

Chrysalis 711

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Chapter 711: The Sanctum of Sleep pt 4

"Where you followed?"

"I don't think so..."

"You THINK? THINKING isn't good enough!"

"Cool it! Your scent is spreading too far. Are you trying to bring them down on our heads?"

"... I'm sorry. I'm just so stressed."

"And tired? Maybe you should sleep! Torpor usually takes care of that. So I'm told, I don't do it much. I find it's too slow for my pace. So, what have you all been up to? I've been running around doing heeeaaaps of stuff. It's so busy right now! I can't believe how much stuff there is to do! Can you? And the Eldest is Evolving! That's exciting! I wonder..."

"Vibrant! I'm too tired to listen to you for too long today, can you wait a second while we try and get settled?"

The hyper-energetic soldier subsided with a sigh whilst the rest of the Council settled into the crude and cramped chamber that had been prepared for the meeting. A far cry from the luxurious carved surroundings of the normal meeting chamber, this room was intended for use as a Biomass storage chamber, recently emptied of its stockpile in order to fuel the Eldest's evolution. It was small, dark, cramped, and best of all, almost nobody in the nest knew that it was even available. Perfect for a group of ants attempting to avoid being dragged off to torpor.

They were all there, even Antionette and Victorian. Sneaking that pair out of the nesting chamber was a feat in and of itself. It would have been impossible without the assistance of the Queen, who aided them in the interests of seeing the two younger royals get out of the egg-laying chamber more often. A sedentary life being waited on hand and foot wasn't healthy for a good Queen, in her opinion.

"You calmed down yet, Sloan?"

The general nervously rubbed her antennae through her forelegs.

"I think so. I've been so damned busy, and arranging this on top of everything else has been such a hassle..."

"I feel like those damned torpor enforcers were giving us a break during the siege. A ton of ants, including almost all of us, went well under the required amount of rest and there were hardly any dragged away. Now that the siege is over, they've been popping out of the woodwork all over the place! I lost every member of my two best teams today!" Bella complained. "They just vanished! I walked past their work area one minute, all of them were altering cores, I come back two minutes later, gone! No traces!"

They all shuddered.

"I say they've gone too far!" Advant slammed an antenna down on the rock they'd gathered around with force. "The Eldest did demand that we all sleep, but forcing us to sleep against our will? Don't they understand how much work there is to do?! There's a wave on right now!"

"They're following the commands of the Eldest," Burke wryly informed them, "are you really going to go and tell them that the Eldest was wrong and that their orders don't need to be obeyed? Or perhaps, you want to go to the Eldest and tell them that they are wrong?"

Every member of the Council felt the pain of a thousand thwacks echo from deep within their memory at those words. No. No they wouldn't be going to the Eldest and asking them to change their policy.

"Let's just focus on what we came here to do," Coolant injected wearily, "I know all of us are well past due for a rest, and we *will* need to enter torpor at some point. Let's make use of the time we have productively."

"Agreed!" The others chorused and they quickly settled in to conduct their business.

"First off, let's go around the table for a status update, starting with the carvers."

"Ahem. Work on the new gates has been progressing..."

The council began their deliberations, each focused on the meeting and trying to take in the overall state of the Colony during this critical time so that they might better offer their own perspective and wisdom. Underneath it all, though none would admit, there was also a slight fission of smug self-satisfaction. They'd done it. It had taken a frankly ridiculous amount of work and preparation, but they'd finally slipped the noose and left the torpor police in the dust. For that reason, the meeting progressed with a renewed sense of energy and excitement, a shared feeling of triumph surging within each member of the council.

The nameless one could almost smell it on them.

Look how happy they are, rubbing their hard work right into the Eldest's face, one of the team members signed from the roof.

Focus, the nameless one signed back in a short, sharp gesture.

She too felt irritated by such blatant disobedience beings shown by the only ants in the Colony to have received the instruction of the Eldest directly, but it was useless emotion that hindered the work. She would pay it no mind.

Be wary of your positioning, she signed again, and saw several shadows shift slightly as the others checked themselves.

The room was small, with hardly any space to operate in. If it weren't for the intervention of the Shadow, they would never have reached this place before the council arrived. Sneaking in with all twenty in the room already would have been almost impossible. As it was, they were limited in how many of the order were able to hide within the chamber, the other teams were positioned in the tunnels outside.

The nameless one looked down from her position at Vibrant in particular. The soldier looked full of energy, practically bouncing with impatience as she waited for her turn to speak. She'd checked the

Vibrant board within the Sanctum before she'd left and she knew for a fact it had been three days since the last time Vibrant had rested. Even then, she'd only been in torpor for *thirty minutes*.

We're going to get you this time, the nameless one promised herself, there's no way out for you now...

Unaware of their surroundings, the council members attended to their business in high spirits. They were halfway through discussing the placement of the second farming expansion when their antennae reacted to a new scent at the same time.

"Working hard I see..."

Each of them froze in place at that sinister scent and slowly turned their focus to the ceiling, where they finally noticed the unnaturally dark shadow above their heads, a shadow that slowly materialised into an ant staring down at them with cold indifference.

"But work time is... OVER!"

"Oh shoot! Everyone scramble!" Sloan cried.

Bedlam erupted in an instant. The two Queens were the first to fall, two ants leapt from the corners of the room and released some sort of sleep pheromone directly onto their antennae, causing them to slump over into slumber almost immediately.

"Come and get me!" Leeroy yelled, her heavy armour clanking and screeching as she tried to manoeuvre in the narrow space.

A wall of ants leapt through the door into the room, dividing themselves instantly amongst the various council members and working to subdue them with expert precision.

Cobalt and Tungstant fell next. It was a close thing, but they were seized and rendered unconscious with strikes to the thorax, cutting off the mana supply to the brain, just as they attempted to slip into a hidden escape tunnel that they must have dug in advance. Overwhelmed, the other council members could only put up a token resistance before, with cries of dismay, they too were taken down.

All except one.

"Too slow! Too slow!" Cackling madly, Vibrant burst out of the chamber and into the tunnel, somehow *sliding* past the waiting mandibles of the nameless one, who had positioned herself above the door for this moment.

Dammit!

Cursing to herself, the nameless one gripped with two legs and swung her body through the entrance and into the corridor, latching onto the ceiling and sprinting in the same millisecond.

"Nap time, Vibrant!" Came an authoritative voice.

The nameless one looked up and saw that the members of her order had formed a blockade further up the tunnel, using their bodies to close off the opening.

Not enough, the nameless one sighed.

Vibrant merely laughed and accelerated even further. The wall of ants readied themselves for impact, bracing their legs, gripping with their claws and extending their mandibles. There was no way she could get past all of th-

WHOOSH!

Vibrant's entire body flickered and vanished, only to reappear on the other side of the blockade a split second later. She stood there, completely still for a moment, as the ants behind her appeared frozen in time. Then, one by one, they began to fall.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

They peeled off the wall and landed on the hard stone floor, unconscious.

"Tsk! Tsk! Need to keep up!" Vibrant laughed.

SNAP!

So close!

The nameless one had known the others would not succeed and had run straight through, trusting that Vibrant would clear the obstruction for her, which she did. Her sneak attack, launching from the wall, was so close to being a success, but she was noticed at the last second.

"That wasn't half bad," Vibrant clacked her mandibles joyfully, "but you'll need to be better than that to put me to sleep!"

The nameless one felt helpless as she saw the soldier set her legs. Once she dashed away, there would be no chance of catching up to her...

"See you next time!" Vibrant laughed.

DASH!

BAM!

It took a moment for the nameless one to understand what she was seeing. Instead of vanishing into the distance, Vibrant had somehow tripped herself up and landed flat on her face! What could possibly have happened?!

"Crin-Crin? ... why ... would ... you?" Vibrant croaked, her face half buried in the stone floor.

Only then did the nameless one notice the bottomless shadow that had formed beneath the escaping soldier, and the many barbed limbs that had emerged to seize hold of her legs.

The Shadow!

Unwilling to let this chance slip the nameless one launched herself onto Vibrant's back and clamped her mandibles down just below her head.

"Don't worry, Vibrant," the nameless one couldn't resist saying, "You'll be in our care for a *looong* time. Rest well."

"Noooooooo....oooooooo.....oo....."

Struggling to the end, Vibrant finally went limp, but even then the nameless one held and counted to eight before releasing her grip. Her job done, she leapt down from Vibrant's back and bowed toward the deep shadow and the tentacles that were already fading back to nothing. She imagined that one of them waved to her before it sank into the dark, but it may have been a trick of the light.

Later.

And that's how we finally caught Vibrant, the nameless one signed to her friend.

Wow! The shadow in the flesh! You've had a busy shift to say the least! Where were the council when you saw them last?

In the cells, the nameless one couldn't help but have a smug slant to her antennae as she signed her reply, they're getting the full treatment. Massage, carapace wax and shine, aromatherapy, full body clean, the works.

They'll wake up so refreshed!

Yes, the nameless one sighed in satisfaction, yes they will.

Good work, nameless ones. Please take your deserved rest, as the Eldest intended, the acolyte signed to them.

The ants shuffled onto their segment of the fulcrum, the nameless one already feeling her entire body going slack. Torpor awaited, and she readily allowed it to drag her mind to stillness. In eight hours, she would wake, and the hunt would be on once more...

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Chapter 712: Royal High Tea pt 1

Enid once again checked her appearance in the polished brass mirror that the Colony had provided for her room. It normally wasn't something she would bother with, but today's appointment was something special, after all. She knew the Queen, first of her kind amongst the Colony, wasn't exactly royalty in the *technical* sense, but the giant ant did possess a certain aura that demanded respect and Enid refused to give less than the proper dues as the mayor of Renewal.

The refugees who made their home above were dependent on the Colony in more ways than one. No longer did they rely on the ants for labour or materials, they had grown to the point where they could provide such things for themselves, most of the time, but their ongoing survival still rested in the mandibles of these creatures. Should Anthony and his kind ever turn on them, the town, and everyone in it, would be swept away in an instant.

The elder woman shook her head to dismiss such depressing thoughts from her head. There had been no sign that the ants would ever commit such an action and deep down, Enid herself believed the Dungeon would cease spawning monsters before Anthony turned on the people he had decided to save. Beyn might be crazy in the truest sense of the word, but he was right about one thing: Anthony *was* a saviour to the people she now looked after and that was unlikely to ever change.

Preparations complete, she gathered her tea pot, tray and small selection of home baked biscuits and moved out of her apartment, closing the newly installed door behind her. The door itself was an impressive piece of work, intricately carved with leaves and scrolls of ivy that framed her name placed right in the centre. A pair of smaller ants had come and placed it only yesterday, using their strangely mobile front claws to nail on the hinges to the wooden frame they glued onto the smooth stone. It didn't have a lock, the ants didn't seem to see the need for locks amongst their private chambers. She idly wondered if thieving was ever an issue amongst the members of the Colony, but quickly dismissed the thought. What would they even steal from each other? As far as she could tell, they didn't have possessions!

Fully equipped, Enid made her way through the tunnels of the Colony, many of which now featured narrow stairs for the human visitors to use. At every stretch, alert soldiers stood at attention, their antennae waving slowly as they kept watch for the ever spawning monsters of the wave. It was remarkable how well the Colony had been able to hold against the unending enemies that came with a wave, their massive numbers helping a great deal on that front, but eventually they would be hard pressed to maintain their defensive posture when the creatures of the lower strata came knocking.

Though she had little doubt they would meet that challenge. She had heard that Anthony had already begun his evolution to the sixth tier, a huge milestone for any monster. How powerful would he be when he emerged? He was likely already the strongest first strata born ant to have ever existed, with the possible exception of his mother, of course.

Enid was undisturbed as she made her way into the very heart of the nest, save for a few guards giving her the once over with their antennae before waving her through. After a short walk, she had entered the most heavily guarded chambers and tunnels the Colony possessed, the brood chambers. All around she could see the brood tenders carrying and caring for their charges, fat grubs the size of small dogs, each one only a few weeks away from emerging as a full grown hatchling, ready to take on the world alongside their siblings.

The grubs themselves were kind of cute, once you got used to them. Even so, the tenders would never allow any but themselves and a select few ants to touch them. Nothing within the nest was defended more zealously than the future generations of the Colony.

With her platter held at the ready, Enid descended into the location of her appointment, the very centre of the nest itself: the egg-laying chamber.

Their work for the day already completed, the three Queens rested in comfort, a guard detachment present even though the offending mana veins had been banished from the walls. She nodded politely to the three massive ants and received a respectful dip of the antennae in response before she sat at the prepared human sized chair and table, placed her tray in front of her and waited.

It wasn't long before a rather harried looking Coolant burst into the chamber, the normally reserved and calm mage in an uncharacteristic fluster as she ran through the entrance. Enid examined the ant mage as she apparently conversed with her mother, the elder Queen's antennae twitching reflexively as Coolant explained herself. There was something a little different about her, in fact, about Antionette and Victoriant as well. What was it?

Her eyes weren't what they used to be so she had to squint a little in the dim light of the chamber but eventually she realised what it was. They were practically *gleaming*. Their carapace had an unusually healthy shine, with not a speck of dust or dirt to be seen. When they moved, the light shifted and shimmered on the chitin as if it had been polished to a mirror shine. Enid had seen merchant princes who would pay a fortune to achieve this level polish on their furniture! How had they done it?

After a few short minutes, she felt the touch of Coolant's mind on her own.

[Welcome, friend Enid,] the mage said, [I trust you have been well?]

[Hard not to be,] she smiled, [you take such good care of us down here.]

[That is well. Your trip to the surface was without incident?]

In order to stave off mana sickness, it was necessary that she and every other human who visited the nest make regular trips to the surface in order to regulate their mana saturation. Enid herself had a mountain of work to do every time she went back, administering to the seemingly endless developments on the surface. It was almost a relief to declare the need for a diplomatic mission and return to the nest.

[It was. I hope you have also been well, Coolant. You are looking practically radiant today.]

She intended it as a compliment, but the mage practically flinched at her words.

[Yes,] she muttered, [I have... rested... recently.]

Enid laughed.

[Usually we would consider that a good thing,] she said, [yet for some reason you don't appear all too happy to feel so refreshed.]

[The issue of resting is... complicated, within the Colony. Enough of me, I will facilitate the bridge between Mother and yourself.]

A few short moments and then she felt the powerful, brooding mind of the Queen touch against her own.

[Greetings, friend Enid,] the Queen once again dipped her head in welcome, [I have been looking forward to your visit. I must apologise for my daughter,] Coolant shivered a little, [for being late. Managing themselves does not appear to be a strong point amongst some of my children.]

[You *are* the one who created Anthony, after all,] Enid chuckled.

The Queen's antennae wavered dangerously at the mention of the 'troublesome one' and Coolant took a discreet step backwards, putting herself out of range.

[That one has been able to achieve much,] the Queen admitted, [when not frittering about and wasting time.]

The giant ant leaned forward to inspect the things that Enid had brought with her.

[What is this you have carried here, friend Enid? I do not recall seeing such things before.]

She gestured to each item in turn.

[I have a tea pot, full of freshly brewed tea, a few biscuits that I baked on the surface before coming back down and a few cups.]

The queen poked at the crockery with one leg.

[And what is this ... tea?]

[I'm surprised you don't know, since it was your children who provided the leaves. It's a drink that humans and other races greatly enjoy, made by pouring boiling water over the dried leaves of certain plants. Sometimes it is combined with milk, though I don't much care for the stuff in my old age.]

She reached out and lifted the pot toward the giant monster.

[Would you care for a cup?]

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Chapter 713: Royal High Tea pt 2

Enid wasn't sure if the three gigantic ants were just humouring her or were in fact genuinely interested in the tea. She'd brought it along for herself, a long conversation, even a mental one, needed a good cup of tea in order to keep one's thoughts flowing smoothly. They *were* quite the curious trio however, so she had brought a few extra cups, the largest that she had, in the event that they might want some. Even so, she was most surprised when the Queen took up her offer, quickly followed up by the other two each requesting a cup.

So it was that Enid Ruther, retired merchant and mayor of Renewal, found herself pouring tea for three massive ants as they crowded around her table, watching her every move with agog fascination.

[After the brew has steeped for a while, the flavour seeps out of the leaves and into the water,] she explained, [usually it doesn't take long, but some plants require more steeping than others. Certain mana rich leaves might need to be soaked overnight, or so I've heard.] She shrugged as she carefully poured. [I'm not certain where your children managed to source this particular variety from, but the flavour is excellent, if I do say so myself.]

She poured a cup for each of them, ensuring that the pot didn't drip, then took a small pouch from one of her pockets.

[Would anyone care for some sugar?] she asked. [I managed to grab some from my hidden supply in my house during my last visit. It's a bit of a luxury, but an old woman needs to keep her energy up, so I say.]

The three ants looked curiously at the small pouch.

[What is this sugar that you speak of?] the Queen asked. [I do not believe I have heard of it.]

[Oh, I'm a little surprised to hear that, considering how the regular surface ants are crazy about the stuff. Though I don't know where you would find a source of sugar down here...]

Enid reached into her pouch and pinched a small amount of the tiny crystals in between her fingers and brought it out for them to see.

[It's a flavouring that we make from sugar cane, a crop that is grown in some places on the surface. It's quite rare in these parts and I brought this pouch with me when I fled my home during the last wave. There isn't much left I'm afraid, but you are certainly welcome to try it. It has a strong, sweet flavour, so rather than eat it directly, we would normally mix in other things, such as a nice cup of tea, or something like these biscuits I brought with me.]

The Queen brought her head closer in order to better inspect the contents of Enid's hand and the mayor forced herself not to flinch as the giant monster loomed over her, the hidden mouth behind the mandibles plainly visible for a rare moment. The antennae drifted over the sugar, smelling the tiny granules that she held in her hand, brushing against them.

[It smells, energizing. Like mana packed into a small space.]

[They are known to house a lot of energy, which is why I suppose most insects will go out of their way to hunt it down. I have to be very careful with my sugar, otherwise it gets stolen by ants in a heartbeat.]

The Queen jerked her head up.

[Which ants have been thieving?! My children wouldn't dare!] Her antennae swished with rage and for a moment it appeared as if she would stride over to Coolant and thwack her right there and then.

[Ah! I meant non-monstrous ants, from the surface!] Enid quickly clarified herself as she held up her finger and thumb, indicating the size of 'normal' ants, [tiny little ones. They can smell the sugar from quite far away and will hunt it down relentlessly. As far as I know, no member of your Colony has ever tasted the stuff.]

The Queen (and Coolant) relaxed.

[I see. I would like some sugar in my tea. Thank you, friend Enid.]

Victoriant and Antionette also enthusiastically requested some sugar be added, so Enid happily mixed a generous spoonful into each of their cups, and then her own.

[Please enjoy,] she said.

It took Enid a moment to realise that none of them were moving, each of the Queens watching her intently rather than making any attempt to drink. It took her another moment to realise that they had no idea *how* to drink, and were waiting on her to demonstrate. Chuckling to herself, she reached out and picked up her cup, gripping it by the handle and around the brim, which she brought to her lips and sipped.

"Ahhhh," she exhaled.

Where *did* the Colony manage to source these leaves? They were amongst the best she had ever tasted. Were they seized during the capture of Rylleh?

The three ants watched the tiny human drink from her cup before turning their attention toward their own, miniature drinking vessels. Enid had small, nimble hands, perfect for drinking from such a dainty vessel, but how were they supposed to do it? Their claws were strong, possibly too strong. If they tried to grip the cup and bring it to their mouths, they would surely break. Pick it up in their mandibles?

Impossible. Their mouth was *beneath* the mandibles. How could they drink from the cup if they picked it up this way?

In the end, the Queen solved the issue by having the three of them take turns lowering their head down to the table and drink their tea directly from the cup without picking it up. Generously, she allowed her daughters to go first, then she drank her own. The taste was... different. Unique. She had never eaten any 'human food' before, only Biomass, so was quite unprepared for the flavour. At first she wasn't sure that she enjoyed it. The heat, the lack of meatiness, none of the tell-tale savour that Biomass provided. Yet, there was something compelling about it. The bitterness of the leaves combined with the faint sweetness that faded all too swiftly.

That flavour... it was intriguing. Enervating. She felt a slight tingle rush through each of her limbs as the sugar laced tea slid into her stomach.

[How did your majesties find it?] Enid asked, amused.

Each of them had become immediately still upon drinking the tea, even their antennae, normally constantly in motion, had become stiff with focus. It had looked so comical that she'd had to force herself not to laugh out loud. Now she wondered if she might have made a mistake. Would introducing sugar to the Colony cause some issues? Surely not, right? They were a race of giant ants that fed on mana and Biomass. They didn't have any need for an energy rich food source like sugar.

The Queen turned her attention to the biscuits.

[Friend Enid, do these also contain the sugar?]

Enid looked down at her small plate of ginger nuts, a family recipe that her husband had adored.

[Yes they do. Would you like one?]

The Queen nodded her assent, her focus intent on the bikkies. Trying to hide her smile, Enid placed three biscuits around the table and watched as the huge Queens lowered their mouths to the table and gobbled them down in half a bite.

[I apologise for their small size,] Enid said, [I had intended to eat them as we spoke as they go perfectly alongside tea. If I'd been more thoughtful I would have tried to bake some a little larger. Are you even able to taste them, given how small they are?]

[We can,] the Queen confirmed, somewhat dreamily. [The flavour is faint, but it is there, along with a slight crunch that I find appetising.]

[A good biscuit needs a good crunch,] Enid confirmed, [if they aren't baked correctly, then they're too soft. Overbake them, and they turn hard and bitter. Proper baking is all about the timing.]

[Interesting,] the Queen said. [I thank you for your gifts, friend Enid. May I enquire how your people fare on the surface?]

She wasn't especially interested in humans, but she had learned through repeated conversations with the mayor that enquiring about things the person you were 'chatting' with cared about was a common opening gambit. So she listened with interest as Enid described the goings on of the people, and answered with great detail as Enid turned the conversation back to her, enquiring about life in the

Colony and how her children fared. As usual, she took great pleasure in the exchange, although this time a part of her mind lingered on something else.

That night, as Enid returned to her chamber to rest, the first of many hunting parties was launched. These ants would scour the Dungeon and surface with great zeal, for their mother had made a request, and what mother wanted, she would get!

No matter where this 'sugar-cane' hid, the Colony would find it!

Chrysalis

Chapter 714: Live Evil pt 1

Dead, huh. Can't say I'm surprised, rather, if I was any less skilful then I wouldn't have lasted nearly as long as I did. To think that the greatest assassin the underground had ever known would go out in such a fashion. It hurts my pride to even think about it. Had I been too focused on the target? I must have been if an ice-cream van had rounded the corner without me even noticing. I can only hope the shot I squeezed off as I was crushed beneath the tyres was enough to finish off my contract. Odin Malum hadn't failed a job yet and even dead, that's a record I'd like to keep intact.

The afterlife so far is a little more drab than I expected. Nothing but darkness presses around me, trying to overcome my will. A foolish attempt.

[Welcome Odin.]

A voice speaks suddenly out of the gloom, its words penetrating directly into my mind. Some sort of telepathy? How is this possible?

[You have died.]

I'm aware of that. What sort of fool wouldn't be aware of their own death. The sight of the hapless driver behind the wheel of that accursed frozen confectionary truck will be branded into my mind's eye forever more.

[Be calm, you will soon awaken to experience life again in a new world.]

Calm? I'm always calm. If I'm not, then that's because I have chosen not to be. This must be a pre-set message, like an automated recording. That implies that I may not be only the person who has experienced reincarnation on this 'new world'. Others like me? I hardly think there are any as capable as I am, but it does make me a little intrigued. Finding people from Earth and extracting what they know will be a good source of information. In the underworld, survival is everything, and information is the key to survival. Knowing too much was never an issue, so long as nobody was aware that you knew it.

[You will be reborn on the world of Pangera.]

Pangera? Like Pangea? That hardly seems original. Come on voice, I grow tired of your mewling, tell me something that is actually relevant, something that might help me survive in this place that you seem intent on throwing me into.

[Destiny and luck shall determine your fate.]

Luck? Luck will have nothing to do with it. I relied on my skills and intuition to keep me alive in my past existence and I'll do the same in this one. I'll rise to the top once more, no matter how bloody my hands need to get. If you're going to be stupid enough to give me a second chance, then I'm going to make sure it doesn't go to waste.

[You will be reborn with the following status:]

Status? What's a status?

[Name: Odin Malum

Level: 1 (I)

Might: 45

Toughness: 36

Cunning: 31

Will: 32

HP: 72/72

MP: 0/0

Skills:

Demonic Convergence (I) level 1; Bite (I) Level 3; Demon Claw (I) Level 3; Crawl (I) Level 1; Mana Sense (I) Level 2;

Species: Initial Demon Larva

Skill points: 1

Biomass: 1]

[You have one Skill point and one Biomass available.]

[Go forth and forge your own path.]

That was a lot to take in, and at the same time, not much at all. So I'm not being reborn as a human? Why was I reincarnated here by this entity with the gruff voice if not for my expertise as a person? There must be another trait that is desired and I need to find out what it is. If I can determine why I've been chosen for this treatment then perhaps I can leverage that information in some way. Wait, I can't make assumptions. Is there a chance that *everyone* is reborn here when they die?

Unlikely, but I can't rule it out. It would be interesting to learn after all of these years that there *was* in fact a unified afterlife, and it was some weird game world with an unimaginative name. Enough with the speculation, what do I know?

My species is listed as an Initial Demon Larva. The name is telling. First, 'initial' indicates that there are multiple stages of 'demon larva', which shows that there is some capacity for growth that is recognised by this 'game system'. Second, I'm a demon of some kind. In the Judeo-Christian variety? Will I have

horns and a pointy tail? For someone who was often referred to as a 'demon' in their life, this almost feels fitting in some way.

For the stats that I've been given, I have no reference to determine if they are strong or weak, so I'll put those aside for now. The Skills are interesting. Bite, claw, crawl all seem rather straightforward in application, but the other two... Demonic Convergence? Mana Sense? What exactly is mana? How does one sense it?

Wait, something is happening...

My mind snaps into focus and all intrusive thoughts are driven away in an instant as I try to take in as much information as I can. What am I sensing? It's faint, like a weak signal coming through a radio, but growing stronger. I can feel something. It's wrapped around me, like a tight blanket or cocoon. Can I move? I try to flex or manipulate but I feel disconnected from any sensation, as if my body is far away and I'm having to control it through the post.

I can tell that I'm drawing closer to it, that my body and mind are harmonising with time, but I refuse to wait.

Harder now, I force with my iron will and feel a response come back at last. That response seems to strengthen my connection and everything seems that much clearer now. Excellent. I harden my mind and push again, able to now feel myself flex and buckle against whatever it is that contains me. Something gives way I feel myself tumble forward. Quick as death I try to snap onto a ledge or find something to grip, but my body doesn't respond quickly enough and I start to fall.

Unpanicked, I roll my body onto its side and brace myself to absorb the shock of landing. It comes, but is much softer than I expected. I must have fallen only a short distance, perhaps I was attached to a wall? Much more in synch with myself now, I begin to analyse myself whilst I take in the environment around me. Understanding my own body is my highest priority. If I don't know what my weapons are, I won't be able to hone them.

Giving Odin Malum a second chance? It's so foolish that it's almost laughable. I'll take great pleasure in ending whoever it was that thought they could play god with me.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 715: Live Evil pt 2

My body was... strange. Certainly far from ideal for my purposes. I still possess the normal senses one would expect, sight, smell, sound, touch and taste, perhaps even *better* than I'd experienced as a human, but the configuration of my physical form... not so much. As far as I can tell, I'm a legless, fleshy blob with two deceptively powerful arms that emerged either side of my fanged mouth.

My body also appears to be covered in a black, thickened tar like substance that is quite difficult for my claws to penetrate. So a slug with arms and a mouth covered in a defensive coating. Unpleasant, but I can deal with it.

I constantly shift my body and swing my limbs as I turn my attention to my surroundings. Conditioning myself and my reflexes to this new reality will be key to my survival. I can feel a vague sense of dysmorphia rising at having my consciousness transplanted into this rather horrific form, but I squash it

ruthlessly. Anything that will impede my ability to survive in this new reality cannot be tolerated. Any instinct that works against this goal must be expunged.

I could feel the familiar mindset roll over me like a cloud. It was always like this when I was on a job. I had to be cold, calculated, make the right move at the right time and with the perfect execution. When the game was life and death, there was no other way to play. Even here and now, in this new body and in this new world, I can feel the thrill bubbling beneath my surface thoughts. If I could only find something to fight, something to *hunt*. That would scratch my itch!

The environment was hot. Overwhelmingly hot. The rock around me radiates heat to an absurd degree and not far away I can see open pools of lava that flowed into places unknown whilst lighting up the area. Everything else I see is blasted, black rock. Except something moved.

A flicker of motion captures my attention and I react instantly, using my two powerful limbs to drag my fleshy body into cover where I could gain a better vantage point. Like a panther, I prowl, a flabby, meat sack of a panther, but a predator no less. Around the jagged, burning stones I pull my body until I find what it was that I had seen. One of my own kind, a disgusting blob of dark flesh dragged itself forward with its arms. What it was doing, I didn't know. From what I can tell, it had only recently been born, much as I was, emerging from the rock. In fact, yes, I can see it, a patch of ground not far from where my fellow larva was now, loose stone and the indentation in the ground indicating where it had liberated itself from the heated stone.

I now had a choice. Should I attempt to befriend this creature and forge an alliance? Strength did exist in numbers, this was something I knew well. Two might survive where one would fail. Then there was the other choice...

Odin only knew one way.

After reaching the creature's blind spot, I flung myself from the rock soundlessly and sailed through the air, my claws and fangs at the ready. Strength in numbers was the policy of the sheep. I have always been a predator! Let others cower and huddle together in fear, that has never been my path. Besides, my information is incomplete. If I reveal myself to the creature and it attacks me, I will have thrown away the advantage of surprise for nothing, putting me into an essentially even battle for no gain. Better that I silence the thing now than take any risks. Besides, I believe there will be much that I can learn from this creature...

My claws strike with deadly precision, my steady aim not having changed though my body has greatly diverged from what I knew. With the angle of my body, my mouth falls in the perfect position and I sink my teeth into the tough hide of the beast and it screeches with pain.

This style of fighting lacks the grace and elegance of my usual performance, but I have to admit, there is a certain *visceral* satisfaction in it, being this up close and personal.

Latched onto its back, the creature thrashes and tries to dislodge me but I hold on with my teeth as I rake at it with my claws over and over again. The wounds piling up and my foe's struggles growing weaker over time.

[Demon Claw has reached level 4.]

Interesting... Once again the strange voice speaks to me of this game elements. As I continue to attack my prey, I notice that I appear to be doing more damage than before, even if the difference is only slight. So these *skills* could help me improve at actions in this world? Fascinating...

After a little more struggle, my victim finally collapses and I release my grip, only to find the voice speaking into my mind once more.

[You have defeated Level 1 Initial Demon Larva.]

[You have gained XP.]

I'd been right. This world would reward me, much as a game would, if I defeat enemies. If I have a level, that meant I could level up. If I can accrue experience by fighting, improving my skills and gaining levels, then that is what I will do. I need to amass power, and quickly. Which led me to my other path of enquiry. It's sitting right there in my status: Biomass.

Biomass meant food, it meant matter, and I didn't see anything else to eat around here except this thing. Jaws open wide, I rip into the meat without delay, unwilling to waste any time and uncaring what it might taste like. For the record, it tasted disgusting, but the voice spoke once again, which sharpened my mind immediately.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Initial Demon Larva you are awarded one Biomass.]

[Basic profile of the Initial Demon Larva unlocked.]

Yet more information. Perfect.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 716: Live Evil pt 3

I wolf down the remains of the creature as quickly as possible, not willing to leave myself vulnerable on open ground any longer than I have to. I myself dropped out of a stone wall and this unfortunate being crawled up out of the floor, which means there could be more of my kind ready to appear at a moment's notice from any surface around us. I won't take the risk, not until I know if others like me are hostile or not. As my jaws crunch and tear, I try to examine this 'profile', succeeding in having it supplied within my mind after a few attempts.

Basic Profile:

[Coepi Demon Larva: Initial Demon Larva, The first phase of the demon life cycle. Beware the claws, they are stronger than they appear.]

Well that didn't tell me much. And what's with the poor Latin? No matter.

[You have gained one Biomass.]

And I can't eat anymore. It's actually a surprise that I managed to get through so much of a creature the same size as myself, in fact, it should have been physically impossible, especially since I don't believe that I've increased in size. No matter, I can explore this and other questions shortly. Using my arms, I drag myself across the boiling rocks until I find a neat crevice where I can hide whilst I consider my next

plan of attack. So far, I haven't seen any other movement, but that doesn't mean there won't be more larvae popping out of the walls.

I was able to gain six Biomass from the creature I defeated, not much but I have to assume that there is something I can do with these 'points'. It's clear to see that they are an important element of this game like world and I need to understand how they function immediately. After a short while, I worked it out.

[You can use skill points to purchase new skills or upgrade existing ones.]

[Biomass can be spent to improve or modify aspects of your physical, monstrous form.]

[Skills available to purchase:

Stealth: cost 1sp, improves your ability to hide and move unseen

Mana Manipulation: cost 1sp, Allows you to control mana with your mind.

Defensive posture: cost 1sp, Improves the ability to protect yourself.

Leaping Strike: cost 1sp, Increases damage and proficiency when making a jump attack.

Demon Fury: cost 1sp, Channel the rage of demon kind to increase damage.]

[Body improvements available to purchase:

Demon Eyes +1: Improves eyesight.

Infernal Claw +1 : Hardens and sharpens your claws.

Purgation Maw +1 : Improves the strength of your bite.

Tar Hide +1 : Toughens and thickens your hide.

Pocket Stomach +1 : improves the capacity of your pocket dimension stomach.]

Interesting...

So I'm able to spend my Skill points to purchase skills and upgrade ones that I already possess? Or did they reach a threshold? And these were the skills available to me right now? I wonder if leaping strike was available by default or if it appeared as a response to my actions. For now, I don't see the purpose of purchasing stealth, I'll rely instead on my own natural instincts and take different options to increase my offensive power. If there's one thing that I'm comfortable with, it's stealth.

As for the body improvements... This required careful thought. Only an idiot would rush a decision like this.

Eyes I dismiss immediately. What's needed in this situation is pure combat power, I'm in a fight for my survival, not an easter egg hunt. After some consideration, I purchase three upgrades for my 'infernal claws', which consumes all of my Biomass, and the Leaping Strike skill. After I confirm my choices with the gruff voice in my mind, a strange sensation overcomes me. Knowledge seeps into my mind like liquid being poured straight into my memories. How to leap, when to leap, the best angles to use. Much of it aligned with what I already knew, but applied to my new body rather than a human form.

As to the claws, a slight tickling sensation was all I could feel as they changed shape in front of my eyes. They grew a little longer, a little thicker, and perhaps a touch sharper on the edge. These were all advantages that I can use in my next fight. Having spent my resources, it's time to continue scouting my surroundings. If I'm lucky I may even run into another morsel that I can use to fuel my growth...

Or better yet, observe others of my kind to see how they interact. I also need to try and make use of the Skills that I'm yet to investigate, namely mana sight. If some strange form of magic exists in this odd world, then I need to understand it. I lever myself out of my hiding place and skulk through the dips and cracks between the rocks as I move around, every so often poking my head up to examine my surroundings. Less than a minute into my exploration I notice another of my kind creeping about the rocks.

Another prey? Before I can reposition myself to properly observe this specimen, I notice another has emerged somewhere behind me. Not good. Unwilling to be seen, I hide my presence and skirt around several rocks to circle around and put both of the demons on the same side of me. If they're going to fight, I want them to fight each other rather than me.

Except there's now a third. I hear it burst out of the ground right behind me, clawed hands scrabbling and shoving at the stone as it drags its body upward. I turn swiftly, cursing my bad luck. I can't move quickly enough to hide before it sees me, the best I can do is face up to it and see what happens!

After another second of freeing itself, the newly born demon larva locks eyes with me and for a moment, it freezes. Then it screams and launches itself at me, claws extended and reaching for my face.

Well that answers that question...

Chrysalis

Chapter 717: Live Evil pt 4

Name: Odin Malum

Level: 4 (I)

Might: 45

Toughness: 36

Cunning: 31

Will: 32

HP: 58/72

MP: 0/0

Skills:

Demonic Convergence (I) Level 1; Penetrating Bite (II) Level 2; Advanced Demon Claw (II) Level 3; Crawl (I) Level 1; Mana Sense (I) Level 2; Leaping Strike (I) Level 3;

Mutations:

Demon Eyes +1; Infernal Claw +5; Purgation Maw +5; Tar Hide +1; Pocket Stomach +3;

Species: Initial Demon Larva

Skill points: 1

Biomass: 6

Clinging to the wall, I take a few moments to breathe. Thirty metres up, I was mostly clear of the ruckus below, though I knew that at any moment more of my species could emerge and begin to fight. After the second fight, things had taken a downhill turn and conditions in this area had deteriorated at an alarming rate. It turned out that Initial Demon Larvae *were* innately hostile to each other. Not only had I been jumped by the creature which had emerged from behind, forcing me to engage in a sudden battle to the death, others had emerged at the same time or shortly thereafter and had *immediately* set about a noisy melee, clawing, biting and screaming at each other.

Which would have been manageable, except that the noise attracted *more* larvae and in less than a minute's time, the entire plateau of blasted rock on which I'd emerged was covered in a roiling brawl in which absolutely no quarter was given. That's not how I operate. I like things to be a little more planned, a little more *orderly*. Without any option, I was forced to get my hands dirty and seize what I could as I fought my way out. I'd sustained wounds in the process but I found that they healed at an accelerated rate after I consumed further Biomass, which I did whenever I could. It was difficult though, since the moment a fight was won, every larva nearby would abandon their own conflict to rush over and try to seize the Biomass for themselves. The moment nothing remained, the brawl would break out all over again. What little food I'd managed to gain had been used to fuel my recovery and upgrade my weapons. Offense trumps defence.

After fighting clear of the mess, I climbed the nearby wall and now I finally have a chance to survey the area. Looking down I can still see hundreds of other demon larvae locked in mortal combat, every crevice of black stone home to at least one such battle. They were bestial, mindless creatures, without any sort of cunning or strategy. All they did was fight, seemingly without end and without purpose, though I believe I may discover something in the near future which might shed some light on the matter. Already some of the creatures below were beginning to show some level of dominance. Strong enough to win a fight and seize some of the spoils and develop themselves, using the Biomass to enhance their strength and press their advantage further.

If this natural cycle played itself out, then most of the larvae that had come to this plateau to fight would become fodder for the few, perhaps even the one, survivor.

And it *was* a plateau. I'd originally thought the wall to my side was the edge of whatever space I was in, but it isn't. I was reborn lower down on this wall on what amounted to a ledge, jutting out of the side of a tall pillar rising toward the ceiling impossibly high above. It had been hard to notice before, since my attention was directed inward and at my immediate surroundings, but now that I take in the broader picture I'm slowly becoming aware of just where I am. In order to get a better view, I decide to continue to climb this wall until I reach the top. I can see the edge from where I am, possibly another seventy metres above.

My arms are powerful, and although my body is a large fleshy sack, they are enough to keep propelling me toward the top, although they are trembling and weak by the time I reach the ledge. Pulling myself over the lip, I dominate my weakness and force myself to dive into cover without pausing to rest. To my relief, there are no enemies present to take immediate advantage of my temporary weakness. Once my strength returns, I drag myself out and begin to poke my noseless face about. What I see is a narrow, mostly flat stretch that is roughly circular that terminates less than a hundred metres away in a sheer drop. All around me, a vast, underground expanse stretches outwards to the limits of my vision.

Feeling stunned by the bizarre, illogical geography around me, I turn back to the edge behind me and look down. I can see below me the ledge on which I was born, still swarming with demons battling against each other. Beyond that, the ground drops away several hundred metres more to what I believe must be the floor of this vast, vast cavern. As far as I can see, in every direction, I see exactly the same thing. Blasted rock. Boiling lava. And demons. So, so many demons. The little fleshy bags with arms that are my fellow demon siblings are *everywhere*. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Hundreds of thousands. To the horizon of my sight, where things grow fuzzy and blurred in the distance, I can still see them.

What's more, stalking amongst them, I can see larger demons of several different forms, slaying the smaller larvae with ease and engaging in running battles against each other. Further off, emerging from the floor are pillars rising high into the air, perhaps miles high, to connect the floor to the distant ceiling. Nothing that I see makes sense from an Earth perspective, the very idea of something such as this existing underground makes completely no sense.

And yet here I am.

I'm not sure exactly what is happening, but it's clear that there is some sort of race on. A race to fight, consume and grow. Only the winner would be allowed to survive. This blasted landscape covered in demons. Am I sure this isn't actually hell? No matter, it's perfect. This is the perfect environment for Odin Malum to thrive. I destroyed others to live in my past life and I'll do the same in this one.

The voice mentioned that I can mutate when I reached +5, which is apparently the limit for my level of evolution. I need to mutate immediately, seize whatever advantage I can, then return to the ledge and fight for resources. I'll need to be strong if I'm going to traverse the floor below. This was going to be a challenge.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 718: Live Evil pt 5

The larval sea, that's what I started to call it. I don't know how large that endless plain of black rock is, but I haven't seen a single inch of it that wasn't covered in demon larvae fighting to survive. Uncounted millions of them. It didn't take long to reach level five and unlock my first evolution, but I didn't take it immediately, there was so much I didn't know. Later, I'd maxed my mutations and formed a core, and only after that was I prepared to take the next step. Good thing that I did.

The hardest part was finding a place free from conflict where I felt safe in case the evolution knocked me out, which it did. Returning to the fray in my new form was almost too easy at first. The normal demon larvae couldn't hurt me, but my increased strength and more potent weapons gave me an absurd advantage. But that was only at first. It wasn't long before the others found me, others like me. Only then did I realise the unspoken rules of the plains, you weren't supposed to punch down, at least

not too much. In order to evolve and grow beyond this second stage, I was supposed to prey on the others who had managed to evolve as I had.

So that's what I did. It reminded me of the old days in a way. No longer was the melee as intense or relentless as before, instead it was a series of duels, one on one battles of skill and wit that would give strength to the winner, death to the loser. I won. Of course I won.

Every now and again the smaller ones would gang up and try to bring me down, but I was larger, stronger and my Skills had advanced far beyond theirs. There was nothing they could do for me. In that way I reached level ten, but again I waited. Only when all of my mutations and my core were pushed to the limit was I prepared to make that step.

My final opponent was tough, having reinforced their hide during their evolution, which was the wrong choice. Although it was difficult for my claws to break through, their weapons weren't enough to inflict damage on me either. We fought for a long time, and though it may have appeared as though it was a standstill, I was always winning. When the defences of my foe finally gave way and the despair began to rise from them, I could almost smell it. A feeling of overwhelming, unrivalled joy shivered through me and I closed for the final blow, which is when I first heard it.

[Demonic Convergence has risen to level 2.]

The first time I managed to level that Skill. I pondered over what it meant later, with my meal complete and my hiding place secured, high on a precarious piece of rock with a crack running down one side. In the end, I didn't understand it, I couldn't work out why the Skill had levelled at that time. There wasn't anything I was doing consciously to activate it at the time. Was it perhaps passive in some way? But what way?

Shrugging it off, I made my final checks and evolved. For my first evolution, only three options were presented, and each of them were quite similar. Initial Demon Larva became Developing Demon Larva, and each of the choices gave a flavour of different stats and bonuses. Most of my success had come with my claws, so I chose the option that would grant me the most physical power and came with augmentations to my two arms that allowed them to snap through the air as fast as whips. Other than almost doubling in size, my body didn't change much, still a sack of tar covered meat with a mouth and two arms tipped in razor sharp claws.

This second evolution was a little different. Again, I progressed from Developing Demon Larva, this time to Prime Demon Larva, but the choices were more divergent. I was careful, as an assassin should be, and examined every option with forensic detail, but I knew I couldn't hesitate too long. As I was going through these menus my rivals out in the larval sea were growing stronger. I'd come close to dying so many times already, a single second, one upgrade, one level, could be the difference between living and dying. There was no way I was going to end up in another demon's gut. I refused to become Biomass for another's growth.

I stuck to my strengths, choosing the option which allowed me to further enhance my advantage in strength and speed. Defence was important, and that's why offense came first. This evolution allowed me to add a weakening aura to my claws that would infect the mana of any enemy I struck, draining them of their energy and making them more susceptible to my blows. This would pair well with the

penetrating mutations I had already chosen for the blades on my hands, ensuring that the effect would go through.

For the rest of the evolutionary energy, I used it to further enhance my Might, with the dregs being pushed into Toughness.

When I awoke, I was still a sack of meat, but once again I had grown much larger, towering over my initial size. With my preparations complete, it was back down to the endless plains of battle. The weakest demons were now almost not worth the time it took to eat them, the second level not much better. It was for the others like me that I sought out and our battles were mighty, crushing many beneath us as we fought.

The divergent paths were showing more sharply at this stage, and some of my foes fought with bewildering magic, blasting me with fire, dazzling me with attacks on my mind or launching beams of pure energy from their eyes. Others tough, hard as rocks and healed rapidly, wounds closing before my eyes. Yet others were huge, as I was, powerful arms covered in barbs, claws, spikes, even mouths or suckers that tried to drain my blood away. I beat them all by being swifter, more brutal, more cunning. In each case I became intoxicated by their fear and despair, and I continued to hear it.

[Demonic Convergence has reached level 2.]

[Demonic Convergence has reached level 3.]

[Demonic Convergence has reached level 4.]

[Demonic Convergence has reached level 5.]

Then I advanced it, curiosity alone demanded it.

[Demonic Convergence of Slaughter has reached level 2.]

[Demonic Convergence of Slaughter has reached level 3.]

[Demonic Conv ...]

I stalked the plains like a conquering king, only giving way when I saw any who were higher above than I, but those were few and far between. As my victories piled up and my strength accrued, I grew in confidence, striking at my foes rapidly, one after another. I barely slept, barely rested at all, and soon level twenty came. Again I waited. I knew of the rewards for those who were patient, and I gathered my power until I reached my perfect strength. This time, things were different again. I reached the end of the larval stage it seemed, as none of my options included those terms. Instead, it was time to pick a more advanced form.

[Pupal Demon of Slaughter.]

Was this the purpose of the demonic convergence? Was it related to my evolution in some way? Regardless, this was always the option I would choose. It was suited perfectly to my style and I relished in the new form I would take. No longer a graceless blob, I would change, becoming a scythe armed nightmare with lithe limbs, able to stand on strange, double jointed legs. This was more like it! I picked over each of the details with care, ensuring each of my choices would harmonise and work together to

better become a part of my perfect strength. Only then did I confirm my choices, ready for the embrace of the dark to swallow me as my body underwent its metamorphosis.

But it didn't happen, instead I was pulled from my body, my mind dragged down to a different place, a place of endless, torrential red, where the fires burned black and hot enough to scorch my very soul. There I saw a being so large that I couldn't comprehend it and for the first time in so many years I felt fear. It towered over me like a human towers over an ant, a nightmarish representation of the demon larva, covered with eyes and mouths and seated on a vast throne. As I watched, the throne shifted and with horror I realised the chair itself was part of the creature's body. Slowly the creature stirred, the air itself thickening like blood as it did so, pressing me down to the floor like a worm.

[Ahhhhhhhhhhh. Another has come, after so long.]

The voice shredded my Will and filled my head with echoes of gibbering whispers and despair filled screams as one of those eyes opened to focus on my tiny, huddled form. How could anything this powerful exist?! What was this world?!

[Yesssssss. Tell me, pitiful one. How does it feel to kneel before your God?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 719: Awakening

The voices are back again. In fact, I'd say they're even stronger than before. There's so damn many of them! When hundreds of thousands of voices are whispering at you, it's no longer a quiet sound, it's a roar, powerful enough to drown out my own thoughts if I'm not careful. Each entity, each soul, is like a single drop of water, a coalesced portion of Will that slips through the ether and into the Vestibule in a way that I don't understand. From there they sink deep into my consciousness, running together and gathering momentum until a raging torrent is formed, a whirlpool of thoughts, feelings and desires that threatens to sweep me away.

But I'm not afraid. Even in this half-dream, half-awake state I understand a simple truth: my family will not harm me. In all of their wishes, hopes and ambitions, there are none that desire for me to come to harm. Their support surrounds me like a storm, but also a blanket. As I gradually return to wakefulness, I start to wonder what it was that caused this change.

Is this simply the clarity of the new Vestibule? Is it transmitting the Will of the Colony to me the same as it always did, but stronger? Or is the new addition, the Communal Spirit Nave, to blame? I thought all it would do is magnify the regeneration I received from the energy the Vestibule provides, but perhaps it also has the effect of magnifying the slivers of Will that come from the Colony to me? I'm not sure, and even if I were, there isn't much I could do to change the situation. This is something that I have become determined to grow used to, so that's what I'm going to do. No more running away.

The senses of my body come back to me piece by piece and with the return of these more mundane sensations, the whispers begin to fade to the background, receding until nothing remains but a dull roar that bleeds into my soul.

"WAPPACHAAA!" I'm up!

With my exclamation, I spring to life and the waiting pets around me react to my awakening in their own manner. Tiny sees that I've risen and falls back onto his backside, already preparing to settle into a seemingly long anticipated nap. Before I can even finish shaking the lethargy out of my legs, he's already snoring loudly in the corner. Lazy ape. For her part, Crinis is much happier to see me.

[Master! You've awoken!]

[I sure have. How've things been whilst I was gone?]

[Very quiet. None have disturbed your rest.]

[Any word from outside the nest? No problems with the wave?]

[I have not heard, Master, as far as I'm aware there have been no major developments, but if there were it's unlikely that we would be told. We wouldn't leave your side no matter what was occurring.]

I guess that makes sense. I *did* order them to watch over me after all. No longer restricted to keeping watch over me, Crinis all too happily detaches her dark shadowy form from the wall where she had been clinging and latches onto my carapace, blobbing around my abdomen like rubbery coating of pure shadow.

[Bit bigger than before? What do you think, Crinis?]

[I can sense that your power has greatly increased, Master. Surely there are no scum who would dare to still despoil your greatness now.]

I highly doubt that, but I don't need to rile her up.

[Hey Invidia, how're things?]

The floating eyeball has watched all the goings on with his lidless eye from near the entrance to the chamber. At my words he dips and bobbles in the air for a moment before his vast mind reaches back to mine.

[Thingsssss are good. Your transssssformation is complete. I sennsssse your mind is no longer quite sssso weak.]

For a second I see that great eyeball flash green before it fades once more.

[Still not able to keep up with your brainpower, but I'm getting better.]

It's true, but it doesn't hurt to try and deflect the covetous orb every now and again. I've never really discussed his envious nature with the demon, but it does seem to be a little inconvenient. He seems to be caught in a state of perpetual want for things he sees others have. Can't exactly be a very satisfying way to live... Maybe that's just part of being a demon from the third strata? I don't know. I just want the little dude to be happy.

Now fully awake, I try to skitter left and right a little, just getting used to my new body. This room sure does feel more cramped than it did before... Like, I know that I've grown larger, but I didn't think it was going to be by this much. I really did pour a ridiculous amount of energy into my stats in this evolution,

both the mental and the physical. I can't wait to see how it feels to fight in this new body. There's no rushing the proper process though! Back to basics!

I hum a little song to myself as I rapidly shift my legs, dodging left and right as I avoid attacks from imagined enemies. Every now and again I snap my mandibles with a satisfying CRUNCH! I can really feel the added power from the increased musculature in my head. Which means my head is bigger than before, yet again. I really don't want to end up as one of those big headed ants. They just look... unbalanced. I can say from experience that it takes a little while to grow accustomed to a new body, and although the change isn't as ridiculous as going from human to ant, it still takes a bit of time to get my sense of balance back. The changes to my mental prowess is probably going to be the hardest to get used to, since the greatest change took place there. I can't wait to start throwing some spells around to see what I can do now with all of this firepower I'm packing. Going to have to get out into the nest and see what's going on, then make my way out into the Dungeon to smack some monsters around! I can't wait!

Feeling more in control of myself, I step out into the tunnel and pause when I see a little worker making her way past. She makes way for my bulk as she heads up the tunnel wall to squeeze through and I weave a quick message to her with my antennae.

Thank you nameless one. Rest well.

I almost don't notice when she freezes in place for a second before sprinting down the corridor and out of sight. Ignorant to her reaction, I make my way through the tunnels, clacking my mandibles in irritation when I find a few paths I can no longer use due to my increased size. Is this how irritating it is to be the Queen? What a pain! Eventually I find my way to where I'm going, it wasn't far away but getting onto the correct tunnels was more difficult than it should be. Soon enough, Crinis, Invidia and I find ourselves in one of the greatest places in Pangera: the brood chambers!

I can spot some grubs that need a tickle!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 720: Mother's Love

Eager to begin my tickling spree, I rush into the chambers only to pull up when I notice someone rather unexpected in the room. Reacting quickly, I spin together a mind construct, marvelling at how powerful my mind feels handling the mana.

[Hey there, Sarah! How's things?]

The giant bear sits in the centre of the chamber, grubs and brood tenders swarming around her as she reaches out to roll the larvae around with her big paws.

[Oh, hey Anthony,] she says, turning toward me, [you look different. Did you evolve?]

Although the polite tone is still there, she has a certain listless quality to her tone, a sort of lifelessness that wasn't there before. I'd heard all about the battle that had been fought here in the brood chambers, how Sarah had fought to the brink of death fending off the golgari, and how she had turned on the Queen in her blind rage. I wish I'd gotten a chance to speak to her before the evolution, but there

was never enough time, the pressure to reach the next tier was high and I felt like it needed to be done as fast as possible. Right now though, I'm not about to let this chance slip past.

[Sure did! You've certainly made yourself at home,] I say, indicating the gleeful grubs wiggling about around her furry form, [the brood tenders were happy to let you in here?]

The massive bear manages to almost look shy. Almost, she fails in the end. She just looks too scary.

[It was... the Queen's idea. She thought it would be relaxing, and it is.]

She reaches out and scratches one grub with the tip of a claw and the little thing shivers with delight.

[Of course it is,] I'm indignant, [brood tickling is the greatest pastime there is!]

And I may as well get to it. Nobody said I couldn't tickle and talk at the same time. I bustle into the chamber which is quite crowded all of a sudden, now housing two tier six creatures alongside the usual inhabitants, but it felt cosy rather than crowded, and I happily settled down, my antennae already extended outward to start rolling the grubs around.

[I never got the chance to thank you properly,] I say, tormenting my first victim with an initial salvo of tickles, [you went way above what any of us could have asked of you and you didn't have to. Without you, thousands more members of my family would have died, thank you.]

The great bear shifts uncomfortably.

[I'm not even sure if I was fighting to save your family or just because I wanted revenge on the golgari. Or... perhaps I just... just wanted to fight. The rage is addictive... it wasn't easy to turn my back on it the first time. I thought I'd be free of it once I escaped the cult and their plans, but I threw myself into it the moment I had the chance.]

She grows still as she talk with me, her paws coming to rest on the ground at her side. Haha! That means more grubs for me!

[From my perspective, it's so much simpler than that. You helped us, and we're all grateful for that help. In the process, you managed to give the golgari a whack on the nose, what's not to like?]

She rolls her massive shoulder blades and goes to speak but I cut her off before she can get started.

[I know that you lost control at the end.]

The hulking monster that Sarah has become seems to fold up on herself at my words. I can practically smell the shame coming off her. It actually makes me a little mad.

[But nothing happened in the end. Nothing. Happened. You fought off the enemy and the Queen was able to calm you down. There isn't a single ant in the Colony who holds it against you, not after what you did and what mother said. Like it or not, you're part of this family now.]

[... is that really true?] she asks, her mind full of doubt. [I'm not an ant. And when I think that the Queen nearly died because of me...]

She trails off and I can see that her mental scars go deep, not just due to this incident, but everything that had gone on in her life. This life as well as the previous. It wasn't my place to try and talk to her about her past, but there was something that I could assure her of.

[Look around you,] I invite her.

A little confused, she raises her huge snout and takes a look around the chamber.

[Where do you think you are?] I ask.

[... in a brood chamber?] She replies, confused.

[EXACTLY. You think we let just anyone in here? This is the brood we're talking about! Every single ant in the Colony would throw down their life in order to preserve the future generations. If you weren't family, do you *really* think that we would let you in here? Would these tenders tolerate your presence if it weren't the case? They barely put up with me being in here! Me!]

As if to prove my point, one of the many caretakers in the room gives me an irritated prod in the side with one leg.

"You need to give me that grub," she tells me curtly.

"Ah, sure."

I release the larva I'd been tormenting with relentless tickles into her care and the little thing collapses with relief, finally freed from my antennae. Time for the next victim! Gweheheheh! Sourcing another grub, I roll it about with my antennae as the little thing wriggles with joy. So cute! So soothing! It takes me a little while to realise that Sarah still hasn't said anything. I look over to see her sitting morosely, a pensive look on her bear face.

[Look. Nobody here is going to make you fight. And if you want to fight, nobody here is going to stop you. Here, in this Colony, you can make your own decisions, you're free. If you want help, for anything, just ask and me or someone else will come and do what needs to be done. You've earned that from us.]

She nods silently and I return to my tickles for a time before she speaks again.

[What about Jim?] she asks quietly.

Hot anger burns in my gut at the mention of that traitorous tapeworm.

[The moment we find him, he'll be food,] I say, my mind tight with rage.

I can see that she's troubled, wrestling with thoughts inside her head, until she sighs.

[I didn't think he would be forgiven,] she said, [not after what he did. I just... I don't know.]

[He was your friend, I think I understand where you're coming from. But brood died because of him. There's no coming back from that, not with us.]

[I think he did it for me, you know,] she confesses, her mind so still and quiet I almost can't hear her words. [He didn't want me to fight. He was so scared, so worried that I'd lose myself again. Maybe he

thought that if he ended the conflict, broke the siege, then it would all be over. I think he wanted to save me.]

I shrug my antennae.

[So?]

The giant bear huffs in anger, turning her gaze back to me.

[What do you mean, so? Doesn't that mean that the betrayal, and everyone who died, the brood, almost the Queen, it was all because of me!]

[Is that what you're worried about? That's just nonsense. You were helping us, any decision that moron made is one that he made himself. *He* bears the responsibility, not you.]

The bear drooped her shoulders once again.

[I wish I could agree with you,] she mutters.

[Look, you're really being a downer in what is meant to be joyous tickle time. Tell you what, why don't you go explain yourself to the Queen and see how she feels about it. She was the one most affected by your actions, so you should go and listen to her words on it.]

There's a moment of silence as Sarah digests my words before she nods with determination.

[You're right. I should talk to the Queen and let her decide what to do. Whatever punishment she decides, I'll live with it.]

With a resolute attitude, the powerful bear rises onto her four legs and pads down the tunnel, making her way to the egg-laying chamber. Content with the extra space, I settle in and keep rolling the grubs around, laughing as they wiggle about with glee, but I make sure to prop an ear open, waiting for a particular sound to echo down the tunnel. It doesn't take long, and when it finally arrives, it's like music to my ears.

THWACK!

Holy moly! That sounded like a big one! Chuckling to myself, I push my six legs under me and make my way out of the brood chamber. Mother will be wanting a word with me as well no doubt. Good thing my carapace has gotten this tough.