these... watchers right now. The Queen and I have been making quite the show of ourselves, mother has knocked down a few more buildings (I didn't imagine she had such a destructive side), but so far nothing has come forward to challenge us as we move deeper into the city. At the pace we're going, the people have managed to stay well ahead of us as they retreat to the walled square in the distance, but I'd expected that *someone* would come out here and have a crack at us!

WHACK!

Oh! There they are!

From the buildings around us emerge an insultingly small band of warriors and mages, firing arrows that glitter with the light of Skills, waves of sword light and a smattering of elemental spells. All of which peter out against my powerful and attractive diamond carapace.

"Mother! Looks like someone decided to come out and play!"

"This is not a game, child," she huffs, "let eliminate this threat and move on. The sooner we are done with this task, the safer the Colony will be."

"Hard to argue with that."

With my preternatural senses tuned in and my nerves firing, these piffling little blows are nothing to me. I ran along the sides of the buildings and turn my best angles to receive the strikes as I close the distance with a dash. As I loom over my first target, a brawny looking human with a standard looking sword and shield, I almost feel pity for the guy. Still, it's better that he falls by my mandibles than by the Queen's. I've rushed ahead of her but even from here I can hear her jaws gnashing as she charges forward, ready to rend these poor people into more harmless forms. Better that I deal with them before she gets the chance!

My victim-to-be looks up at me with a sneer and brandishes his shield in my face. It explodes with bright light, blinding me completely! With a roar of triumph, another leaps from a nearby roof, mighty hammer aglow with power as he prepares to bring it down on my head. But I... step backwards, causing the powerful blow to land with tremendous force on the cobbled street beneath our feet. Blinding me was a clever move, pitiful humans! But my senses are greater than just my sight! In point of fact, my mana sense and my heat detecting antennae both were able to inform me of the incoming danger in this instance.

I will reward your cleverness by allowing you to sample the finest produce in the entire strata, straight from the source!

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

A rapid fire rain of merchandise and justice falls amongst the swarming fighters, causing them to cry out in shock or run for cover. The acid itself burns at their armour and gums up their limbs, restricting their movements even as it burns away at the mage's shields. Gweheheheh. Such a multi-purpose, good for all situations thing my acid is! With my eyes still blinded, I can't work too precisely, so resort to wide sweeps of my mandibles to send my adversaries stumbling as my sub-brains reach out and twist apart the threads of magic that fly my way. Surprisingly, the spells are better crafted than I expected, clearly a few of these chaps and chapettes have worked on their Skills, but after I get my minds on them, what remains of their fireballs, ice spears and wind blades doesn't amount to much.

I should be able to wind this up with minimal injuries if everything keeps going this way!

[HOW DARE YOU ATTACK MY MASTER?!]

Ah.

I'd neglected to take Crinis' feelings into account. Actually, come to think of it, where is Tiny?

"HUUUAAAARRRR!"

BOOM!

There he is. Just as dozens of tentacles explode from my back as Crinis makes her terrifying presence known once more, Tiny and Invidia enter the fray in an explosion of fists and spells. Confronted with such a concentration of high tier monsters, the opponents arrayed before us begin to waver. It's all a little confusing to me, they saw us come in! Didn't they have a plan? Perhaps those flickers have something to do with this situation. At any rate, they don't seem to know what to do in this moment as the four of us run amok amongst them. With Invidia in the fray, his magical prowess almost completely suppresses the local mages and his shields protect Tiny and myself from the worst of the attacks that come our way.

By the time the Queen arrives, we managed to suppress or incapacitate almost all of them. I try to turn my gaze from the fate that awaited those unfortunate saps. The Queen does not appear to be in the mood to delay the conclusion of the day's events. It's pretty ugly. The members of the Colony are almost upon us now and they take it upon themselves to clean up after us, keeping watch on the defeated and ensuring they can't get up to any more mischief.

"Looks like it might be a clear run down to the square, mother," I observe.

"Then perhaps we'll be able to finish this quickly," she replies and begins to crawl forwards with purpose.

"Hold up a second! Don't forget the speakers, we'll need to wait a second."

"Oh, fine."

She's definitely feeling impatient. This was the plan though. Backed into a corner, terrified and desperate, the people of this city are right where we want them, but at the same time, on the edge and dangerous. If we provoke them, who knows what damage they'd do to themselves, to us, to whatever they can get their hands on? We figured it would be wiser to try and send in our human communication

specialists to try and open dialogue and bring this campaign to a swift conclusion. Indeed, we only have to wait a minute before a few of the brown robes arrive, joined by my most devoted, one-armed priest.

[Please don't shout at me,] I sigh as I reach out to connect a bridge to the people.

[We are blessed to be in your presence, Great One,] Beyn replies.

His mind is so incredibly focused on containing the 'volume' of his thoughts that the mental contact trembles with suppressed energy. It's almost as distracting as just getting shouted at. Almost being the key word.

[This is going to be a dangerous moment for you lot. Be careful but don't let them stall us. We need to find and shut down any magical gates in here and we need it done yesterday.]

[Fear not, Great One. We will serve with all our hearts, the danger is nothing to us.]

Looking at the fanatical zeal in their eyes, I actually believe it.

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Chapter 572: Attack on Rylleh pt 8

There had been little to no communication from the council, not that it was a surprise to Captain Wallace. In recent years, the ruling families had become little more than leeches, perpetually sucking at the prosperity that their ancestors had achieved. He could almost imagine their faces, locked in their mansions as they panicked and strove to preserve their possessions. The indecision and paralysis that had likely seized them in this crisis was so easy to picture it was almost comical. A wisp of glee bubbled up in the captain's belly and he nearly giggled out loud before he restrained himself.

The pressure had pushed him right to the edge, he could tell that about himself, now. The despair that he'd thought had fallen away from him he now realised was merely suppressed, forced into the background of his mind where it ate away at his sanity. He was grateful for it. In half an hour he'd been able to move with incredible purpose, and enact decisions with crystal clarity thanks to his own burgeoning insanity, and he had hopefully enabled, not a saving of lives, but a more dignified end for the city which he had served his entire life.

Because it *was* coming to an end, indeed, it was already over. He could see it so clearly. The insects had penetrated the city's defences with such insulting ease, had presented those tasked with protecting the people with such an impossible task. Defend against insurmountable odds on every conceivable front? It fundamentally could not be done. What choice did he have but to try and pull his people back to a central location? No other option was presented to him.

When that thought struck him, Wallace was led to a conclusion that disturbed him in a way that he found difficult to shake. He had made the correct decisions for his people, his decades of experience assured him of that. If there were better moves to make, he simply didn't know them. Yet he couldn't help but feel that he'd been led to his current position, that he'd been dancing in the palm of his opponent all this time. That each of his decisions, as good as they'd felt at the time, were nothing but a path that had been set in front of his feet by another intelligence.

Could it be possible that the ants themselves were not the orchestrators of this invasion? The way they'd so expertly tested and circumvented the protections around the city, the way they'd so efficiently

overwhelmed any opposition. That didn't strike him as anything that he'd ever read of conflict against Dungeon spawned ants. The literature that he'd seen was clear, ants would throw themselves forward in suicidal rushes, crawling over massed piles of their own dead to reach their enemies. Unending hordes of low tier creatures, starved of Biomass and experience attacking single points, following scent trails from their nests, battering against the foe until the prey grew tired, or sloppy, or simply gave up hope. He knew from the scanning array that not a single one of these creatures was below tier three! How could this be any ordinary colony?!

Another giggle threatened to erupt but he managed to stifle it into a cough, although a few guardsmen and women nearby looked at him askance. Someone had tamed an ant Queen, used it as a pet and were now utilising it to assault Rylleh. This was the most plausible explanation! Why didn't he think of it before? Was it simply a crime so rare and unspeakable that he hadn't been willing to consider it? Perhaps.

The square, as it was generally referred to by the people of the city, was relatively large, given the population. It was home to the administrative and ruling arm of Rylleh. The council building, the treasury, the guard offices and the sorts of wide open, well gardened spaces that only the extravagantly wealthy could afford to surround themselves with in a literal underground living space, all surrounded with a largely decorative but still functional wall. Those manicured lawns and elaborate rock gardens were now covered in shivering and crying refugees. The inner sanctum of the elite, perforated by those people they most wanted to keep out.

Upon the wall was every guardsmen, volunteer and mercenary that Wallace could find and give a weapon, along with Wallace himself. He hadn't heard from Yasmine in more than ten minutes, apparently lost somewhere near the market. A shame that, she was a good officer, if a little soft. He stared out into the city, waiting for the attacker's next move. Would they come forward to try and negotiate? In which case, perhaps there was a sliver of a chance that the people might live. Or would they, far more likely, simply overwhelm the defenders from all sides, using the experience and Biomass the citizens would provide to grow their ant force even further?

Regardless of what he thought would happen, he was still shocked when a one-armed man, dressed in an earthy brown robe with what appeared to be antennae sticking out the top, along with another twenty of his kind, stepped slowly down the main road toward them. Behind those figures stood two enormous ants, perhaps Queens of this colony, and behind them the ranks of thousands more gathered on all sides.

"Hee, hee!"

As he looked down on these strange humans, he couldn't help but laugh aloud. They just looked so *ridiculous*. Clumsily woven antennae drooping down over their faces from the top of their hoods that did little to properly conceal their faces. Were these really the masterminds of this entire invasion? The people in control of this powerful, enormous army of monsters?

Tension was high on the wall as the humans stepped forward, easily within bow range. Wallace himself felt the air thicken around him. If someone lost their cool and took a shot, then every single one of them would die. Judging by the expressions on those around him, this fact was very apparent to everyone, not

just to him. The overwhelming show of force in front of them was enough to convince them that resistance was a gesture more than a hope for survival.

Not able to wait any longer, Wallace leaned over the parapet and called out to the strange ant... people, before they got any closer. The figure in the lead, a young man with only one remaining arm, paused his step, which led the entire procession to come to a halt. There was a long moment of silence before the lead ant figure raised his head, drew a powerful breath and began to speak.

"YOU STAND IN THE PRESENCE OF -"

THWACK!

In a mind boggling scene, the smaller of the two large ants brought an antenna down to strike the human on the head, which caused him to lurch forward before he caught his balance. Once he'd righted himself, the human turned toward the ant, bowed deeply (Wallace swore the antenna twitched again) and then turned back to the wall.

"AHEM! WE INVADED YOUR CITY, BUT WE DO NOT SEEK TO END YOUR LIVES! IF YOU ACCEDE TO OUR DEMANDS, THEN ALL OF YOU SHALL BE SPARED!"

There were a few sighs of relief on the wall, but just as many snorts of distrust. After the mass panic and the deaths it had no doubt caused, to appear as a peaceful intruder at this point was far-fetched. But Wallace did not share their reaction, he was neither relieved, nor distrustful. Instead, he was chortling, his shoulders shaking as a grin twisted his lips. Just when he'd decided that the ants were controlled by another agent, that display in front of him now clearly said otherwise! When he thought about it, his entire day had just been insane. He may as well lean into it.

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Chapter 573: Attack on Rylleh pt 9

Beyn was nervous, yet exultant, but terrified whilst also experiencing a deep sense of unfurling faith. The enormity of the moment wasn't lost on him, far from it, this was the first time the holy ones, the Great One, would be exposed to the wider community of Pangera! And he, Beyn the one-armed, humble priest, was to be the spokesman, the representative that would communicate their glory to the world!

... except that he couldn't. He wasn't allowed to say any of the words that exploded in his heart and soared to the snow-capped peaks of his soul. He felt wracked with a pain that sent shudders through his entire frame as he strove to restrain himself. He had already failed once, in a shameful display that had brought swift retribution from the Great One. Richly deserved punishment that nevertheless sent him into paroxysms of faith induced joy. It was wrong for him to find such delight in the touch of the one he revered so, but he couldn't help it! He wasn't worthy, wretched unbeliever that he had once been, far too lost to receive such contact!

Behind him, the rest of the delegation looked on with eyes bulging from their heads. Even if they knew he was being disciplined, to see Priest Beyn receive the touch of the Great One elevated him to new heights in their esteem. Truly, he was the right person to lead their congregation. Selected by the Great One the moment they breached the surface, this level of closeness only reaffirmed his eminence.

Beyn himself continued to battle within himself, a titanic clash that consumed him as he desperately strove to say only the words he was meant to.

Suddenly, he felt the touch of the Great One upon his mind and tears began to well in his eyes. He wasn't worthy!

[Look, just chill out, alright? You look like you're about to pass out, I swear to goodness you're vibrating in place! Deep breaths. Just breathe.]

Covertly, the priest attempted to follow this advice in the depths of his hood. Inhale. Exhale. He focused and tried to still his frantic thoughts and emotions. It worked, a little, maybe enough.

[Okay now. Just remember what we need you to say and how we need to come across here. We don't want them knowing what they're dealing with, not yet, alright?]

Beyn nodded to himself. Yes, he must maintain this shameful charade for the time being. It would be painful, it would be difficult, but he could do this! He gathered himself and began to speak once more, hoping that his unusual delay had gone largely unnoticed.

"I SAY AGAIN!" he called, "THERE NEED BE NO MORE HARM DONE THIS DAY! SEND OUT A DELEGATION THAT WE MAY NEGOTIATE WITH!"

There was a pause as his words were digested before someone called back.

"I think we'd rather talk from where we are, if it's all the same!"

Refusing to talk with the Great One?! INSOLENT!

[Just ask them if they'd like us to go in there and talk with them,] the Great One cut in, heading off another off-script explosion.

Beyn wasn't sure exactly what he meant, but he dutifully followed his instructions.

"IF YOU SO CHOOSE, WE WILL COME OVER THE WALL TO NEGOTIATE WITH YOU!"

"Fine! I'll come out!"

A miracle! Though he had no idea why, the words of the Great One had brought about such a swift resolution! A miracle indeed! Within five minutes an older gentleman emerged from the narrowly opened gate which slammed shut behind him before he began walking over. Beyn took a moment to study this person, as he felt the thousands of ants in view were also doing, their collective attention somehow materialised in the tense atmosphere like a blanket that weighed down on everything. Grizzled, experienced, solid and somehow not entirely predictable was Beyn's read on him. There was something about him that spoke of instability, not that he could be blamed, faced with such glorious inevitability as the Colony, who wouldn't be rattled?

The man certainly didn't lack for courage as he willingly abandoned the safety of his wall to venture out, alone, and walk forward into the face of an army of monsters. Not just any person could do such a thing.

"My name is Captain Wallace Danton," he spoke and bowed toward Beyn, but also somehow toward the Great One, a gesture which raised him in Beyn's esteem immensely. "I head the guard here in Rylleh, the guard you have so roundly defeated this day."

"DO NOT... ahem. Do not blame yourself or your soldiers for such a failing, your defeat was a foregone conclusion, with the army we have at our disposal."

"True," Wallace ceded, his gaze wandering over the ants who covered every surface of every building he could see from where he stood. Each monster was perfectly still, barely a twitch of an antenna to show that they still lived. Despite their eyes not needing to focus, he could almost *feel* that their attention was on him, not the least the two giant creatures so close to him.

It was enough to drive someone mad...

"I would love to know what it is that has brought about this... invasion. I find it difficult to imagine what a human in charge of such a large colony of monsters would want."

Beyn stared at the man blankly for a moment before he remembered. Oh, right! The fiction! He was supposed to be in control.

"I will not mince words as our mission is time sensitive. We wish to know how many spatial gates exist here in this city, and where they are. We seek to dismantle them as soon as possible. Once that is complete, we will leave your people to their own devices. All we ask is that we are allowed to oversee the city to ensure that no new gates are constructed."

Wallace felt his head spin. They wanted to cut off this area of Dungeon? But why?! There must be more that he doesn't know.

"Such a thing would be difficult," he said, "the people here depend on those gates for many things, without them we'll be isolated, unable to trade with the other cities, unable to contact our families and friends. Many in the city are travellers whose homes lie elsewhere. They'd be abandoned here, cut off from their support networks."

The priest frowned at this less than instant capitulation.

"The gates *will* come down within the next hour, Captain. There are two ways that can happen. With your people aiding us, or we tear the city apart and destroy them ourselves. What there *isn't*, is a way those gates stay operating."

There was a strange pause as the priest stared straight ahead, as if listening to another voice.

"We will provide what consolation we can. Nobody will starve and what material goods we can provide we shall strive to do so. It is not the fault of the people of this city that we've come here, you are unfortunately caught in the crossfire. Nevertheless, we must achieve what we have set out to do this day."

Wallace could see no hesitation in the eyes of the surprisingly young man. He spoke of eliminating the city as if it were simply a matter of course. Chilling.

"There are only two places with gates," Wallace sighed, "inside the square is the transport ministry, and..." he gestured to an imposing fort carved into the wall of the city, "the Abyssal Legion fort up there."

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Chapter 574: Attack on Rylleh pt 10

The moment this Wallace guy revealed the locations of the gates, the Colony sprang into action. I could hear orders being snapped out as ants began to gather in teams, flooding away towards the fort on the outskirts of the city. Even my heart skipped a beat. This could be a major blunder! We'd anticipated the gates would be here, in the centre, and so they were, but we didn't foresee that there'd be more around the edge of the city! Almost all our forces are concentrated here for the final push! If those gates open and those Legion nutters come pouring out...

"One of us should go," I tell Mother, "those Legion soldiers are no joke, as I recall."

Though I was super weak back then. I have no idea what their relative strength would be now, realistically.

"Which of us should it be?" she asks me. "I'm willing to go where I'm most needed."

I hesitate. I need to stay here to help communicate, but I'm worried that the fort will prove to be the more dangerous of the options.

"Go to the fort," I tell her reluctantly, "as soon as I'm done here, I'll head up there as well, just in case. Make sure you take a few members of the council up there with you. If it turns serious, we'd rather have more firepower than we need than not enough."

The Queen's antennae twitch.

"What about you, child? Will you be alright here?"

I suspect she thinks I'm taking on too much here.

"Not to worry," I assure her, "I alone would be enough."

The Queen turns to leave and rushes to join the flow of ants marching into the distance as I focus back onto the idiot priest and the negotiations taking place with the guard captain, Wallace.

[We want to get in and dismantle that gate as soon as possible,] I urge Beyn, [no delays, we get in there, right now.]

The two humans continue to exchange their inefficient, noisy words as I wait, impatient to get moving. If I can smack this thing down fast enough, then maybe I'll be able to make it over to that fort in the event something nasty starts up over there. I think Beyn can sense my impatience as my mental communication becomes more and more curt. After a few more minutes, I run out of patience.

[Tell them we will have access to the gate within the next two minutes or we'll be charging over the wall and bringing it down ourselves, no more stalling.]

[He's worried about sending ants within the wall. The people are unlikely to react well.]

The priest sounds highly offended that our reception would be anything less than celebratory, but I can understand what the captain is worried about. If a riot breaks out inside, where I imagine people are densely packed, then the potential for fatalities will skyrocket. I harden my heart to the possibility.

[Tell him that's not our problem. If his people can't control themselves then they become another obstacle that we'll overcome. Those gates are coming down. Now.]

Injected with my determination, Beyn toughens his stance and delivers our ultimatum. Rather than sweat, flinch, or any of the other behaviours I would expect, he looks as if he's about to laugh before he turns back toward the walls. We give him a single minute to let the people on the other side of the wall know we're coming before we follow.

The waiting is unbearable. The Colony and I stand around, impatient as the seconds tick by.

"Do you really think they'll let us in?" Advant asks.

"They will if they know what's good for them!" Propellant cackles.

She really is getting more and more aggressive the higher her flame magic Skill rises. I wonder if Skills can have an impact on our personalities. Is it more than just knowledge that Gandalf the wise is slipping into our brains? Something to chew over later. Just to be careful, I task my sub-brains with whipping up another construct and preparing some gravity magic. Not the bomb, that might be a little overkill, but the domain will help keep me safe if the crowd turns hostile.

Despite my reservations, Wallace appears on the wall and waves us forward. Somewhat trepidatious, Beyn and ten of his followers lead a contingent of ants towards the gates which open wide to allow us inside. Inside we find masses of people, huddling together amongst truly elaborate buildings, terrified of the monsters that they find in their midst. The ants outside the wall move closer, increasing the pressure on those manning the parapet, pushing the whole situation closer to the brink of disaster. One idiot doing the wrong thing is all it's going to take for this to turn into a bloodbath.

As I stride into the square, the faces of the assembled humans, with a few golgari and possibly others mixed in, are a mixture of hatred, fear and disgust. Thankfully, a great deal of that emotion is deflected toward Beyn and his robed followers. Nice save, crazy people! Taking all the heat for us! I appreciate your sacrifice. Several large buildings loom within the square but the Captain wastes no time (for once) and directs us to the largest. Even though the centre of the city has become packed with people, this single building appears to be completely unoccupied which may have something to do with the thickly swirling magical energies around the building.

When we finally break in, we don't find a horde of enemy soldiers pouring through active gates, but rather three large archways, unpowered and dormant. Enchantments and runes built into the gates appear to be collecting mana and storing it, which leads me to believe that the gates need to be charged before being opened. Handy for us, they appear to have been mid-cycle when we launched our attack. What fortuitous timing!

In a jiffy, the ants move in, study everything they see and break the gates down into segments, shearing the stone with clean bites so it can be reassembled and studied back at the nest. Mission accomplished; we turn to exit the square as quickly as possible. I don't want to expose my family to danger any more than is necessary.

But that's when it happens.

I don't know what motivates the little kid, he could only be six or seven years old. Mature enough to know that us monsters had done something bad, but not enough to realise what provoking us might mean. I could see his face amongst the crowd, screwed up in anger and frustration, much like many of those around him. Unlike those adults, this child had the courage, or lack of understanding, to express that feeling. Winding back his little arm, he gripped hard onto something and threw it with all his might. Right at me.

With my senses, with my reflexes, there's not a chance that it will hit me, and honestly what could it do, even if it did? I understand all this, it's common sense for someone who'd been human, like me, to know that a little child isn't going to have some sort of mega-grenade to hurl at the biggest and baddest monster that he can see.

But there are members of my family who lack my level of understanding, young and foolish creatures that they are.

"IT'S AN ATTACK! GET DOWN!" screams an ant, appearing almost from thin air as she threw herself forward into the path of the projectile.

In an instant, more of them pop into existence, leaping onto my carapace to cover me from harm and forming a defensive wall around me.

"COVER DAMMIT! PROVIDE COVER!"

"CHECK THE ELDEST FOR WOUNDS! MEDIC!"

The first ant continues to glide gracefully through the air, my hyper-reflexes cause the entire scene to unfold in near slow motion as I become almost buried under these mystery ants. The projectile, a harmless toy ball, spins through the air and rebounds from the ant's carapace with a gentle 'tok!'. The ant in question continues her flight, legs a tangled mess, before she thuds into the ground completely unharmed.

Perhaps it's lucky that the humans seem far too shocked to react to this bizarre scene that's unfolded. The rest of the Colony also seems a touch surprised, staring at these newcomers with bewilderment in their eyes. Sadly, for them, I react the fastest.

[Crisis! Get them!]

So close to me, the ants have no chance of escape from the tentacles that sprout from my abdomen and wrap them tight. Crisis lifts each of the creatures into the air as they suddenly scabble to try and escape her grasp. No chance! Glee builds within as I stalk over to the ant on the ground, using her antennae to check herself for injuries.

Just as I close in, she seems to realise what's happening and tries to scurry away like lightning, but I nab her in my mandibles and lift her up so she has no choice but to look into my eyes.

"Foound youuuuuuu!"

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Chapter 575: The aftermath

The surrounding crowds, pressed together in the square, recoil with horror as Crinis makes her presence known. The fact that she snatched up the mysterious ants rather than start munching on the helpless crowd isn't enough to completely mollify their fears. Screams and indignant cries rise as they push to create distance from me, while the kid who threw the stupid ball looks on with wide eyes before being dragged away by who I presume is his mother.

Whelp, time for me to get out of here.

"Let's get the heck out of here!" I shout to my siblings before speaking to Beyn over the mental link. [We need to leave this area. Let things calm down a bit before we come back.]

The priest readily agrees, and our convoy makes directly for the nearest wall as the crowd scrambles to make room for us to pass by. A few guards brandish their spears at us, but the ants ignore them, climbing straight up the wall and using their bodies to shove the guards to one side to create space for those behind to head straight over. Each of the ant-robed humans is picked up by a large soldier and carried over whilst clutched in mandibles. You'd think they'd be a little afraid at being gripped in the crushing jaws of powerful monsters, but instead they look almost radiantly happy. These people are just as far gone as the damned priest. There's no hope for them anymore.

I maintain my grip on the still struggling ant as Crinis holds aloft the other nineteen. It makes crawling up the wall rather difficult, the individual ants are relatively small, but holding twenty of them is no joke in terms of weight! Up and over and once more in the clear as the uproar behind us continues. Being surrounded by my fellow insects rather than the panicked citizens of this city is such a relief. Back amongst my own kind!

Those ants who'd taken apart the gates were already on their way out of the city, wasting no time in their quest to return the precious artifacts back to the nest. If we can unlock the secrets of this magic, the future of the Colony will truly know no limits! A solid contingent of soldiers and scouts go with them, guarding the precious cargo. For the rest of the ants present, the work is clear. We may have seized the gates inside the square, but there are no guarantees that there aren't more besides those that we were told of.

"Do you think all of the gates will have that distinctive mana gathering array?" Coolant asks from nearby.

Struggling to contain my wiggling captives, I take a moment to reply.

"I'm not sure," I admit, "since there's no Dungeon veins in here, the mana is much thinner than it is out in the tunnels, so it would make sense they'd need such arrays to power the gates. But we don't know enough to assume that would be the case."

The mage nods her head.

"We'll just have to manually search then."

"Wouldn't hurt to send out the mages to test the mana density around the place anyway. Never know what they might turn up."

The low concentration of mana is almost enough to cause me problems. Only by using my external mana manipulation to pull energy toward myself am I able to maintain my core.

Coolant rushes off to facilitate the search as the majority of ants turn and scurry away into the city. I remain with perhaps a thousand others to watch over the walled square where order is gradually being restored, judging by the diminishing level of noise coming over the parapet. As much I want to run to the fort in support of the Queen, the situation here just isn't stable enough that I can be confident the city defenders won't get feisty again. At the very least, this gives me a little time to interrogate my captives. Gweheheheh.

"So," I address the ant gripped in my mandibles, "I presume you're the little flickers I've been sensing lately?"

At detecting my scent, the prisoner goes limp in my grip. I wait a moment to see what will happen, but to my surprise, she doesn't respond at all.

"Hello?" I say, "are you not going to respond to me?"

Nothing. Every single ant that Crinis holds in her grip has similarly gone slack. I can sense that they are still alive, it appears as though this is their strategy to avoid my interrogation. Foolish! Do they really believe that giving me the silent treatment is going to be enough to dissuade me!?

"Let me just take a guess at something and see how you feel about it, alright?" I watch all of the captives closely as I continue my line of questioning, "let's say that after I was captured by the golgari and vanished from the Colony that the council got together and decided that having me running around doing dangerous stuff was a bit of a pain, but not something that they could control."

The very idea of the council trying to tell *me* what to do. Laughable! I trained them from the time they were grubs!

"So instead, they thought to themselves, 'since we can't prevent the Eldest from doing whatever they want, instead we'll try to make sure they stay safe. Why not provide some guards?' or something along those lines. Only they immediately realise that I would say no. I do not need or want a group of guards following me around, I would more likely have to protect *them* as opposed to them protecting me. Not to mention the appalling waste of resources that would be."

My mandibles grip the still limp ant a little tighter.

"Instead of dropping the idea there and then, like sensible ants, they thought they'd go a step further. 'If the Eldest doesn't want to be protected, but at the same time *needs* to be protected, why not guard them in secret!? We'll make special guards to watch over the Eldest without even letting them know!'"

Each of the twenty figures exudes a sense of martyrdom now, as if they know the jig is up.

"So, the council put into a motion a plan, probably with a stupid name like Operation Silent Shield."

Twitch.

"Really? Holy moly. So, Operation Silent Shield commences, they recruit twenty promising young hatchlings, ones who are dedicated to a fault, willing to serve in any way and give them the best training, full core evolutions and full mutations. Maybe even special evolutions?"

Twitch.

"Right. And for your last evolution, you're probably tier four, I would guess? Yes, judging by your mana, tier four. For your last evolution, you all chose some sort of advanced gland that masks your presence, from all sources. Or does it work on perception? Perhaps the Vestibule was working correctly the whole time and I filtered it out without realising? Maybe my Will stat was too high... Well? Which is it?"

I prod my captive, but she stubbornly refuses to say anything.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't matter. Even if you hadn't leapt out when you did, I would have tracked you down eventually."

I can't help but sigh. I shouldn't be surprised that the council would pull a move like this. I can't even be mad, not really. These twenty young ants represent the council worrying about me, attempting to look after my safety without letting me know. They basically used up a second council worth of resources, special cores and everything, just to look after me. I wish I could be more confident in saying it was a waste of effort, but I can't deny the run of trouble I've been getting myself into.

[Crisis, let them go please.]

[Are you sure, Master?] she huffs.

She sounds irritated that these ants were attempting to do her job.

[Yes, let them go.]

She uncoils her limbs and each of the nineteen insects she'd captured sprints away into the shadows where they disappear. It's uncanny how fast it happens. Despite not moving, I can tell that the remaining ant in my mandibles is feeling distinctly hopeful. She seems to be hanging in a more optimistic way. I just need one thing before I let her go.

"Name."

...

I give her a shake.

"Name. I'll let you go, once I get your name. They *did* name you, right?"

A pause.

"... Protectant."

Really?! Not that I can judge I suppose.

"Thanks for looking out for me, Protectant. I'll be having a chat with Advant later, and then with you and your sisters. Right now, we need to get back to work."

With that, I let her drop and she dashes away to join her team out of sight. As satisfying as it is to drag this little group out into the light, I have other things to worry about. As the seconds drag by, I keep thinking about the Legion fort and beyond that, what the future is going to look like for this city. The trick is, we can't leave them alone, not anymore. We know that they can build gates, what's to stop them doing it again?

A consideration for another time... and probably one that I punt to the council, let them work it out. Maybe the humans from the village can help, I don't know. Having to manage some sort of subservient city state under the control of an ant colony feels a little odd. Ah well, maybe I'll let Beyn at them, he seems to be able to sell just about anyone on the concept of ant messiahs.

Chrysalis

Chapter 576: Silent Halls

You might think it would be challenging to operate in a territory administered by ants. Indeed, I have heard many express such sentiments, going so far as to insinuate that I'm suffering from an affliction of the mind when I tell them otherwise. Any attempt to explain on my part is waved away as the ravings of a lunatic. Good thing they'll still trade, even if they refuse to engage in proper discourse. Gold forged by ants is still gold, as it turns out.

It just made so much sense! It took a little adjusting to, of course, but once I did, my business began to thrive! Perhaps I had an edge in that department, as I was far quicker to accept the new status quo than many of my competitors. The bribes? The under the table deals? Gone, overnight. You can't bribe an ant! There were many who tried, only to stand rather awkwardly, a purse covertly extended in one hand as a giant insect stared back at them, uncomprehending. The entire concept of commerce was foreign to their society. They didn't sell, or buy, or trade in any way, but once they understood the fundamental nature of it: fair compensation in exchange for goods and services, then they decided to ensure that that's what would happen! Any merchant who failed to see the light was hurt in the simplest and most profound way possible: crippling fines.

Overcharging? Half your business gone, overnight. Fraudulent goods? Half, vanished. Repeat offenders were out of business in a week. No matter how they tried to conceal their shoddy dealings, the ants always sniffed them out. They wailed and gnashed their teeth as they appealed to the council, but the ants didn't care. Why would they? When it was suggested that the penalties might be too onerous, they were genuinely puzzled and rejected any compromise. Since the seized materials were immediately and efficiently distributed to the poor in the city, there was a blossoming of support amongst the people for the new administrators.

Thus, a new playing field was created for the merchant Class. A place administered by uncorruptible, brutally fair and somehow almost omniscient creatures who questioned the very existence of business. With such dramatic drops in costs, the ants insisted the savings be passed on, 'fair' compensation, after all. The drop in prices allowed many who could never access my goods to now become customers, and the volumes I moved rose and rose.

For an honest businessman, nothing is better than working for ants!

Excerpt from "Letter to Bilanan of Tulson" by the merchant Chulo of Rylleh"

It takes the Colony a few hours to search through the entire city thoroughly. Every building, every mansion, every room and every cellar is opened for insect inspection. Sometime during the process word comes back from the force the Queen led to the Legion fort informing us that it was empty. Not a single soul was found inside the walls. What's more, papers, documentation, cores, rare materials, all gone. Several forges and workshops were scraped entirely clean, not a piece of wire or pliers left behind to indicate what they may have been working on in there.

It's clear that they realised we were coming in advance and wiped clean all traces of themselves and their technology from the fort before abandoning it. How much notice would they have needed to pull that off? A day? Two? Did they realise what was happening once we began testing the defences around the city, or did they have some other means of detecting our presence? The possibility also exists that they were recalled in preparation for an assault on another front after receiving a call for aid from the golgari.

No matter which of those situations turns out to be true, it doesn't bode well for us. The gates were found within the fort, just as captain Wallace had suggested they would be, and were summarily taken apart and returned to the nest for further study. Lending further credence to his words, no other gates were found anywhere in the city, not even in the largest and most wealthy looking abodes. In this city at least, running a private gateway appears to have been too expensive to justify.

With our immediate mission complete and the safety of the Colony secured for the short term, the Colony begins to move out of the city. The headache of having to administer the city as part of the colony's territory also begins to make itself known as Beyn enters into negotiations on our behalf. He arranges for a full meeting of the Rylleh city council in the next day, decreeing how many ants will remain in the city and where they should go, what the guardsmen will be allowed to do and not do. It's a nightmare that I simply don't have the attention to detail to handle.

Besides that, I have my own council meeting to attend. We need to decide what the next steps are going to be given the conquest of the city has gone according to our best case scenario.

"We still have no idea where they're going to come for us from," Sloan grumbles.

"At least we can be confident that it isn't going to be from here. Which means the expansion and construction of the new nests can proceed," Tungstant sounds pleased at the prospect.

"I agree, we need to expand," I say, "not just across the second strata either. We can't afford to be ignoring any resource. We need more surface nests and to grow our reach in the first strata also. The more territory we can balloon into, the sooner we'll know where they're coming from."

The council reacts with muted surprise at my words. I suppose they didn't expect me to be advocating for reckless expansion.

"We can do that, Eldest. It steps our timetable forward a bit, but we can do it," Cobalt says.

"We also need to expand down," I tell them firmly, "there's a good chance that even though the first and second strata in this area are largely abandoned, that the richer territory beneath us is likely to have been claimed. There'll be more cities with gates, and races like the golgari, who've made their civilisation in the depths of the Dungeon. I think the direction of the attack will come from below."

"Pushing down is dangerous," Victor warns me, "the Colony doesn't know enough of what goes on down there."

"That's why I need to go," I say and before they can protest and I continue, "not on my own, not this time. I'll take Vibrant and her team, and I'll have my new *protectors* along for the ride."

I glare at Advant and she wilts a little.

"We need to send the strongest we have to uncover as much as we can, as quickly as possible. This is the best way to get the job done. I don't intend to take any unnecessary risks, but in my view, Dungeon exploration is key to our survival. Not only because of what we can learn, but because we need to continue to level up and evolve our people if we want to survive."

Myself, Tiny, Crinis and Invidia are still the strongest non-Queens in the Colony and we need to continue to power ourselves up to meet the threats that will face us. We can't be everywhere at once, so others need to step up with us, Vibrant being the obvious next choice.

"I advise that we push for further integration with the human village," Coolant interjects. "They've proven that they can be useful to be our face when we interact with non-Dungeon spawn and I think it would be wise to continue to do so."

I'm a little shocked to hear this coming from ... not me. The rest of the council are happy to include humans?

"I agree," Ellie speaks up, "many of our advancements have come from interacting with those people, I'm sure there's still a lot we can learn. We could look at establishing new villages alongside each of our surface nests, to ensure that there's always someone to 'talk for us'."

"That's a greater level of cooperation than we anticipated embracing," Advant sounds unconvinced, "would they really be willing to accept such a thing? Where would we even find the people to populate new villages? They don't seem to be able to increase their numbers like we do."

The rest of the council nod as they consider this massive failing of the human race. I can't help but laugh inside. Yes, they aren't producing hundreds of new children every day like we are, it doesn't quite work like that for them! More's the pity, if we could churn out devoted human helpers at even ten per day, it would be a serious help.

"I'll scatter the scouts and get them ranging away from the nests, we'll shoot for as wide an area of coverage as possible," Burke tells the group. "With any luck, we'll be able to catch them coming a long way out."

"I'll lead a team toward the golgari territory," Wills offers, "they'll most likely come through that area."

"We should meet back at the main nest in around a week. Does that seem reasonable to everyone?" Sloan asks.

None of the members take any issue with that, and so the various council members disperse. Vibrant hops towards me, full of energy.

"Hey-hey! Ready to go and explore! Just like old times! I hope we go fast, we'll go fast right? Lots of ground to cover after all! Let's go, go, go!"

I'm already regretting this...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 577: Downward growth

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"Are we there yet?"

"Dammit, Vibrant! NO! It's going to take us a while to get there, okay?! We're moving as fast as we can already. We can't go any faster than this. Just think of something else to talk about!"

A moment of blessed, blessed silence descends amongst our group as we run through the tunnels. My pets and I are all here, along with Vibrant and her whole posse, several hundred ants at this point, as well as my twenty 'shadow helpers.' This is the advance group of powerful troops that I've chosen to take on a push further into the depths of the Dungeon. A special mission, in a sense. If the warning given to me by Corun and Torrinn is true, then there's likely to be more settlements, cities, probably larger ones than Rylleh, below us. My suspicion is that the next closest path of attack is likely to be from deeper in the third strata or perhaps even in the fourth. The Colony needs to get its eyes as deep as possible and we will be the vanguard of that.

I still feel a little useless. Although I think this work is necessary and that we're the best group in the Colony for the job, I have to say that the *real* work, of building the nests, rearing the young, developing the culture and taming new territory, you know, actually constructing the kingdom of the Colony, is being left for the others. We're just off to fight and snoop around. It kind of feels strange to consider my family as now large enough, and powerful enough, to be taking territory and building something that is closer to a nation than a family. But hey, hard to keep a good ant down. Can't really fault them for being the industrious, powerful and all around awesome collective of kick-ass insects. They gonna do what they gonna do.

As the Eldest, it's my duty to oversee and support them as they grow! Not to inhibit their dreams and desires!

"Are we there yet?"

"GAH! Vibrant! Aren't you evolved now? All grown? You're a leader, you have your squad that follows you around and all that? You have a position on the council! How the heck are you still this impatient?!"

"What do you mean? I've always been like this! Why? Do you think there's some reason for me to change? I've just kept on doing things the way I've always done them! It's been working out okay!"

I eye her sceptically. She's still this casual and cavalier, yet things have been working out alright? Somehow I'm doubting that. I take a moment to have a look at the group of ants that is dutifully following along in their leader's wake. If Vibrant actually hasn't changed from the hyper-energetic, impulsive and enthusiastic ant that I recall, how the heck are any of these Colony members still alive?!

One of the smaller ants trailing along behind us appears to nod her head a little at my words before catching herself and checking to make sure Vibrant hasn't noticed. Vibrant, of course, hasn't, as she's too busy nattering on and flicking her antennae in every direction as new scents make themselves known to her. Sigh. I honestly thought she'd grown past this stage. Perhaps all the organs and mutations she has that emphasise speed are just making her experience moments of relatively normal movement

as painfully slow? I mean, we're all running right now, but there's no doubt that she could speed ahead of us with ease should she choose to do so.

"Well, what have you been doing lately? I can see that your group has grown in size again. How do you recruit members, anyway? They just show up out of the blue?"

"Uhhh, where's the blue? This place is pretty dark, is this the black? The mana in the first strata is blue! Do you mean they come from the first strata? I suppose so since that's where we're all raised. Not me though! I spent a lot of time on the surface when I was a hatchling, didn't I? I mean, I don't need to tell you that, you were there too. Well, not all the time, but you know what I mean."

"I do."

This is exhausting.

"No, it's just a saying that refers to... never mind. Where do they come from?"

"Oh well, I don't know really. They approach me and ask if they can join the group and I always say yes, because, why not? We're ants, after all! We're happier and more effective the more of us are around!"

She says that as if it were just common sense and I suppose for ants it is. I can think of a lot of humans who didn't necessarily enjoy the company of other people. I mean, as a human I frequently tried to get people to enjoy my company, but I don't think I could say I was successful. I mean, my parents certainly didn't like spending time with me, given the whole abandonment thing. I guess not all humans enjoy company? Personally, the ant vibe is good, now that I'm more accustomed to it. The more of my siblings there are, the more comfortable I feel.

"So you don't have any criteria or anything? Everyone is welcome?"

"Yep-yep!"

I turn my attention toward the smaller ant I noticed behind us and she tenses immediately, not expecting me to focus on her.

"So tell me, what made you want to follow Vibrant?"

I mean, I know that Vibrant is a champion monster, as they're described by the humans. Individuals born with higher stats, better evolutions and a strange capacity for leadership that attracts others towards them. To my knowledge, another champion is yet to be born in the Colony, but it's only a matter of time. The more we understand them and the way they work, the better we can make use of their talents.

The ant, a general by the look of her, considers my question seriously for a moment before she answers.

"I felt that aiding and assisting Vibrant would be the best outcome for the Colony and for myself. I believe I made the right choice, considering all that we've been able to achieve."

Good answer. Vibrant and her team have been in the hottest and most active areas of the Colony's expansion, for sure. Not to mention the role they played in extracting my butt from the fire after I was captured. Interesting that she put forward that she was motivated by a 'feeling'. Was that inspired by the mysterious champion quality that Vibrant possesses?

[Masssster.]

[Oh. What's up Invidia? You sense something?]

[I foundsss an expanssssse. I crave its secretss!]

[And you'll get 'em chief!]

Not that you'll be satisfied...

"Hey, Vibrant. Invidia says he's found an expanse nearby."

"Yay-yay! Let's gooooo!"

And she's off.

"I didn't tell you WHERE! HEY?!"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 578: The dark web

Any person of sufficient courage, who has walked the Dungeon long enough to know its pain and glory, will come to hunger for the power that is buried at the root of this world.

Words attributed to Gaius Magnus, founding member of the Legionem Abyssii

We're moving in. It feels nice, in a way, to be boldly adventuring where no ant has gone before alongside my fellow Colony members. We creep toward the powerful flow of mana that Invidia has sensed, making short work of any monster that happens to pop up in our way. I almost feel sorry for the critters as they're set upon by dozens of ants before I even get my mandibles open. I could push my way to the front, but somehow I don't feel it's appropriate for me to hog all the experience for myself. The Colony is going to need other powerful members, that's why I brought Vibrant and her group here to begin with. Which reminds me...

"PROTECTANT!"

Vibrant and the other ants around me all twitch in surprise as I flood the tunnel with pheromones. Vibrant in particular has a quizzical tilt to her antennae as she looks at me. If I'm guessing correctly, she probably had nothing to do with the plan to put twenty baby sitters around me. Even if they discussed it in front of her, I doubt Vibrant would have been interested enough to follow along. This sort of scheming is completely not her style.

I wait for two minutes before I decide to call again.

"GET OUT HERE PROTECTANT OR I SWEAR I'LL GET THE COUNCIL TO REASSIGN YOU TO GUARDING LEEROY!"

It only takes a few seconds for her to appear over my head, clinging to the roof of the tunnel. She looks a little sulky and I feel a little bad for my threat.

"This isn't supposed to be part of how we operate, Eldest," she says.

She's lucky I can't roll my eyes.

"Oh, I know all about Operation Silent Shield. Gawd. I called you here because I need to make sure you understand something. The council, Advant, Sloan, even the Queen, are not the ones who tell you how to do this job. I do. If we can work together, then we'll all have happier lives and more safety than if I have to keep guessing what it is you're going to do."

She remains silent and watchful as I speak and I can almost hear the gears turning in her head and she thinks over my words.

"If you're thinking of activating some stupid protocol that you were taught where you pretend to cooperate with me but just keep doing things the way they told you, I'm going to be super annoyed."

Twitch.

She's so easy to read. Perhaps it's because she's so used to not being seen at all? If nobody can see her, or doesn't notice her, what would be the point of learning to control your reactions? A blind spot in their training.

"Look, all I want to say for now is that you need to be careful before you jump out of nowhere and take a hit for me. You're no use to anyone dead. In this expanse I just want you lot to pick around the edges and secure some xp and Biomass for yourselves."

She looks at me steadily for a moment.

"That's not really what we were trained to do, Eldest."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're meant to live the most sacrificial lives in the history of the Colony. Always on duty, never resting, never a moment of peace. It's all super noble and everything, but let me ask you this question. If I evolve and I'm tier six, whilst you're all still tier four, what exactly are you going to protect me from that I can't handle myself?"

...

I let that thought sit in the air as Protectant digests it before I dismiss her with a flick of my antenna. She gratefully fades away into the darkness to join her fellows and I feel Crinis stir on my abdomen.

[Problem, Crinis?]

[I don't like the way these newcomers have tried to take your security as their responsibility.]

[It's not something that I chose, or something that they chose. We may as well make sure they're useful, since they're here. Not to worry, I still consider you my real last line of defence.]

HRK!

Letting her emotions get the better of her, Crinis dang near puts a crack in my carapace by gripping on too tight. Trying to push the discomfort from my mind, I push forward with the others and before long we arrive at the entrance of this new expanse. The pure, dark mana flows into our faces and wraps around us as the ground drops away beneath our feet. In front of us a vast space opens up, the shadow mana so thick that it swirls in massive currents, like rope coiling around itself. The largest detail that really hits home is that the whole place is covered in webs. Giant webs. Monstrous, mountainous webs.

Clinging to the gaps between the strands of the huge web, are just more webs! What the heck is this place?!

"That looks nasty," Vibrant complains, her antennae twitching with disgust as she looks out onto the mess that awaits us.

"I bet half of it's poisoned as well..." I mutter.

The air amongst the group has certainly fallen, except for with Tiny. The big ape is positively grinning, his eyes blazing with a fierce light as his fists clench at his sides.

[You want to get revenge, eh big fella?] I ask him.

He nods vigorously and bellows as he slams his chest.

[SMASH!] he roars in my mind.

A word! An actually properly formed word! I mean, if there was going to be one word that he got right, it was going to be that one!

[Good stuff Tiny!, we'll get in there and tear those stupid webs to shreds!]

"Come on, team! This is a chance to strike a blow against the foul arachnid menace and ensure they remember for all time the superiority of the insect! For the colony!"

"FOR THE COLONY!"

"Down with the arachnids!"

"FOR THE COLONY!"

Close enough. Our group pushes forward into the expanse and immediately begins to descend, scaling the rocky wall and making sure to avoid the webs where they connect to the stone. We hear the chittering and clacking of hateful spiders in the darkness as we move, but we ignore them all. Their time will come, but not yet. Our conquest of this expanse is going to come from the territory where we are superior, the ground. Making our way up into the nightmare tangle of webs will come later, after we test and ensure the safety of the footing.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 579: The truly disgusting face of the foe

The floor of this particular expanse is quite similar to the last one I was in. Long fronds of those spined weed like plants that drift and bend with the flow of shadow mana in the air. The stone coral is also present, but the huge strands of web that are anchored to the rock dominate the space that we can see. I can detect flickers of mana in just about every direction, monsters huddling away from this new invasion of their space. An interesting point is that I can feel mana flowing through the massive webs I can see also. The spiders that made these must be similar to the one that poisoned Tiny.

"Be careful of the webs," I warn everyone around me, "there's shadow mana infused inside."

There are a few mages in Vibrant's group and they quickly busy themselves running over to the nearest web and investigate it, their antennae quivering with eagerness.

[You watch yourself,] I say to Tiny, [I don't know if you're immune to the influence of that mana or not, but I don't see any reason to take a chance, do you?]

The big ape looks mad but he shakes his head with a grimace. The pain of having your insides constantly eaten away seems to have made a lasting impression on him. Since his evolution, I'm pretty sure he would be at the very least, resistant to the effects of that mana, but we have absolutely no reason to push our luck.

[Any chance I can send you out on a scouting mission?] I ask Crinis.

[No.]

Haaah.

[Fine. I guess we'll just hold here for a moment as we get our bearings. Invidia! Let's do some practice!]

The magical skills grind is never ending and today is no exception. Invidia practices his shields, forming barriers out of hardened mana in the air as I blast them with whatever element I happen to be practicing. That, or we engage in mind magic duels, which I almost always lose. I think that once I manage to evolve again, I'll be able to have the raw power to keep up with him. If I combine higher stats with sufficient mind magic ability to create those mental constructs that he uses, I might even be able to come out ahead!

For now I work on my fire magic. I know that it's effective against these stupid spiders and their webs so I want to ensure I'm well practiced with my constructs. The fire bolt, fire spear, even the fire domain might come in handy in this place. The fire domain is a little tricky to use though. My allies and pets aren't affected by the flames of the domain itself, but since it produces such ridiculous amounts of heat, that it tends to set everything around it on fire and *those* flames can absolutely burn my allies, as Tiny found out. Considering how flammable these spiders have proven to be, the use of the domain might be questionable.

Vibrant, being who she is, doesn't share my patience and decides to lead a group to scout the surrounding area, screaming at me about how she'll 'just take a quick look!'. Naturally, she returns ten minutes later with the severed pieces of a monster gripped in her mandibles.

"Eldest! Look at what I found!"

"Did you 'find' it, or did you chase it down and bite it until it questioned its life choices?"

"One of those! Yes!"

The creature itself appears to be some sort of scorpion? Hardened carapace (of an inferior sort) in segments that support a powerful looking tail. When I take a closer look at the barbed point of that tail, I notice an interesting detail.

"Did this thing shoot barbs from its tail?" I ask Vibrant.

"Oh, yeah! They were fast, too! I mean, not *fast* fast, like me, but quick!"

I thought so. The musculature at the tip is oddly shaped and way too bulky for just stabbing. Looks like it's all attached to some sinew which acts as a launching mechanism. The barbs themselves are probably

formed deeper in the tail so there's a ready stock of ammunition. Seeing the claws and tail is bringing up some bad memories for me. If those damn centipedes pop up in here then this expanse is going to experience the full measure of my wrath.

Still, this is evidence that there's more than just one type of arachnid making a home here in this expanse. The eight legged menace has truly gained a strong foothold in this cursed place! I can tell from the ants around me that they too are burning with outrage and disgust at the appearance of these *wrong* things. It's time to go to war!

"Enough waiting, we'll leave the webs for later. For now, we can sweep around this area and clean up anything that we can get our mandibles on! If it has the wrong number of legs, it is to be destroyed without mercy!"

[Come on guys, let's get hunting.]

Without further ado, teams of ants, a *very* excited Vibrant and my group swarm out into the darkness. Acting as coordinated units, the native monsters are unable to put up much resistance before our onslaught. I have fun operating twin flame throwers and roasting whatever gets in front of me as Crinis performs her dark work and Tiny punches everything into pieces. For his part, Invidia acts as the perfect support mage, shielding and healing whilst unleashing his potent disruptive capabilities of illusion and bewilderment.

The monsters we find are, for the most part, more of the scorpion variety, though we do start to come across some spiders. Nimble creatures of shadow and death, they constantly try to launch sneak attacks, creeping from the dark with their glistening mandibles ready to puncture our defences. With Crinis and Invidia on the lookout, they never had much chance, but when we regroup it's clear that a few of Vibrant's squad weren't so lucky.

[Invidia, see what you can do to heal them.]

[*Yessss. I sssshall takess their suffering!*]

[Good stuff.]

There are already healer ants picking over the wounded, but Invidia has a lot more oomph when it comes to magic.

"Stupid sneaky spiders!" Vibrant complains, "jumping out of the shadows like that!"

She's fussing over the injured as she declares her disgust for the deplorable stealth tactics of the enemy.

"This is their hunting method. No point complaining about it, we just need to come up with countermeasures. What have we learned?"

"Well, there's a *lot*, and I mean a *lot* of monsters out there. They look like they're trying to give us a run for our money in the numbers department, Eldest! They're dumb and like creeping up from behind, which works super good here in the dark, and they can jump down from those webs! The scorpion things are also around, but they're not much trouble. Their barbs are poisoned though."

"Oh, how do you know?"

"I'm poisoned right now."

...

"Medic!"

Chrysalis

Chapter 580: Prepare to strike

Thanks to our advanced medical techniques, or at least, advanced compared to how primitive they were before, our wounded compatriots are back on their feet in a relatively short amount of time.

"Let me up!"

Ah, the truly wondrous cooperation that members of the same colony can display. It's heart-warming.

"I won't run! This time!"

The collective and unselfish nature of the ant is a marvel of nature. The healers see to their injured siblings not only with care and dedication, but true joy, as they fulfill their chosen purpose and dedicate their labour to the glory of our family.

"Eldest! I'll be good!"

Over here we have a slightly different example. An ant being sat on by a giant gorilla because she refused to sit still whilst the poison she readily admitted to coursing through her veins was expunged. How impatient can you get?! Too impatient to be healed of frickin' poison?! There's a limit! Luckily, Invidia was on the ball and before Vibrant had managed to get up a full head of steam, she ran mandibles first into a barrier which stunned her long enough for Tiny to latch onto her leg. After a brief wrestle that she was destined to lose, I asked Tiny to ensure she remained still for the rest of her treatment, so he sat on her. For some reason, she's chosen to persistently complain about this eminently satisfactory outcome.

"What is the problem, Vibrant? You are poisoned. You are getting healed. Because you couldn't sit still long enough for that to happen, you are being pressed to the ground by ape butt. None of this should be confusing to you!"

"I'm boooooored!"

"WHO CARES?!"

"Oh! Me! Me!"

"THAT WAS RHETORICAL!"

GAH! I'm going to burst a valve or something.

"Just be sat on until we get the all clear and next time don't get bit, alright?"

We haven't even gotten up into the vast tangle of webs above our heads, the true home territory of this gang of spiders, and already we're having trouble with tactics. If we constantly have to stop and purge poison from amongst the ranks, then we'll have a slow time of it indeed. If we get jumped by a swarm

with half of our members out of action due to poisoning... I'd be fine, more likely than not, but the regular ants with us wouldn't be so lucky. The objective here is to level up Vibrant's squad, not get them wiped out.

"Do we have any generals around here?"

One of the ants nearby raises an antenna in response to my question.

"Yes, Eldest. I'm Emilia, one of Vibrant's generals."

This is the ant I saw on the way here, running along at Vibrant's heels.

"Emilia? She named you?"

"She's named most of us, Eldest."

The general sounds proud of the fact, which is fine. I never claimed to have some divine right to name all ants, it's just curious that Vibrant would take it on herself to hand out names. I wonder why she did. Just because I did? That seems unlikely. Perhaps now that the ants know about the concept of names, they're beginning to grow fond of the idea? I think I'd like that, if it were true. I mean, technically we'd all have the same last name, being descended from the same individual. And it appears we may have finally reached the stage where the word 'ant' doesn't have to feature in every name.

"Alright then, Emilia. I think we should mix up our strategy for our next outing. Mages in every group, light up the area to reduce sneak attack opportunities, scouts with eyes on the sky. Keep the groups close together in case the flames attract too much attention. We can shut off the fire and work on clearing out the mess. Also, do we have any core shapers in this group?"

Emilia looks at me a little confused for a moment.

"We do, Eldest. But why are you telling me this?"

"So, we can... so we can do the things I've suggested?"

"We follow Vibrant."

Oh really?! Interesting! They are in fact loyal to Vibrant in such a direct way that they won't do what I tell them, just because I tell them to? That's neat! Far from being frustrated or mad about it, I feel somewhat happy. Finally, some people who won't just do everything I say! Having everyone following my instructions is beyond weird, given my previous life. As a human, I don't think anyone did what I suggested even once...

At any rate, this situation is an easy enough fix.

"Hey Vibrant, should Emilia do what I said?"

"Will you let me up?!"

"Sure."

"Do it, Emmy!"

[Tiny, let her up.]

[Haaah.]

The big ape almost seems a little disappointed at having to relinquish his comfortable seat. Freed from the rather burdensome weight the gorilla posed, Vibrant springs to her feet and immediately dashes around in a blistering circle.

"Ahhh! I need to move my legs! All six are cramping!"

"Vibrant!"

"Yep-yep!" she cheerfully replies without stopping her sprint.

"Sit down and let the healers finish checking you or I'll get Crinis to hold you down this time!"

"Crin-Crin wouldn't do that!"

"Wanna bet?"

"What's a bet?"

"SIT!" I flood the area with a roar of pheromones which are apparently just persuasive enough to make Vibrant stop running. "Now, what did you think of my idea?"

"Hmm? Ah! I thought it sounded good! We're best suited for high speed fighting though, so I think we should make sure every group keeps moving! I can stay in the middle and help out where I need. I can be there in a flash!"

"That's... actually a good idea."

Vibrant and her squad are just as she said, specialised in moving, hit and run style fights. After joining her squad, most of the members have taken at least one mutation to enhance their speed and train their dashing skills relentlessly. When her generals evolved to tier four, they unanimously chose a speed or agility aura power to supplement their existing combat aura. The result is an incredibly mobile force that does its best work on the run.

"Alright then Vibrant, we'll do it as you've suggested, how does that sound, Emilia?"

The tier four general salutes with one antenna toward Vibrant and then me.

"I'll see it done!"

She quickly scuttles off to arrange things with the other generals of the group and before long teams are being reforged and more detailed movement plans being discussed. I only have one more thing I need to organise before I'm ready to go.

"Protectant, make sure you and your team secure experience and Biomass during this outing. I want a full report when we're done."

...

"Understood."

The message is barely a whisper against my antennae and the ant herself refuses to step out of hiding, but it appears I've gotten my point across. There is a metric boatload of spiders in this expanse, should be enough experience for all of us! In fact, the numbers make me curious if all of these eight-legged beasties are spawned, or if a giant spider momma exists in this expanse and has taken over the place. The truly giant, kilometres high web seems to suggest that a big ol' spider is living in here somewhere. If she's laying eggs, then a ridiculous population of young would make perfect sense. Perhaps if I eat and get a few profiles I might get an answer to that question. Although spiders don't produce at quite the same prodigious rate as ants, they can lay up to a thousand eggs in a single clutch, depending on the species. That's a pittance compared to say, army ant queens, who lay around three-hundred thousand per day, but spiders are usually a lot more capable on their own than a single ant. Heck, army ants are pretty much blind, and the workers are tiny. Not that it matters with those sorts of numbers.

Imagine if my colony was producing three hundred thousand new hatchlings every day... Yeesh. It'd get out of control pretty darn fast.