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Chapter 721: And Thwacks for all

I enter the egg-laying chamber to find Sarah rubbing the top of her giant bear head with one paw whilst mother looms over her, clearly irritated. A nearby mage spins together a mind bridge and I allow it to connect to me without complaint. It seems that mother wants Sarah to be able to listen in on the conversation. Makes sense, excluding her and using pheromone language would be quite rude in these circumstances.

[Was this your idea?] Mother demands with less than her usual patience.

[She blames herself for what happened and you are the only one who can really forgive her,] I shrug my antennae. [It made sense to send her down here so she could tell you herself and get punished for it.]

[Wait. You *knew* I was going to get whacked?] Sarah says, an accusatory glint in her eye.

[Thwacked. And of course, you were being ridiculous. Me trying to knock some sense into you just wouldn't have the same effect, so I sent you down to experience some of Mother's wisdom.]

THWACK!

Oof! Still hurts! Maybe after my next evolution and my carapace is upgraded these won't be quite so sharp? Or perhaps I should concentrate a build-up of extra dense carapace on the top of my head? I eye the Queen's antennae carefully. I'm certain she's chosen some form of mutation that makes them hit harder.

[Stop staring at my antennae,] the Queen demands.

[How could you even tell?! I have compound eyes!]

[I just know,] she says nonsensically.

[Alright, so Sarah got thwacked for being dumb,] I rub my head just as she was a moment ago, [why did I get hit?]

[The same reason,] the Queen tells me, still clearly annoyed.

Well, it isn't as if I didn't know it was coming.

[Did you explain to Sarah that she was wrong to think as she did?] I try to deflect.

[No,] the Queen replies, [I just told her she was being foolish, because she was.]

[This all seems a little rude,] Sarah grumbles.

[Quiet, child,] the Queen tells her, [I'll get back to you in a moment.]

The Asura Bear flinches and sits up a little straighter, like a schoolchild being reprimanded by a teacher. I snicker at the sight and the Queen rounds on me again.

[Something funny, child?] she says, dangerously calm.

Careful Anthony...

[Absolutely not, mother. My attitude is solemn and serious, as always.]

Her antennae twitch, but she finds nothing wrong with my words so finally settles down a little. She turns back to Sarah, sparing me her forensic examination for the time being.

[I will hear no more talk of forgiveness from you,] she tells Sarah, her mental voice once more settling into its normal soothing tone. [This is now your home and we are now your family. There is no such thing as blame between us so long as that remains true. The choices of your friend are not your choices and we do not hold them against you, so from this point on, neither will you.]

Sarah hung her head.

[I'm not sure it's that easy,] she whispers.

The Queen raises an antennae threateningly.

[It's fine! I'm fine! No more guilt!] Sarah waves her massive clawed paws in front of her muzzle in surrender.

I nod from the side. Truly there is no power greater than the thwacks of mother. Such miraculous results.

THWACK!

[What was that one for?!]

[I sensed some foolish thoughts coming from your direction,] the Queen says firmly, [was I wrong?]

Dammit! I need to be more careful when there's a mind bridge connecting us!

[Now come,] the Queen turns back to the centre of the chamber and settles herself comfortably. [Let us talk, it's been some time since last you paid me a visit. You too, Sarah. It will be pleasant to share your company.]

As I walk over I take note of the human sized table and chair carved from stone that had been installed in the egg-laying chamber, but quickly put it from my mind. I'm sure there's a reason for it. With the three of us seated, we take a few hours to discuss the various goings on. The Queen and Sarah ask me about my evolution and I'm honest with them, for the most part. I talk to Sarah about her current evolution and how she feels about it, not great, it turns out. The Queen suggests that perhaps she push for tier seven, where she may be able to reverse or at least alter some of the things her current form does that drive her out of control and Sarah promises to think about it.

[Don't forget you have Granin and his triad here,] I tell her. [They might be from the cult of the worm, but they're good people, like the ones who originally took you in. They'll be more than happy to help you with some advice.]

[Thank you Anthony, I'll think about it,] she smiles.

It's a scary smile, but a smile nonetheless. The conversation turns from there to the Queen's evolution and I ask her about it directly, but I get a surprising answer.

[I do not plan to evolve again anytime soon,] she tells me bluntly. [I consume enough resources as it is, with my hunts and having to take in Biomass for the eggs. I am accumulating experience slowly, on my own, eventually I will reach tier seven, but it will not be for a long time. I think this is fine, since reaching the next tier would force me deeper into the Dungeon and away from this nest.]

Actually, come to think of it, I haven't bothered to examine my own core since waking up. How am I holding up? I turn my senses inward and I'm a little dismayed to find that I'm leaking mana. How's this even possible? There's a wave going on! Only then do I remember that the walls in this chamber are free from dungeon veins, making the ambient mana much lower than it would otherwise be. Even so, I'm quite shocked. It's quite possible that once the wave is finished I won't be able to sustain myself at this depth without making a conscious effort to drag in mana, and even then I might not be able to do so indefinitely. Has the time come already to relocate myself further down? I suppose the Queen is fine since her core isn't as dense as mine, but Sarah might be in a similar boat as me.

[How are you doing at this depth, Sarah?] I ask her directly. [Is your core able to handle it?]

[I'm probably the same as you are now,] she admits. [before the wave, it was a little tough. In these chambers, the mana is a bit thin. I can't stay in here forever. Without the golgari enchantments thickening the mana in my chambers, there's no way I would have been able to stay in the second strata as long as I have.]

[Does this mean you need to move deeper, child?] the Queen asks me.

I reluctantly nod.

[I think so,] I confess, [especially once the wave is over.]

The Queen shrugs her antennae.

[I do not see the problem,] she says, [before long there will be many ants who need to move deeper. You will do as you always have and move as the vanguard of the Colony. I am sure you will be able to secure a place for us in the depths before we need it. You have always been capable in that regard.]

[You sure you don't mean to say that I'm capable of getting the Colony into a mess and then needing the whole family to drag me out of it?] I ask.

She frowns at me. It's an odd thing, an ant frown. There's no facial muscles, obviously, it's more about the mandibles and antennae than anything else.

[I was trying to be nice about it,] she says. [Enough. I think it is time that you return to your duties.]

[Who, me?] I ask.

[Of course you. There is much work to be done, is there not? The wave threatens our nests even as we speak and the most formidable warrior of the Colony is sitting here idle. I will keep you no longer.]

[Ugh, fine.]

I push my legs under me and stand up.

[Sarah, mother. It's been wonderful to chat with you, but duty calls.]

I turn and walk away, Invidia floating over my shoulder.

[Anthony...] the Queen's mind rings against my own.

[Yes?] I ask innocently.

[You appear to be walking towards the brood chambers,] an undercurrent of warning runs through her mental sending, putting my hairs on end.

[Hah! Whoops! What a blunder! I think I better go this way then... thanks for pointing out the mistake! Haha!]

Dammit! Wait for me, grubs! I'll be back!

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Chapter 722: What's been going on

Back to work then. No rest for the wicked, so they say. Not that I'm wicked. Whatever. Leaving the egg-laying chamber and embracing the rush of mana that comes once I leave the dungeon vein free zone in the heart of the nest, I try to get my bearings and work out exactly what I should be doing next. Quite honestly, there's a lot on my list. I could talk to Granin and the crew, get my bearings on what to do mutation and skill-wise going forward. Or I could go visit the other golgari prisoners, it's been ages since I dropped in on Irette Plamine and co. What the heck have they even been up to all this time? How do they feel about the golgari failing in their assault and being left behind? Come to think of it, what the heck are we going to do with them from here on out? Eh, I'm sure the council will work it out.

There's also White and Grey to think of. From what I've heard, Grey put on quite the show and absolutely humiliated the leader of the invasion during the siege, which would have been amazing to see. I should definitely squeeze in a convo with them before I leave the nest. I should probably check in with the council at some point also. I'm sure each of them are furiously busy, what with the wave and all that, but I've little doubt that there are things I could do to help them out. If I end up visiting each caste, I'm sure to wind up with a laundry list of tasks as long as my body. I could probably take the time to go and see the branchies again as well. They've proven to be quite a bit more powerful than initially expected and if we can get their 'mother' on our side then she would be an incredible ally. Not to mention it'd be nice to get to know another reincarnator such as myself. At least, one that isn't likely to kill me.

I'd love to hunt down that miserable worm while I have a chance, but I just don't believe that I'll find him. If he wriggled away and the golgari didn't capture him again then he could be anywhere. If my guess is correct, he's well beyond our reach, burrowed into the deepest darkest hole he could find, somewhere not even the Dungeon will reach him. Eventually the wave will end and he'll have to stick his nose out. When he does, we'll be there.

Gah! I'm getting mad thinking about that traitor, I need to get to work in order to distract my thoughts.

Our first port of call is to collect Tiny. After kicking the ape awake and dragging him out of his comfy nook by the leg, we set a course looping through the nest in order to visit all the individuals I need to catch up with. I find Grey and White meditating together in their chambers, as usual and I try not to

cheese off the wolfish 'Folk' over the course of our discussion. As our chat winds up, Grey lets me know that he will be leaving shortly.

[Oh? Why's that? Our hospitality not good enough for you?]

[Far from it,] the wolf remarks, [considering what and where you are, our accommodations have been much better than expected. But it is time to return. White must complete her training journey and it will be necessary for me to provide witness to our leadership before they can make a ruling on the matter of your sapience. Should things go well, then diplomatic channels will be opened with your Colony and you'll be afforded the respect a new race deserves.]

[That'd make a mighty change from the treatment we've experienced so far,] I remark.

He waves a hand, a frown on his face.

[You'll find all of the so called 'new races' have experienced harsh treatment from the old. Only through many battles in which we proved our strength were we afforded the space to stand on our own. Although the peace has endured for many, many years, anger still runs deep on both sides and small scale fighting is incessant. You'll never truly be at peace with the old, but with time and further battles, you may be able to secure some measure of peace.]

[You mean they'll come back and try again?! Don't these people have hobbies?]

He chuckles and even White hides a smile behind her sleeve.

[They do: killing you,] Grey laughs. [I wish that was a joke. They'll be back. It might not be the Legion and the golgari, or either of them for that matter. There are plenty of others out there who are intolerant of your kind of life. In fact, once the word gets out, expect a horde of hunters to descend on this area to prey on your people for resources.]

[We'll put them in their place.]

He shrugs.

[Then stronger ones will come. This too will be a problem you cannot avoid. Not in the short to medium term.]

Well... that sucks. On that cheery note I leave them be and head over to visit the prisoners in the nearby cells. Turns out Irette hasn't taken the defeat of the golgari all too well. I think she might have been holding out hope that they would win, liberate her and she would be able to return home to live in comfort amongst the Shapers once more. Her dream shattered, she's but a fragment of her former self. Can't say I'm *super* sympathetic, but it's still a bit sad to see someone brought so low. Hopefully she can pick herself back up soon. After that I continue to whip around the Colony on my whirlwind tour, dropping in on each and every caste, saying hi to the council members and trying to get a picture of what is needed from me.

None of this is strictly necessary of course. If I want to know what members of my family really want, all I have to do is open my mind to the whispers pouring through the Vestibule. But I won't! Face to face meetings are more polite after all! Let's stick with that reason. As expected, each member of the council

has a huge list of things that they need done, but are strangely hesitant to ask for me to do anything directly. It's only when I run into Sloan that the general tells me why.

"Granin has convinced us that the best thing for the Colony is for you to power up," she says bluntly. "Which means that the members of the council are under instructions not to load you down with chores."

"But that's no good!" I protest. "What's the point of being the strongest member of the family if I don't do anything to help the family?"

"The idea is that we have you around to deal with the stuff that we can't deal with ourselves. For the time being, just get out into the Dungeon and defeat monsters. The pressure from the wave is building and it's getting harder to hold our lines, especially in the places where we aren't fully entrenched. In this case, just go out and take all the experience and Biomass you can. That's the best thing for us right now."

I guess I can do that. Time to put my newfound muscle to the test!

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Chapter 723: Going on tour

Turns out that the Colony had already begun to invest a significant amount of time and energy into the wave farming project. As I exit the nest and make my way out into the tunnels, I see the vast wheels of ant industry turning on a grand scale. Tens of thousands of carvers, each and every one of them an Earth Mage, shifting impossible amounts of stone and dirt, diverting water, creating new chambers and tunnels as part of an immense, interconnected web of 'farms'. Each stretch of tunnel I moved through was patrolled by yet more soldiers, scouts, generals, mages and core shapers, keeping watch for the endless spawns that the Dungeon spewed forth.

The sheer quantity of work being done was mind boggling and frankly well beyond the scale that I envisioned when I put the idea to the council. They didn't muck around, that's for sure. Once the idea was in their heads, they wanted to go as large as they possibly could. I'll never accuse them of having too small an appetite! From what I've seen just on my way out of the nest, the new farming setup will be hundreds of times the size of the previous one, built around the surface nest. If all goes well, the amount of Biomass and cores we can gain will fuel the Colony into another wave of expansion. The trick is, are we going to be able to defend such a large swathe of territory?

Which is where enormous construction project number two comes into the picture. As my pets and I leave the nest behind and travel further away from its comforts, we no longer see the ongoing farming project and the thousands upon thousands of labourers hard at work. Instead, we see thousands and thousands of labourers hard at work at something completely different: fortifications.

Turns out there are a whole host of Skills within the System related to building, shaping, designing and utilising defensive emplacements. It make sense, since there's pretty much a Skill for everything, near as I can tell, and after the siege, the carvers of the Colony have become, if not masters, then certainly experienced in putting together some hefty defences. Their Skills trained from the days on end they toiled shoring up the nests, these workers have now turned their attention to a grander stage, the defensive wall that will encircle the core of the Colony's territory.

Tons of rock are shifted and shaped every hour and even as I watch sturdy walls, ramparts, spiked embankments, pitfalls and more come into existence, every single inch of them hardened and baptized by the magic of the carvers. They've even gone so far as to prepare healing centres and resting chambers, peeled free of the Dungeon's veins through monumental effort, in order that the healers can work unimpeded. I know for a fact that this work is replicated throughout the Colony's territory, a vast sphere of walls and forts that will defend each and every tunnel that would provide access for the invading wave.

The overall design was that of a detail oriented mad person, or Sloan, Victor, Cobalt and Tungstant, as they are otherwise known. I'd seen the carvings and barely been able to make heads or tails of them, even when they were explained to me. It wasn't as if they were satisfied with one wall per entrance, oh no, that would be insane! The pitiful delusions of a mad ant! Instead, there were layers upon layers of redoubts, forts, walls, traps that could be abandoned or retaken as needs required, all intricately designed to funnel the hordes of enemies to deadly killing grounds where the largest tunnels intersect and merge.

As we continue to march, even these enormous works are put behind us and something else takes their place: the sights and sounds of battle. This is the true face of the wave, after all. Not construction, not relentlessly patrolling soldiers, but an endless war of attrition against a literal wave of monsters without end. Here the Colony has placed the vast majority of its strength, almost a hundred thousand monstrous ants form an unbroken, living wall to hold off the wave until the fortifications are complete. It's toward these frontlines that we make our way, and it isn't long until the deafening roar of monsters at war is resounding from the tunnel walls and echoing off the stone.

In the tunnel ahead a team of hundreds is pushing back against the wave in this section of tunnel, trying to ensure that none get through. Even as we approach, I can see that the fight is desperate and difficult, with ants being pulled from the frontline and healed before being sent back in or dragged away for further treatment. Without the benefit of a proper defence, the Colony is forced to put bodies against bodies and there is clearly a toll.

As we approach, a nearby general rushes up to me.

"Eldest! I didn't expect to see you here, but I wouldn't say no to some help."

I look over the fight taking place not a hundred metres away.

"How bad is it general?"

The much smaller soldier caste member doesn't equivocate.

"We were holding fairly easily at first, but it keeps getting harder and I'm having to rotate my soldiers for rest more often. The pressure on the healers is increasing by the hour and without more mage support, we may find it difficult to hold out more than a day if things keep getting worse."

That's worse than I thought... It isn't hard to see what the problem is. Far from the usual tier one shadow beasts that are jumping out of the walls higher up in the strata, these ants are battling against far more formidable foes. Death Magic infested brutes, huge shadow dogs, spiders and more highly evolved monsters shriek and scream as they throw themselves at the Colony's defenders without end. Despite

their advanced tactics and cooperation, the fight simply never ends and ironically it is the ants who are being worn down by the overwhelming number of foes.

I can also spot mixed into the endless hordes are a few creatures similar to those I fought the last time I came out here. Demons.

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Chapter 724: The Paragon Emerges

The demons are powerful monsters, no doubt about it. It should have been a given, seeing as how strong Invidia is, but I thought he was an exceptional case. He was hand crafted and raised by a team of Shapers who supposedly knew what they were doing, whereas the monsters of the third strata that I've run into so far are purely wild. Even so, the natural advantages they have seem to far outstrip those of the natives to the second strata. Incredible, overpowered strength and defence combined with body parts and shapes more advanced those that the members of the Colony were born with.

In a conflict between first and third strata monsters, the differences in starting conditions really do become apparent. The chitin we ants have been born with simply doesn't match up to the tough hides and devastatingly sharp claws and teeth of the demons. Combined with their ability to pack obscene amounts of brain power into small, nimble bodies via their dimensional insides, it becomes easy to see how even intelligent ants are going to struggle against them. The wall we have to overcome is just that high.

"How've you fared against the demons so far?" I ask the general and she flicks an antenna in irritation.

"They're either tough as rocks, strong as the Queen, fast as Vibrant or smarter than Cobalt," she complains, "and so far we haven't seen any beyond tier four. Every time one of them comes close, we combine our firepower and bring it down as fast as possible, even so we struggle sometimes. If we don't kill them fast enough, the rest of the monsters close in on us and the fight turns nasty until we can stabilise again."

"Sounds rough. I had a chat with the council before I came down here and I'm told that there will be a flood of reinforcements that will meet you once the defensive line is finished building. Almost the entire graduating class of the academy is being poured into combat castes."

"That'll be welcome. We lost a lot of good soldiers during the wave."

We both dip our heads in a moment of silence.

"Have you been able to capture any cores from the demons? The sooner we get them into the hands of the core shapers, the sooner those beasties will be fighting on our side."

Even if they don't make any changes, reconstituting those cores and raising the demons up to fighting strength will give us a force of shock troops that we can throw at the wave without worrying too much if they survive. At the very least they'll be able to mow through most of the shadow creatures we end up fighting.

"We've retrieved some," the general tells me, "but we haven't been able to deliver them back to the nest yet. We haven't seen a runner in a while."

"They shouldn't be too far away," I frown, "I know the scouts have setup relay stations all through the area. If something happened to your runner then you should see another one in an hour or so."

"That's good," the general acknowledges before she gives me a bit of side eye, no easy task for an insect. "So, what kind of help can we expect from you, Eldest? How long are you here for?"

I stretch my legs and clack my mandibles in amusement.

"I just evolved and I'm keen to see what this new body can do," I chuckle, "so I think my pets and I might take a stroll deeper into the Dungeon and relieve the pressure a bit. As for how long, we'll see how we go."

The general nods and snaps out a quick salute with one antenna.

"Right you are then Eldest. My girls will appreciate a break, the longest you can give them."

"Coming right up!"

Our discussion complete, the general turns back to her people and I face mine. Tiny is as eager as I would expect, ready to deliver fist to face, his armour polished to a high gleam by Smithant before we left. Crinis is a little nervous, I can tell by the way she keeps shifting and morphing on my back. Invidia looks, mostly bored, to be honest.

[All right gang. Make your final checks and then we are going in. Don't go too crazy,] I warn them, mostly for Tiny's sake, [this is going to be a long fight. Our aim is to go the distance, not wear ourselves out in ten minutes. I want to push deep and try to clear out the monsters all the way to a major junction. That will relieve the pressure on as many defensive points as possible. If things go south, we collapse the tunnel and get the heck out of dodge. With any luck, the rubble will slow the monsters long enough for us to retreat to safety. Any questions?]

They each shake their head and I give them a nod.

[Alright, let me just come to grips with my status and then we'll be good to go.]

I haven't been actively avoiding looking at my status, but I've been a bit nervous about it since evolving. This evolution was a big jump and, strange as it sounds, I'm a little intimidated by the changes.

Name: Anthony

Level: 1 (Rare) (VI)

Might: 205

Toughness: 180

Cunning: 145

Will: 100

HP: 360/360

MP: 530/530

Skills:

General:

Master Excavation (IV) Level 3; Expert Grip (III) Level 9; Expert Stealth (III) Level 6; Tunnel Guide (III) Level 11; Iron Mind (IV) Level 30; Master Stamina (IV) Level 6; Still Meditation (IV) Level 12; Snap Dash (IV) Level 11;

Mana:

Mana Craft (V) Level 24; Condensed Mana (IV) Level 18; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) Level 16; Mana Hoarder (IV) Level 22; Master Mind Magic Affinity (IV) Level 20; Directed Mana Sensing (IV) Level 12; Expert Healing Magic Affinity (III) Level 14; Omni-Elemental Affinity (V) Level 4; Mana Masking (II) Level 6;

Pet:

Further Pet Communication (III) Level 7; Core Crafting (IV) Level 13; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 5;

Defensive:

Grandmaster Exo-Skeleton Defence (V) Level 11; Master Dodge (IV) level 25; Master Endure (IV) Level 6; Expert Grace (III) Level 14;

Offensive:

Unerring Acid Shot (IV) Level 6; Master Precise Shooting (IV) Level 23; Doom Chomp (V) Level 23;

Mutations:

Senses:

Sharpened Perimeter Eyes +25, Antennae (Twilight Filament);

Defence:

Complete Diamond Carapace +25, Braced Healing Inner Carapace Plating +25;

Physical:

Hardened Rapid Absorption Legs +25, Mana Flooded Mandibles +25, Frequent Potent Regeneration Gland +25, Loud Convincing Pheromone Gland +25, Vast Hungering Stomach +25; Lock Hyper-Twitch Musculature +25, Coordinating Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network +25;

Acid:

Propagating Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +25, Guided Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle +25; Thickened Draining Acid Concentration Gland +25, Exhausting Thickener Acid Stimulation Gland +25;

Mental:

Unyielding Coordination Cortex +25; Main brain; Sub-Brains;

Mana:

Compressing Unending Gravity Magic Gland +25, Collective Will Vestibule (Soul Crystal), Communal Spirit Nave;

Species: Mature Colony Paragon

Skill points: 21

Biomass: 113

The first thing I need to do is mutate my antennae. My fighting style has come to rely on my future sense, combined with my lightning-fast reflexes and sturdy carapace to make me disturbingly hard to damage. Having just been reset, my new antennae are not setup to read the faint tremors of the future as they used to be, something I'll need to remedy immediately. That isn't to say that I haven't noticed the improvement my newly reforged antennae provide, far from it. They look glorious, to start with. The Twilight filament that now make up the basic structure of my antennae are like glittering crystal wires of a dusky hue. They catch the light whenever I move and, in my opinion, look quite fetching. The other benefit is just how darned sensitive they are. The filament splits off into impossibly fine threads up and down the length of each antenna where my hairs used to be, and let me tell you, they are very, *very* fine detectors. I can smell a trail the second a molecule of pheromone wafts anywhere near me, even the tiniest shift in the air current is like a shout in my ear. Comparing the performance pre-reset to now is like night and day. To think that monsters deeper down get to be born with this stuff?! No fair!

Although, everything they have to fight is also born with these advantages, and they can only come up here to fight us during a wave... Bah. Still unfair!

I have enough Biomass to lock in the first three mutations for my antennae, so I double down on the future sense and then reinforce it, skipping over the heat sensing ability I chose last time.

[Crisis, cover me.]

Luckily most of the ants are facing outward, toward the enemy, so they don't notice Crisis envelop my body, hiding me from sight as I twitch and thrash whilst my antennae mutate. When it's finally complete, I emerge from my dark cocoon ready for battle. Let's do this!

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Chapter 725: The Paragon Fights

To be honest, I'm both overwhelmed, and a little sad about my new stats. It's an incredible improvement over my last evolution, the gains to each of my stats is more than double, a feat which required the immense bonuses provided by the Mature Paragon evolution as well as a massive chunk of my evolutionary energy. It was necessary though. My stats had been lagging behind where they needed to be as I invested a lot of energy over the last few evolutions in expensive organs. Even though the gain is massive, I still lag behind Tiny in raw physical power and behind Invidia in mental might. It's true that the two of them are more of a streamlined, specific type of monster, but I need to work harder to make up for my lack of raw power by using my versatility to its finest.

Comparing my Cunning stat to Invidia's, the differential is made even worse by the fact that my own mental stats are split across four separate brains, whereas his are devoted entirely to one. Using the mental construct magic, he's able to replicate the ability to think about multiple things at once without

having to physically divide his brains, as I have. Although I've made a huge stride forward with this evolution, I still have a long way to go before I can become a truly intimidating magical force. Having made all of my brains mutable is going to be interesting to explore as well. I'm sure there are plenty of options that'll help me take my spell casting game to a whole new level. So many more strides forward waiting in the future!

Having said that, I still have a level of juice in the tank that I've never come close to having before, and it's finally time to put it to the test! Eager to get started, I rally my pets and we start to move toward the line of battling ants in front of us. As we walk, I order my sub-brains to kick into gear and marvel as they stir the mana in my core, drawing it out and weaving it into the omni-elemental construct. It's still hard, obviously, but it isn't close to the near impossible task that it was before. Each of the brains works in harmony, guided by the coordination cortex as they cooperate to weave and fold the intricate, many layered structure. This is incredible! My main mind doesn't need to get involved at all!

[Are you ready?] I ask my pets.

They each reply to the affirmative and we start to run forward. A wall of insects covers the tunnel in front of us, members of the Colony hanging from the walls and ceiling to block off every possible avenue for the wave to pierce through their numbers. On the other side, a screaming mass of monsters pushes forward, fighting each other just as hard as they do the ants that bar their way.

"Clear a path!" I roar, blasting my pheromones forward and my siblings respond instantly, the centre peeling back to either side.

The monsters of the wave waste no time seizing this opportunity as they flood through with a triumphant roar, only to be met by Tiny's fist and sent flying back to where they came. In less than a second, we barrel through the opening and find ourselves surrounded on all sides, the wall of insects closing behind us. Enemies surround us on all sides, swathes of claws, fangs and worse reaching to rend us limb from limb from every conceivable angle. Tiny has never been happier. With a whooping bellow of rage and joy, his fists blaze with light as his hands start to flicker faster than the eye can see, sending straight punches in all directions that blow monsters back, stunning and damaging in equal measure. With the minimum space he needs achieved, he winds back his right arm, gigantic muscles shifting and bulging beneath his armour, before he launches a furious straight right that sends a fist of light the size of a car slamming into the ranks of monsters in front of us. The enemies just evaporate, knocked away or simply disintegrated by the power of that punch.

Imagine being tier one and having to face up to Tiny's fists... Such a miserable way to go.

Unwilling to be outdone by my first pet, I urge my sub-brains to finish their work and they each grumble back that if I really want to speed things up I could darn well get involved and help, which I refuse. Nevertheless, in only a few more seconds the construct slams into place and I task the main sub-brain with maintaining it as the other two begin to operate it, feeding in raw mana and extracting the desired type. The whole process is so much more flawless than it was before, my main mind not even required at this stage in the process. In a blessedly short amount of time, blue fire mana has accumulated and I finally deign to step in, weaving a fire domain with speed and precision that leaves my previous efforts in the dust.

With a 'whoosh', the air ignites as a sphere of pure blue fire expands around me, searing any foe who dares to step within ten metres of my noble frame. I turn the maintenance of the domain back over to the sub-brain and I almost weep as it manages to maintain the spell as well as operate the construct in order to keep feeding it with mana. Meanwhile, my other sub-brain has been hard at work pumping out lava mana, the combined essence of earth and fire. In a true test, I force the sub-brain to continue operating the construct whilst weaving a simple bolt spell and though it's a strain, it succeeds and soon an arrow of sizzling lava flies forward, splattering against a shadow monster who roars in pain.

This is fantastic! This is the dream! I'm casting multiple spells at the same time whilst maintaining a truly devilish construct and my main mind isn't involved at all! Muahahahaha! How far I've come! And if the main mind isn't involved, then I can get busy doing other things! Move aside Tiny! Time for this beefy ant to head to the front lines and get my chomp on!

My jaws locking into place, I charge forward, shouldering the ape aside in the process and unleash my most potent physical attack, the Doom Chomp!

CRUNCH!

Twin jaws of dark light, larger than any I've seen before, manifest beside my head and slam forward, tearing into the hordes of monsters in front of me and clearing space instantly. A flood of messages stream in from Gandalf, but I ignore them. That was crazy strong! Is this the benefit of increasing my Might to this extent? No regrets on that front!

[Gwahaahahahaaa! Come on, Crinis! You need to get your share of the experience so you can evolve! No holding back now!]

[Yes, Master!]

The four of us rip into the onrushing wave with wild abandon, unleashing our strength to its limit as behind us the garrison of ants watches on in amazement.

"I want the second and fourth squad off the wall and resting in two minutes!" the general roars at the stunned insects. "The rest of you hold firm! The Eldest is working hard to give you a rest and you are going to get one! Where are the medics! Get out here!"

Firing back into motion, the ants begin to scurry with urgency as the Eldest and his guardians tear into the hordes that had pressed them so hard only a moment ago.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 726: Real Strength

This talk of 'ancients', mysterious creatures of supreme power that supposedly rule in the depths of our world is naught but superstitious nonsense. As a scholar, how can I put my faith in hearsay, tattered records and stories passed down over centuries? I need evidence. I need facts, verified by firsthand accounts. When we actually sit down and try to prove the existence of these monsters, what do we actually have?

Almost no written records survived the Rending, certainly not any that I can access or have heard of, a fact which I believe lends credence to my own arguments. If the pre-cataclysm society was so powerful, so wondrous, as many of my contemporaries would claim, then surely they would have survived the

scourge of the Dungeon far better than they did. Waves are nothing new, we have experienced hundreds of them in the millennia since they first began. Many kingdoms maintain cities, outposts and forts in the Dungeon during these times, something that we know the civilisations of old were unable, or barely able to do.

"Oh," those who disagree would say, "you are comparing people with hundreds of years of accumulated expertise against those taken by surprise, without any knowledge of what lay beneath their feet!"

A foolish point that only lends further strength to my view. My detractors seem to be unable to see the contradiction they themselves have constructed. Were the old kingdoms immensely powerful centres of learning and strength far in excess of what we now possess, as they claim? Or were they weak, falling victim to the ravages of the wave and being swept away by a tide of weaker monsters capable of existing on the surface? It can't be both!

I have heard such nonsense as to suggest that the first wave that occurred during the Rending was simply of a scale larger than any that has occurred since, but again I ask: where is the proof? More than a thousand years later we have records of waves all over Pangera that date back centuries, and nothing such as what is posited to have taken place has ever been recorded. Not only has it never been recorded, the level of mana readings have never approached even HALF what would be necessary to create the conditions they describe.

It is my studied opinion that, as I have stated before in my earlier writings, the Cataclysm was indeed a real event, to say otherwise would be foolish as the weight of evidence on this matter is conclusive, but that rather than the delusion of impossibly strong societies falling to monsters of such strength that have never been seen or heard from again, instead the Cataclysm consisted of weak, unprepared societies falling victim to what was, at worst, a slightly above average wave.

The 'ancients' are simply an excuse for weak minded and lazy researchers who are unwilling to let go of the concept of a pre-Dungeon 'golden age' despite the lack of concrete evidence. In truth, the old-races of Pangera have never been stronger and the ancients do not exist. These are the facts and I challenge any who dispute me to provide evidence to the contrary. I am supremely confident that I won't be taken up on my offer, since no such evidence exists.

- *Excerpt from the Challenge Letter of Scholar Grans to the Tower.*

The power! The unbelievable power! Flinging spells and chomping my way through the rampaging hordes is far more fun that it really ought to be, and deep down I think I feel the stirrings of the long slumbering Dark Anthony. No! I reject thee, evil one! I need to get a grip on myself, this pointless and wanton slaying doesn't serve my purposes as well as I need.

[Come on, Crinis, Tiny! You need to get up here and vacuum in as much experience as you can. Can't have you lagging behind me and Invidia forever! Let's go, go, go!]

Tiny gives me a look that speaks volumes. *I've been wanting to, but you jumped in front of me and I haven't been able to hit a monster since, idiot.* Which may be true, but there's no need to frame it quite so roughly, Tiny! Forgive me, alright? I got carried away!

[Yes, Master!] Crinis is far more forgiving and leaps forward, her blobby body taking on the form of its full terror, her three mouths revealing themselves from within the shadows of her form.

After those gnashing maws appear, Crinis takes a brief moment to gather her strength before she unleashes the devastating scream that I heard once before in Rylleh. The effect on the monsters nearby is instantaneous as many rear back clutching at their heads or simply dropping to the ground, writhing as their sanity is assaulted by the psychic waves of fear that accompany her roar. Waves I can sense now, thanks to my antennae. Just how sensitive *are* these things? I can clearly detect the mental assault that rides along her voice, somehow attacking the mind of her foes without even employing mind magic. It's like an injection of pure fear, straight into the vein, and it appears to work wonders on the foe in front of us as they cower back from Crinis, revealed in her full majesty.

What happens next to those monsters cowering in terror, I would rather not describe. Let's just say I wish I could avert my eyes.

[Don't forget the Biomass!] I call over my shoulder, having pressed my face up against the tunnel wall. It's not perfect but it's better than nothing. [You guys need to max out your mutations before you evolve. I know it's not easy to get space to eat, so take turns or something. If you need help, call Invidia or me and we can chip in.]

With a roar, Tiny pushes off the ground and barrels forward, charging headlong into the next wave of monsters as they press forward. We've been making solid progress, pushing down the tunnel and putting some distance between us and the checkpoint manned by the Colony behind us. My hope is that the deeper we can go, the more checkpoints we can relieve by cutting off the flow of demons to as many places as we can. The endless hordes of shadow monsters are a pain, to be sure, but for now the majority of them are still in the first three tiers, with a few tier fours mixed in. I've no doubt there are tier five shadow monsters hiding out below, but for now they're managing to hold on and haven't been ousted from their hunting grounds as of yet. Something that will likely change as the wave goes on.

No, the real threat to the Colony right now is the demons climbing up from the third strata. From what Granin told me during our discussions before I left, there aren't actually that many connecting points between the second and third strata, for 'reasons that will become clear when I see it'. Which means the monsters climbing up into the territory claimed by the Colony may be coming from as few as one or two entrances. If we can push down and plug one of those for a while then that'll take a lot of heat off the Colony while they finish building their defensive network. Getting that deep is going to be a massive pain in the butt though, to be honest, I'm not even sure that we'll be able to manage it. Doesn't hurt to try though. Let's see how far down we can get!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 727: Need to work fast!

"Dammit, Vibrant! Get back here!" Advant yelled, her scent filled with impotent rage.

"No chance!" laughed Vibrant as she raced away.

"We're trying to make you stronger!" the exasperated soldier tried to reason with the fast vanishing form of her fellow council member.

"I-can-do-that-myself-okay-so-I-don't-need-your-help-bye!" Vibrant replied with rapid fire speed, her scent fading almost as fast as she did.

In the end, all that remained in the section of tunnel was Advant and her escort, slumped in defeat as they tried to catch their breath.

"Damn that Vibrant!" she growled, "why does she have to make everything so difficult?"

She had been tasked with finding the second most powerful warrior in the Colony and bringing her back to the nest so they could pour their collective resources into her and raise Vibrant as the second powerhouse of the Colony, but so far she just wasn't cooperating. She'd heard out Advant well enough when she'd first caught up to explain the idea, but had flatly rejected the Colony helping her in any way, insisting that she would do it her own way before speeding off into the distance. Everytime Advant managed to catch up to her, the same scene repeated itself, with Vibrant slipping away no matter how hard they tried to pin her down.

With nothing else for it, she gathered her energy and pushed herself back to her legs, following along the trail of the speeding ant at a more sedate pace. Vibrant would have to stop and fight at some point, which was when they would next catch up to her. Hopefully the next time would go better...

Further down the tunnel, Vibrant raced away having already put her latest encounter with Advant out of her head. Who had time to worry about that sort of thing? There was so much fighting to do! And it was *everywhere*! No matter how fast she managed to get from one checkpoint to the next, it always felt like she should have gone faster, which was *exciting*! No matter how fast she was able to run around, it wasn't fast enough! This was a novel situation for the fast moving ant and she was *loving* it.

For a brief moment she wondered where all of her followers were, only to remember a moment later that they'd given up on chasing her because she'd run even them into the ground. Instead, one of the generals had organised them into roaming packs spread across the territory of the Colony, doing much the same thing Vibrant herself was doing: rushing from one flashpoint to the next, just on a smaller scale than their leader.

The air rushed through her antennae and over her carapace and for a long moment, she just indulged herself in experiencing the joy of running at full speed. She didn't know exactly when she'd begun to love moving fast, as far back as she could remember she'd had too much energy, to the point that the Eldest had claimed she'd been hyperactive even as a grub! Whatever the reason, it just felt *right* to run and so run she did! As fast and as often as possible.

The territory of the Colony whizzed by, a blur on the edge of her vision. She'd had to mutate her eyes to be able to work properly moving at these sorts of speeds, an investment that she didn't regret. In fact, it only ignited her desire to go faster! On and on she raced through the tunnels, several times passing by a soldier busy grappling with a freshly spawned shadow creature, but she didn't stop, couldn't afford to stop! The Colony needed her!

In less than five minutes, she had covered the six kilometres needed to reach the next checkpoint and arrived in a cloud of dust that blanketed the general standing at the rear of the skirmish.

"What the heck!?" her scent guttered in the sharp breeze that blew through.

"Hi-hi! Just here to help out but no need to thank me I'll get right to work and then get going okay byeeeeee!"

So saying, the large soldier threw herself into the fray, dodging and weaving through the hordes, working her mandibles with relentless energy, cleaving legs, shattering hides and piercing demon flesh. She was a whirlwind more than an ant, never ceasing her rapid paced movement, finding ways to dodge and slide through gaps that an ant half her size would never attempt. Seizing on the momentum that her intervention had brought them, the rest of the ants leapt forward into battle, shoving back the wave and thinning out the monsters, buying them precious time to rest.

The moment the tide of the battle changed, Vibrant turned around and dashed away, leaving nothing but the scent of her "Have a nice dayyyyy!" lingering on the antennae of the ants who momentarily had to wonder if she had ever been there at all. There was need! She was needed! And so, she had to go. All over the territory the Colony had claimed there were checkpoints that needed help, needed someone to come and relieve the pressure, just so they could catch their breath. Vibrant was ready! Vibrant was willing! She couldn't be everywhere at once, but she could sure as heck try!

Just as she was picking up the pace and her heart was really starting to race, she suddenly felt her front right leg snag on something she hadn't seen. Before her balance could fail, she snapped down her second leg and managed to catch herself just in time to avoid losing any of her speed. A perfect recovery. Except for the second, then third snag she hit. What the heck was going on?!

With two of her legs snarled in some kind of invisible obstruction, even her highly developed sense of balance wasn't enough to save Vibrant from going down.

CRASH!

With a loud thump, she tumbled end over end and slammed into the tunnel wall heavily, stunning her for a moment,.

"What the... hey!"

Which gave just enough time for the net to drop down from the ceiling.

"Hello, Vibrant," came a scent she knew all too well, "how nice to see you again."

"You!"

Descending from the ceiling like a filthy spider came the small ant who had captured Vibrant last time, but only with the help of Crinis! She'd forced Vibrant to sleep, for *hours*! She might have been able to run faster afterwards, but she still resented being made to be still!

"What do you want?! I'm busy helping the Colony! I haven't even been avoiding sleep!"

More ants emerged from the shadows and they surrounded Vibrant on the ground, looking down at her with glee.

"You have not been avoiding rest," the nameless one said, "but according to the Eldest, there is something else you have been avoiding, is there not?"

Vibrant, for once, grew still.

"I'm not sure what you mean, you probably don't mean anything, right? Why not just let me go and be on my way? There's plenty of ants out there that need help and I can help them! I want to help them!"

You wouldn't want them to not be helped, right? So let me up and I'll get to rushing over and you don't need to worry about me or anything that I might be avoiding, which is nothing because I'm not avoiding anything!"

"Did she take a mutation to help her talk that fast?" a nearby ant wondered.

The nameless one wasn't distracted.

"The Eldest believes you've been ready to evolve to tier five for some time, but have been holding back because you don't want to be stuck in one place. You've been avoiding it for weeks now, haven't you? Well look at what we have here."

The nameless one drew out a precious rare core and placed it on the ground in front of Vibrant.

"Everything we need to help you evolve in the best possible condition. You want to help the Colony? Time to be the best Vibrant you can be."

Vibrant thrashed her legs for a moment before giving up.

"You won't let me go until I evolve, will you?" she said miserably.

In response, the nameless one reached over and patted her on the head.

"We absolutely won't," she said.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 728: Delve

Down and down into the depths we plunge, battling the furious monsters of the wave every step. The number of cold undead creatures we encounter continues to rise as we progress, and I can't believe the sheer variety of shapes the shadow monsters can take. I understand that their shadow flesh makes them the basically formless, squishy and mouldable things that they are, but some of them are just weird.

Tiny battled a disgusting beast who resembled a slug fused with a seahorse that fired some strange form of death plasma out of its face-hole. The whole thing was rather traumatic from my point of view and I wish I'd never seen it. Only Invidia's intervention managed to prevent my ape friend from suffering a premature death during that fight, and in fact during many fights.

Without much ability, or inclination, to avoid damage of any sort, Tiny has come to rely rather heavily on his armour to prevent damage, which works well against physical attacks, but doesn't help much against the more insidious attacks levelled at him by death monsters and demons. Without the eyeball of Envy, Tiny would have had to face-tank all number of poisons, curses and toxins that were sent his way and I've little doubt he wouldn't have survived long.

Before he evolves to tier six I'm going to make sure that he covers his bases and gains a few more points in cunning. I'm starting to think the reason I've never seen any of Tiny's species evolve beyond tier two is simply because the lightning fist ape and what comes after are simply too dumb to survive without constant babysitting and supervision. I might have a chat with Granin about it when we get back... Still, it would be encouraging to learn that my first pet's total lack of survival instincts was an inbuilt flaw rather than something I introduced myself.

The number of demons has also continued to rise and without the benefits of my evolution they would have been a right pain in the backside to deal with. Despite being tier five, both Tiny and Crinis struggled against tier four demons, the resilience and sheer brutal power of the creatures simply a tier above what we had seen so far.

[Disgusting trash! You will be rendered into pieces before you lay a claw on my Master!] Crinis ranted, her limbs wrapped around the foul visage of a hulking demon, sawing away at it.

[Need any help, Crinis?] I ask.

[Do not foul your mandibles or mind on this infernal creature, Master! I am enough to end its miserable suffering!]

I think you are more the cause of its suffering Crinis. Nevertheless, she is successful in ridding the poor beast of its condition, namely the one of being in one piece, and swiftly descends on the Biomass. In just a few seconds the looming threat of the Wrath Demon is gone, along with any evidence it existed in the first place, vanished into the three maws of the blob of death.

Despite her victory, we are still surrounded, and I once again bring down a domain of scorching blue flame, using my main mind to supercharge the spell and increase its range, burning any monster who dares to come close.

[This is exhausting,] I complain, [there's no end to them.]

[You didn't expect anything different; did you Master? It's a wave after all,] Crinis says.

Tiny just gives me a thumbs up, a broad grin splitting his bat face. I know you're happy, we've been fighting for hours without pause! This is basically paradise for you! For his part, Invidia just continues to float alongside us, the intense light of his eye resting on each of us briefly before flicking away to the tunnel then returning to us after a few seconds.

[I know that!] I say, the roars of burning monsters ringing in my ears and causing me to become irritable, [but I was kind of hoping they'd stop flooding upward at some point...]

Our descent has been very different than what we experienced in the first strata during the last wave. At that time the tunnels were filled with spawns of weaker monsters with occasional stronger ones feasting on the free experience and Biomass, and although it was draining in the extreme, it wasn't too difficult to clear them out. This time, it's so, so different. Moving downward in the Dungeon has felt like walking into the face of a gale force wind. We want to go deeper, but it appears as though every other monster in the Dungeon wants to go higher. Which means stronger monsters, more of them, and delivered fresh to our face in a never-ending stream from the depths. We aren't even dealing with the creatures being spawned around us, as those are snatched up and consumed by the rising monsters in a flash.

[How long can you maintain this domain, Master?] Crinis asks me.

Good question. I check the mana flooding into my core through my legs and idly check what I can grab from the ambient mana around us.

[If I keep dragging in mana, probably indefinitely? It would take most of my concentration to do so though.]

[Then might I suggest we rest here momentarily?]

[Alright, you two can relax. Invidia, can you deal with anything that gets through?]

The eye flashes dark energy.

[I sssshall take my due...]

[Sure thing buddy.]

The pulsing sphere of blue fire isn't enough to deal with the press of monsters on its own, though it does damage them. Sadly, most of the demon spawn are resistant to the flames, which allows them to push through it, which is where the power of explosions comes into the picture.

BOOM!

The four of us are showered with dust and stones as we settle in for a short break as Invidia sucks in mana from the air and weaves his deadly magic with it.

BOOM!

[How much further do you guys think we need to go before we reach the third strata?] I ask.

[I cannot say, Master, I do not know how thick the shadow layer is, nor can I say how far we have travelled so far.]

Tiny just wobbles a hand back and forth, eyeing the exploding monsters around us sadly. By my estimation, we've come a significant number of kilometres down, the slope we've been travelling on has been fairly steep, and despite fighting every step of the way, we've been pushing hard without rest. At least the fire domain helps keep the cold off. It's freezing down here.

[Have you two managed to gain a few levels?]

Tiny pulls a face whilst Crinis just sounds frustrated.

[I have, but slowly. It will take a long time to catch up to you, Master.]

[Hey, if we don't push hard, you'll never get there,] I try to encourage them, [it's a mountain, but without climbing, you'll never reach the top. If we keep fighting and accruing experience at the pace we have been, you'll be level eighty before you know it.]

I checked on the two of them before we set out and it's a bit unfortunate, but they're lagging quite a ways behind. Both have managed to raise their levels fairly well since reaching tier five, but both were stuck in the thirties when we started. With hard work, they'll be able to evolve by the time this wave is done.

[Oh, did either of you grab any cores?]

Crinis extends a limb from within her blobby mass and deposits a few cores in front of me which I quickly leap on and devour. The capacity of my core has doubled after all, need to pump it all the way up to max!

[What about you, Tiny?]

The ape just shrugs and shakes his head. I'm not surprised, the big guy usually isn't bothered keeping track of any cores he comes across when eating, he spits them out like seeds and ignores them in favour of shovelling in more food.

[I need all the cores I can get my hands on right now,] I scold him, [and after you and Crinis evolve we'll need hundreds more in order to max out your cores as soon as possible! Don't slack off! You're making trouble for everyone else!]

He has the decency to look a little ashamed, which is a plus. His laziness is usually fine, but when he drags himself and others down I can't indulge him anymore.

[Massster. They are closssing in on usss.]

A quick glance is enough to confirm that Invidia is correct. Despite his frequent detonations, the monsters are pressing closer, even through my domain spell. With a weary mental sigh I push my legs under me and flex my mandibles.

[Back at it gang. We've got a long way to go.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 729: The flaming pillar

Why are the monsters of the third strata called demons? This is a question frequently asked of me by those unfamiliar with that particular strata, or less well read on monsters in general. It's a general misconception that it was the civilised races of Pangera that designated the monsters of the third strata as 'demons', as a response to the particularly intelligent cruelty inherent in the more highly evolved monsters encountered there. This simply isn't so. It was, in fact, the System itself that assigned the name of demon to those monsters, probably long before any surface being encountered and slew one.

As to why this may be the case? Ah, here we come to the crux of the matter. This question is the cause of much debate and speculation in the academic community even to this day, and despite what many of my colleagues believe, I don't think it will be possible to arrive at a conclusive answer.

Some posit the theory that the System itself contains a sense of 'good' and 'evil', and use the language associated with various Skills, Classes and monsters to support this idea. The argument has some merit, I admit. Various healing classes, or those with a predilection to endeavours that one can argue are for the immediate benefit of society, do in fact receive affirming and positive language in their descriptions as given by the System. Other classes that are... less savoury in nature, such as torturer, executioner or thief, are far less complimentary in the text, though it must be noted that neither does the language of the System strictly condemn such classes.

So it is by this argument that the most 'evil' of all monsters have been denoted by the System as demons, as they are the most deserving of this title. Others argue that this concept is inherently flawed, as all monsters from the Dungeon are, in essence, highly motivated killers. The less intelligent monsters may pose less of a threat than their smarter... colleagues... but the motivations of both are similar: kill, eat and grow stronger.

It's only the natives of the third strata, to my knowledge, that seem to enjoy what they do, even go out of their way to inflict pain, fear or terror in their victims. There have been numerous witnesses to testify

that the demons will act like this even when preying on each other. And each demon will attempt to indulge itself according to their nature as described by their species. Wrath demons engage in horrific displays of anger and rage against those who they see have wronged them, Greed demons will go to absurd lengths to collect and accumulate that which they desire whilst delighting in the pain inflicted, Envy demons are known to strip everything from their foes, reducing them to literally nothing before dealing the final blow.

Why do they act this way? Why have they been named and designed to be this way by the System? In my humble opinion, there are none who can say for certain.

- *Excerpt from Lecture Series "On the nature of Demons" by teacher Sooka of the Tempest Alliance.*

I'm so damn tired. I need more ants nearby to fuel the Vestibule, the twenty bodyguards who have shadowed us down this far simply aren't enough to provide the kind of energy that I need. It's been two damn days and we haven't had much of a break in that entire time. Constant fighting for this length of time is enough to take it out of anyone, even a tier six, as it turns out. We did actually try to bury ourselves into a wall and hide from the wave for a while, but it wasn't too effective. I don't know if the monsters here are smarter or if our cores are just too easy to detect through a few metres of collapsed tunnel wall, but no sooner did we seal ourselves into a pocket of air that we'd dug out than the monsters started digging their way through to us.

Stop being so persistent! Leave us alone, dammit!

In the end we managed to get a tiny rest by digging further in and forcing the monsters to work harder to get to us, but it wasn't nearly enough to recharge the batteries. In truth, we should have turned around a long time ago, but I can feel that we're getting closer to the third strata with every step and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't super interested in taking a peek. This is the new frontier! The next leg of the Colony's conquest of the Dungeon! What will the terrain be like? What sort of tunnels, what sort of mana, are we going to find? The sense of adventure is welling up within me and I cannot bring myself to squash it, despite the danger that pressing forward entails.

"Eldest, I must recommend against this course of action," I scented a killjoy from somewhere above me.

"Protectant? What do you mean?! Aren't you curious to catch a glimpse of the third strata? Not to mention the benefit to the Colony if we can block an entrance to our territory for as little as an hour!"

If we stop the flow of demons into the second strata beneath the Colony the pressure on all of the checkpoints above will diminish dramatically. It would achieve the goal of this expedition in one fell swoop!

"My only goal is to make sure that you remain alive," comes back the reply, "going further into the teeth of the wave isn't worth the risk."

"Be a lot easier if you lot helped out more," I grumble.

"We are helping more than you think. We've done as much as we can whilst also remaining hidden."

"You must be getting a hell of a lot of stealth levels out of this."

"... yes."

I don't want to reveal to Protectant and her crew that I do, in fact, know exactly what they've been up to. Their thoughts and desires, their Will, has been flowing into the Vestibule, being enhanced by the Nave, and giving me a window into their activities. What they want, what they do and how they do it, aren't really mysteries to me anymore, especially when I'm actively paying attention. I'm sure the information I can glean from an individual ant when I focus on them would be overwhelming were I to try it back in the nest, but it's fairly trivial for me to do so here, with only twenty of my siblings within range.

"Make sure you keep getting levels," I urge them all, directing my scent widely across the ceiling where the rest of them are hiding, "I know you've been working hard to level up. A bit more of a push and you'll reach tier five. Let's do it!"

If all of them reach tier five at the same time my pets reach tier six, my group will have reached a much higher level of power, making us a mobile fortress that the Colony can fling at our enemies. Certainly we'd have been able to hold at the Siege far more effectively.

"Anyways, we're pushing forward again!" I declare. "We aren't going home until I catch a glimpse of the third strata. If you want to go back, then push forward even more aggressively!"

I can feel the curses ringing through the very souls of the defender squad above me, each of them raging that the target the Council wants them to keep alive is so determined to seek out danger at every turn. Not my fault, team. I'm not the one who tasked you with this impossible mission, so if you want to complain then go back and yell at the ones who commissioned you in the first place. Having reaffirmed my desire to push on, the group girds themselves and continues to press onward into the teeth of the endless flood of monsters. The deeper we go, the more necessary it becomes for the bodyguards to get involved, working in groups to knock monsters off balance, put damage on targets from range with coordinated acid barrages, or use magic to thin out the weaker opponents. It makes a noticeable difference and my pets and I keep moving forward.

The first thing I notice is the heat. The irrepressible cold of the shadow sea gives way ever so slightly, the faintest hint of warmth brushing against my carapace. Thank goodness! The temperature was getting so low that my legs were on the brink of locking up. The more we move, the warmer it gets, and the fewer shadow monsters we see, as if they are actively avoiding the heat. Which makes sense I suppose.

[Crisis, are you feeling alright as it gets warmer?] I ask, concerned.

[It's uncomfortable,] she admits, [but I'm fine.]

[Good, we can press on then.]

Down we go, further into the depths. Eventually we come across something I didn't expect to see, a thick wall of fog blanketing the way forward. We walk cautiously forward, testing our footing and stretching our senses as we go, even as monsters and demons swarm around us. Every time I move my leg forward, the rock gets hotter, until it reaches a near scorching temperature that thankfully does no damage, though it stings. Tiny is particularly uncomfortable and I can sense him hopping from foot to foot as we fight our way through the fog.

It lasts for perhaps a hundred metres of tunnel, and when we emerge on the other side, the Dungeon has completely transformed. No longer are we surrounded by the dark and cold, instead, a wall of heat boils the moisture from my eyes and bright red light emanates from veins that flow through the walls like branching lines of pure magma. Far more shocking than this is the scene that opens up before us. The tunnel continues to slope down, forming a ramp to what I can see is a flat pillar. Not far ahead, the walls of the tunnel drop away to reveal a huge expanse of open air that frankly defies belief. Keen to see more, we barrel forward, slamming monsters out of the way, even knocking them over the edge to fall to the depths.

[Hold them off,] I tell my pets, [I want to take a look.]

As Crinis, Tiny and Invidia move to defend me from the monsters, I move to the edge of this ramp and look over the edge, my mind freezing at the impossible sight. The floor... is so... so far away. What am I even seeing? Even in the Dungeon... this surely can't be possible...

But the evidence of my eyes cannot be denied. The ramp we stand on connects to a pillar of fiery rock that rises what must be ten kilometres from the floor. It's hard to make out, but as far as my eyes can see, the rocky ground flows with lava, fire and a writhing carpet of monsters that flow toward the base of the pillar. The pillar itself is covered in monsters, clawing their way upward, even as they fight each other every step of the way. These are the demons who've been reaching us in the second strata, those few who survive the climb. In the far, far distance, when I strain my eyes to their limits, I can make out another towering spire of stone that looks as if it holds up the sky itself.

So you're telling me that the entire surface, and the top two strata, are being held up by these columns?! Surely not, right?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 730: Pillars of the world

[Master, we need help!] Crinis' call shocks me out of my daze and I rush over to assist them against the unending crush of demons that charge up the ramp once they have crested the top of the pillar and secured their position against their fellow demons.

The flying demons have such an absurd advantage in this situation, simply flapping their way up and onto the ramp, but once they reach this natural chokepoint, all bets are off as the demons fight amongst each other to reach the second strata.

[No worries, I'm here!] I call as I leap back into the fight, my mandibles pumping and minds spinning a new domain.

Without the overwhelming crush of shadow monsters, the fire domain no longer serves a purpose as the demons are at least partially resistant to it. All production of blue fire mana is discarded and the construct now starts to pump out pure ice mana which is deftly woven into a new domain. Likewise, the lava mana I was working with before is also cast aside in favour of the much easier to work with air. In only a few seconds the first compressed bolt of air is ready and I fire it at a lithe, weasel looking demon trying to slip past us. Caught unawares, the beast only has time to roar indignantly before the powerful gust of air carries it over the edge of the ramp and plummeting to the depths below.

Ice domain!

The moment I release the spell the air around us becomes infused with frigid air and spinning chunks of ice that bounce harmlessly from my allies but detonate with a sharp crack when they hit anything else. At first I'm wholly satisfied with this new domain, the demons certainly aren't big fans of the ice, but after a few seconds I notice something I may have overlooked. The amount of mana being sucked out of my core to maintain this domain is unbelievable! Even over this short period, the sub-brain in charge is starting to frizzle from overwork as it tries to maintain the spell and produce the ice mana necessary to keep it running at the same time.

The reason why is readily apparent: it's too damn hot here! The ice mana is being consumed way too quickly! Cursing inside, I throw away the ice domain and switch to air, both sub-minds working together to pump out the same type of mana to hurl bolts of compressed air at my foes.

[How are you holding up, Crinis?]

[I'm fine, Master!] she replies, her voice steely with determination.

[Don't give me nonsense Crinis,] I warn her as we battle back and forth with the demons, [give it to me straight, that's an order!]

[My strength feels like it's being sapped,] she grudgingly admits, [and my flesh doesn't move through the shadows as easily as before.]

Of course, without the naturally abundant shadow mana and darkness in the second strata, her powers don't work half as well as they did before. Another problem quickly becomes apparent.

[Is it just me, or are these demons much tougher than they were before?] I gasp as the bladed arm of a nasty looking horror scrapes across my carapace before I can snap forward with my mandibles and end the threat.

[The cold must have weakened them when we fought them before,] Crinis guesses, [here they are surrounded by their natural affinity and it is empowering them.]

Dangit! This is actually way harder than I thought it would be. Despite arriving at the most perfect natural chokepoint we could hope for, the ramp is no more than fifty metres wide and every demon who climbs the pillar has no choice but to move up it if they want to reach the strata above, we may not be able to hold here as long as I'd hoped.

[Hold on for a little longer, then we'll fall back! And make a break for the second strata! Alright?! If anyone is struggling, make sure you let Invidia know!]

"I really don't think you should stay here, Eldest!" Protectant appears to tell me in person, her antennae twitching in all directions as she nips forward to bite at the legs and joints of the demons near Tiny. "This situation is too unstable, there's no need to take the risk!"

"We're alright," I tell her, forcing my exhausted body to keep moving as yet another demon fronts up to me, charging toward my much larger frame with reckless abandon. "Just hang on a little longer and then we'll retreat. We'd be fine if all of you were tier five already..."

"Is this really the time for that, Eldest?!"

Probably not, but the slow progress of my security guards is getting frustrating. The demon slashes forward with its claws and I blast it in the chest with a condensed burst of air, sending its wiry frame flying through the air and over the edge of the ramp. It was a quick and painless way to deal with the enemy, though it doesn't work nearly as well on the heavier ones. As we continue to battle hard, it's clear that we're being forced to give ground as the press of demons only grows thicker with the passage of time. For every one we put down, another two are ready to take their place. Even if the bulk of them are only tier three or four, in this environment they're much tougher, moving faster and hitting harder than when we fought them above.

"ROOOOOOAAAAR!" a rumbling bellow ripples through the air and my antennae whip around as I try to work out where the heck that came from.

From below? Over the edge of the pillar I see a massive arm covered in dripping black tar reach up and dig into the stone, thick muscles bulging to haul the rest of the monster up to the top of the pillar.

[We've got a big one here guys! Keep your eyes peeled!] I tell my desperately fighting pets.

The spark of battle ignites in Tiny's eyes anew as he spots the enormous demon cresting the edge of the pillar, a broad grin splitting his bat features.

[You stay here!] I order him. [This one's mine!]

Seriously, how would any of his species survive without a baby sitter?

Heedless of the smaller demons crushed by its bulk, the newcomer smashes its arms down and lifts the rest of its massive body into view and I get my first glimpse of the full creature. It's huge, bigger than Tiny, bigger than me, bigger even than the Queen. Clearly built heavily around its physical stats, the monster is powerfully built, thick slabs of muscle that remind of nothing as much as Garralosh, the sheer overwhelming physical presence similar. Two squat, powerful legs hold up a frame appears like a concrete wall. The monster is hunched at the shoulders, its head little more than an open circular mouth ringed with teeth. At the end of each of its absurdly thick arms there aren't the hands or fingers that I would have expected to see, instead two more mouths, just as wide and lined with barbed teeth as the one in its head. It's whole body drips with black tar that steams and sizzles as it falls down onto the hot stone beneath its feet. No two ways about it, this dude is ugly.

Having gotten its feet under it, the monster reaches out lazily with one arm, the muscles in its forearm twitching strangely for a moment. Faster than my eyes can see, a spear-like tongue is launched forward, piercing its target in an instant. In a matter of seconds, the poor victim is dragged back into the arm, it's body vanishing into that horrific ringed maw as the arm bulges grotesquely around it. Not only is it ugly, it's nasty! What is up with these demons?! Its meal complete, the giant monster starts to move forward, clearly intent on mounting the ramp and ascending to the second strata. Then it lays eyes on me and my group.

"A FEAST?!" it bellows with mad joy. "INSECT. I WILL WELCOME YOU INTO MY GULLET!"

It can talk?! Is this thing tier six?! A chill rolls over my carapace. Please tell me it's not higher than that...