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Chapter 731: Demon Fight!

When I hear that deep, taunting voice emanating from somewhere within the demon I almost reflexively start spinning together a mind bridge, my automatic reaction whenever someone speaks to me whom I can't talk back with naturally. In only a few seconds the connection snaps into place and the demon pauses for a moment, bringing its horrific face to align with me.

[A smart bug? How interesting!]

The mind of the demon is as repellent as its voice. There is a roiling sense of frenetic energy and desperate need hidden beneath an oil slick surface of grease. Every thought I brush against seems to stick to me like a rancid smell. Needless to say, its deeply unpleasant. Talking to Invidia is nothing like this, he may be a single minded little eyeball but there isn't this terrible sense of *otherness* to him. Is this the difference between a demon raised in captivity and one raised in the wild?

[Who are you calling a bug, ugly?] I retort, snapping my mandibles in anger, [what's your deal anyway? I thought only the weaklings were climbing up here, what business do you have poking your gross face about?]

The demon takes slow steps forward as it leers at me, another spear-like tongue drooping out of the central mouth, swaying with its movement.

[You address me, bug? It's not often the food talks back. Will you struggle? Will you writhe and scream for me? Are you delicious? The city is ever hungry and you might be the morsel they are looking for.]

Just. Gross. The novelty of finding another monster smart enough to converse, and the wealth of information that it might hold are almost not enough for me to resist cutting the connection. This thing has such an alien way of thinking that exchanging words with it is almost enough on its own to make me sick.

[You want to eat me demon? Are you sure you won't become food yourself? How about you step back and we have a little chat before you do something you'll regret? Tell me a little about this city, where might it be found, for example?]

Despite having a circular mouth, I can tell that the demon is grinning as that barbed tongue lolls out of its mouth.

[Anga plays with food, but Anga does not *discuss* with food. If you want answers, come and take them, little bug.]

It has a *name*? Before I can get my thoughts together to try and keep communicating, the beast cuts the mind link itself, the feedback making me flinch for a crucial moment. A cruel gleam flashes in the creature's eyes, ringed around its terrible mouth, and in that moment of weakness it stretches forward one of its arms and blasts its spear-tongue at me. Even with my mind rattled, my antennae do their work and I sense the projectile a moment before it is even released. Nerves across my body fire in synch, sending my large frame sliding to one side and causing the spear to merely graze the side of my carapace before embedding itself more than two feet into the stone behind me.

Yikes! Even though it was just a graze, I can tell that the tongue managed to scrape off a layer of my precious diamond carapace. A direct hit might not go straight through, but it would surely hurt! Quick as flash, I turn my head and attempt to snap my mandibles down on the trailing, fleshy cord that connects the spear back to the monster's mouth. It's a disgusting, sinewy connection of pale meat and I really would rather not bite, but robbing Mr Anga of one of his primary weapons seems like the sensible play.

CHOMP!

My eyes almost boggle out of my head as the tongue flexes and twists away from my mandibles, avoiding by bite my centimetres. Are you telling me the whole thing is prehensile?! It can move and bend the whole way along its length? Before I can get a chance to bite again, the whole tongue grows taut and in a flash is wound back into the huge demons mouth.

Tiny Crinis, Invidia and the twenty guards continue to battle around me, fending off the barrage of demons who still make their way up from below, but my eyes are fixated on this nasty specimen, the other monsters fading into the background. The others will be able to deal without me for a while at least, but I'm the only one who can go toe to toe with this guy, I can tell. This here is a fully grown demon, like Invidia. When I use mana sense to get a touch of his core, I can tell that it's a touch stronger than mine, which means it's almost definitely in tier six.

I waggle my antennae mockingly at the demon and clack my mandibles to let him know what I think of his surprise attack and in response another two of the spear like tongues appear, one dangling from each arm-mouth. To my disgust, the display doesn't stop there, as each of the beasts three tongues extends out further, twisting through the air until each of them has risen above the height of my head, arched down to point at me like arrows ready to fire.

Well, that certainly is unpleasant.

I set my legs and not a moment too soon as my antennae fire a warning and my body reacts before I can even think.

BOOM!

And again!

BOOM! BOOM!

First one, then the other two spear-like tongues launch in my direction with almost no speed lost due to being extended out of the demon's mouths. I dodge the first one cleanly, but the moment my opponent sees which direction I've dodge to, the other tongues fire, bending through the air to home on my position as I move. Only by leaping at the last second do I avoid getting skewered, though the second and third strikes grate against my carapace, once again carving a groove in my beautiful shell.

My sub-minds are working overtime, trying to make use of the air mana they've already accumulated and before I land they fire off two wind blades that slash outward, almost invisible to the naked eye. Once again the demon attempts to flex its tongues, bending them to avoid my spells, but the wide arc of the wind blade is much harder to avoid and both of them strike into the tongue, cutting it, but not deeply.

CLACK! CLACK!

As I land back on my legs I once more taunt Anga with my mandibles. Not responding to my efforts, the demon continues to slowly advance, retracting its tongues closer to its body and letting the spear tips hover over its head. Despite the first two exchanges going in my favour, my opponent doesn't seem rushed, quite the opposite. I can almost feel a horrible sense of glee rising from the creature as it continues to narrow the distance between us.

POW! POW! POW!

Unwilling to let him narrow the gap for free, I rapid-fire a series of acid blasts whilst also using my main mind to spin together a few gravity bolts, drawing them out and weaving them together in record time. Anga makes no attempt to dodge any of this, the acid connecting with his tar-like covering and sizzling madly. Likewise the spells strike the demon without him showing any reaction at all, simply continuing his ponderous advance. Not even bothering to dodge? Where does the confidence come from?

Suddenly, a sensation of dizziness rolls over me and my legs shake, overcome by a sense of weakness. I stumble to one side and the moment I do, my antennae ring loud with warning. He's about to fire again!

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Chapter 732: Demon Subdued

I rely on my instincts and dodge, my weakened legs firing to get me out of harm's way. The demon has picked his moment well, striking at the first sign of weakness and this time I'm not able to get away from all three of the spear strikes, the third one slamming into my carapace just in front of my foremost leg on the right side of my body. The force of the impact is stunning, even with my new stats, and my weight is driven backward, though I'm able to keep myself upright.

I can feel that the hardened tip of the tongue has failed to penetrate through my shell, though it has managed to dig in an inch or two, weakening my carapace in that spot significantly. I unleash the two windblades I have prepared and they cut deep into the flesh of the tongue connecting the spear to the main body, but again fail to sever it. Burning bright ichor drips from the wound onto the hot rocks of the third strata, steam rising as it bubbles to a boil in an instant on the ground.

What is this sense of dizziness? Have I been poisoned in some way?

I keep moving, unwilling to remain still, forcing my legs to pump away despite the strange lethargy that has overtaken them. As I circle around the demon, I try to analyse my situation and study the barbed tongue still embedded in my shoulder, hoping to get a glimpse of what ails me. It doesn't take long to realise what the problem is. Though the very point of the tongue is hardened beyond the strength of steel, the area just behind the tip is different, coated in small sacks that contain a virulently green looking goop that is even now leaking out onto my carapace. Some sort of venom or toxin? But I was only scratched! Even now he hasn't managed to get through my shell and into my bloodstream!

[Invidia! I've been poisoned! See what you can do about it!]

With all the practice he's had lately, during the siege and keeping Tiny alive, Invidia has trained the rank of his healing magic at a rapid clip. I know for a fact that with his achievement of the higher ranks he gained knowledge of ways to deal with poisons and afflictions, which will hopefully be enough to alleviate this situation. For now though, I need to get this damn tongue off of me before more of this insidious toxin manages to worm its way into me. Let's see if he wants to test his tongue against this!

DOOM CHOMP!

The dark energy mandibles manifest as an extension of my own and before they slam shut, Anga has rather predictably chosen not to chance it and pulled his tongue back. Although the fight has turned positively in his direction, the demon seems a touch hesitant to approach too closely now that I've revealed the power of the doom chomp. He might be willing to soak up the acid damage, but it seems as though my mandibles might be more of a threat than he's willing to take on. Not that I'm going to give him a choice.

I quietly start to pump gravity mana into my mandibles and they begin to glow with an unearthly purple light, something that my opponent doesn't fail to notice. He pauses his advance for a moment, tongues still hovering threateningly. I can immediately tell what he wants. The poison managed to affect me when I barely had any of it on my body and now he managed to pour it onto my carapace with his last attack. If I can't counteract the effect somehow then the fight is already over, all he has to do is wait.

[How are you doing, Invidia?]

[The demon toxin issss ssstubborn. Not physssical at all. Mana basssed it hasss ssseeped into you. I have done what I can for now.]

Mana based?! A mana toxin!? I switch on my mana sense and direct it inward to reveal that Invidia is totally correct. The disgusting goop that Anga dripped all over me is a medium for delivering the poison rather than the poison itself. A viral form of mana has leaked out of the stuff and drifted into my body, latching onto my own mana and corrupting it, disrupting the flow of energy throughout my body. I didn't even know something like this was possible.

Using his big ol' brain, Invidia was able to detect the issue and attack the infected energy within my body, breaking it down and dispersing it as best he could. Some traces remain, and given time they will multiply and replicate the problem, but for now I'm not in any immediate danger. Not that the demon knows that. I continue to build the gravity mana in my mandibles and I manoeuvre, only to stumble and fall, crashing into the rock of the ramp with a thud.

As I feign weakness and try to push my body off the ground, I can almost feel the malefic glee rising from Anga as his tongues waggle in the air. He once again starts to approach, his thick chunky legs bringing him slowly closer. I flop and twitch on the ground for a few more seconds until I'm confident that he's close enough before I unleash my prepared surprise. The gravity mana infused in my mandibles flares to life as I reach out and *pull*.

I don't target Anga, the demon is way too heavy for the gravity to affect him, and I'm honestly not sure it would go super well for me if his whole body started falling at me. No, no. I target something much more specific.

The demon barely has time to react as one of his tongues suddenly feels a *pull* and is dragged toward me.

DOOM CHOMP!

Focusing on maximal sharpness, I slam shut my most potent biting attack, severing the tongue completely. Anga rips his remaining two tongues back into his body to avoid me getting hold of them

too, but I'm not focused on that. Legs firing, I *dash* as quickly as I can toward the demon, mandibles wide and ready to bite again. Before my opponent can bring his weapons to bear, I slam down another doom chomp, cutting deep into his left arm. Not letting go, I drag the demon forward, putting him off balance before releasing my grip and slamming into his back, sending him toppling to the ground. Quick as a flash, I leap beside him and snap my mandibles forward once again, nearly severing the arm. I maintain the grip and open my mind to his, connecting with a mind bridge once again.

[Hey there, food,] I taunt him, [feel like talking now? Might want to start fast, I'm more than a little hungry.]

The mind of Anga is little changed from what it was before. That same roiling violence beneath a coat of filth is present, but I sense no fear from him.

[Hurr, hurr,] he laughs mentally and out loud at the same time. [A feisty morsel you are. Will you allow Anga to live if he speaks with you? If I am to be food, I would rather be eaten and be done with it.]

He sounds as if he's surrendered, but connected as we are I can sense the thoughts of harming me bubbling away in his mind. He would turn the situation in a second if I let him, and I doubt he would give me a chance to walk away alive.

[Sure, I'll let you leave my sight alive if you talk,] I tell him, [I just have a few things I want to learn.]

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Chapter 733: Infernal Conversation

"If you're going to talk to that thing, you better make it quick, Eldest!" Protectant calls as the fight continues to keep the press of demons from overwhelming me.

Right, don't want to waste any time here, need to get our info and get the heck out of here. Still, this is a precious chance to talk to a fellow sentient monster. I've heard that there's tons of them down here in the third strata. What to ask? What does the Colony need to know the most?

[You mentioned a city?] I ask the trapped Anga, [whereabouts might I find it?]

[You don't see it?] the demon says in a near mocking tone. [Look down the spire!]

I'm going to assume the spire refers to the gigantic pillar we are close to the top of. Glancing over the side of the ramp, I can see straight down the absurd, vertigo inducing sight of the giant stone formation holding up the roof of the third strata. Just as before, I can see the rocks teeming with lifeforms climbing their way up dotted by flowing rivers of lava that flow out of the pillar at various points. Then I notice something odd and it takes me a second to reconfigure my perspective to understand exactly what it is that I'm looking at.

Is that... what I think it is?

What I had originally thought was a rock formation around the base of the pillar appears to be something else. Looking almost straight down at it, I couldn't quite make out the difference, but when I look a little harder, I realise it isn't actually on the ground. What I'm seeing is, in fact, a plate-like rock formation that circles the entire pillar about halfway down. And as I stare harder, I realise that those aren't rocks, but rather buildings that are formed on that flat ring. That's a city?!

It appears as though I might have found it... Suspended halfway up the pillar, multiple kilometres above the floor of the strata, the demon city exists on the pillar itself. How do they avoid getting swarmed by the climbing monsters though? Try as I might, I can't make out the details from this distance to work it out.

I feel the thoughts of my captive shift in an unpleasant direction and I wrench his arm with my mandibles as I return my full focus to him, dashing his hopes of knocking me off the edge.

[I'd tell you not to think about it, but I don't think you're capable,] I say.

[Demonic nature cannot be changed,] he seems to agree.

[So you came from the city on the pillar?]

[I did.]

[What for?]

[This is the only time that we demons can rise to the second strata. I was sent to scout and search for developments in the overworld.]

Makes sense I suppose. The wave gives the demons a chance to move up in the world, so to speak, and why wouldn't they seize this opportunity to check out the lay of the land? In a general sense, they have more to fear from attackers descending from above than those rising from below, since waves are rare. If an army like the Legion, or perhaps a giant Colony of ants, were to start setting up shop above them, the residents of the city would probably rather be aware of it than not.

Even so, I feel like there is more that I'm not being told, though I don't can't figure out what it is.

[You were sent by yourself? Hardly seems like enough.]

The demon gurgles a laugh out loud.

[A full-grown demon has little to fear moving up, usually.]

[Your just an unlucky sap who picked on the wrong ant, I suppose.]

He's not wrong. How many tier six monsters would he run into on his climb if I hadn't been here? None, probably.

[Does the city have a name? Or this place... this area of the third strata?]

The demon grins.

[You are above the Plains of Leng, bug, and the city of Roklu.]

Interesting. It doesn't mean a whole lot to me, but it's nice to know that the place has a name at all. Perhaps Granin will be able to tell me more about it.

[So another question that I have,] I pose to my demon friend, [is what happens to you when you crawl back to your city injured, having failed your mission before you managed to leave the strata?]

[Another will be sent and I will be punished,] I can feel from the demon's mind that he doesn't much care. [They may decide that Anga is to be food and throw me to the vats.]

Vats? I'm not sure I want to know.

[I am done with your questions, insect,] the demon growls, [either finish me or let Anga go free.]

[But we were getting along so well,] I tell him.

[I will speak no more,] he says and cuts the mind bridge once more.

It's odd that he would know how to do that, though I sense no strong ability for magic coming from him. Certainly he didn't cast a single spell during our fight. It makes me wary, thinking that there might be further depths to this demon that I don't yet understand. Still, if he doesn't feel like talking, I can hardly take the time to try and make him whilst exposed here on the ramp. I release my bite on the demon and back up slowly allowing him to gradually put his feet under him.

With his right arm nearly severed and the tongue from his main mouth cut, Anga is not much of a threat. Still, I continue to be wary of him as he steadies himself before turning to move back down the ramp. Before he's taken two steps, my antennae tingle with warning and I curse, jumping to one side. The demon spins faster than I had expected and fires his one remaining tongue-spear from his left arm from near point blank range. I don't bother to fully dodge, merely shifting my body to the left to put the demon between me and the edge of the ramp. With a loud 'THUNK' the spear slams into my carapace, once again failing to penetrate all the way through but I pay it no mind, instead coordinating with my sub-brains to condense the air mana I need for this spell to work.

BOOM!

With a concussive blast I unload two condensed air bolts right into the demon's chest from close range, giving just enough force to knock the demon backward, but not quite enough. Hit him again!

BOOM!

Unable to correct his balance in time, Anga is blown backwards, slipping over the edge. For a moment I can feel the aura of murderous glee rising from the demon before he slips out of my sight. With a powerful snap of my mandibles, I sever the spear that still connects us and wait to see if I get a notification for the monster's demise.

None comes. Dammit.

He had to have known he wouldn't be able to defeat me, as wounded as he was, so why bother making the attempt? I get the feeling the demonic mindset is going to be very different than what I would expect to see from a normal sapient creature. Still, we learned a few valuable things from him, such as the name and location of the closest demon settlement to the Colony. We'll need to scout it out in more detail in the future, since I've little doubt we'll be conquering the place as our first port of call to extending the territory of the Colony into the third strata. I glance out of the vast terrain that is laid out before me from this high vantage point. Won't all this be better when it belongs to the Colony? I look down at the teeming hordes of demons down below. Just think of the farming possibilities...

"Alright everyone," I call to my bodyguards, "time to go!"

[Pack it up gang, we're retreating back to the nest.]

Hopefully the way back up is easier than the way down.

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Chapter 734: New recruits

"Fall! Fall, you interlopers, invaders and unbelievers! You are the nutrients provided by the Dungeon to grow something greater! Your Biomass will be the building blocks used to construct the new Path! The new way! Go in peace, under the mandibles of the Colony!" Beyn orated, his sonorous voice rolling through the tunnels like wind.

"Give it a rest, would you?" Isaac muttered, working his spear relentlessly alongside the soldier ant next to him.

Why he wasn't back on the surface patrolling the quiet streets of Renewal and enjoying the new ale being brewed up there, he still didn't know. Instead of relaxing and putting his feet up, here he was in the Dungeon, fighting alongside the Colony and the several other surviving members of the town guard, getting an earful from the mad preacher while they were at it.

After another five minutes of fierce battle, the sudden rush of shadow beasts was finally put down and Isaac gathered his people rest. He pulled off his helmet and wiped the sweat from his brow as the others did the same, patting each other on the back and sharing any levels or Skill improvements they might have gotten.

"Friend Isaac!" came a voice from behind him.

"Ah, plops," he cursed before turning with a smile to see the one-armed priest approaching, hunched over due to the weight of the shield he bore on his back.

Isaac pulled a face.

"I'm not sure you really need to be carrying that thing around," he said, "Do you even get a strength bonus from your class?"

"I do not," the priest said, breathing heavily. An hour of yelling hadn't winded the man in the slightest but carrying an oversized shield for twenty metres knocked the air straight out of him. Classes, what a thing. The vagaries of the System were nothing new to Isaac, he was born and bred in it, had never known a life without it. "... but the burden is light," Beyn gasped, "as I am strengthened by my faith. The shield of righteousness is my burden to bear, as decreed by the Great One directly."

"Did the 'Great One' really decree that?" Isaac asked sceptically. "That's not exactly how I remember it."

"One must allow some interpretation of the Great One's actions," the priest replied defensively, "would you rather I bother them endlessly with questions about everything they do or say?"

"Don't you do that already?"

"That's not the point!"

Beyn's face has turned a touch red by this point and Isaac takes a moment to take in the whole man. It was more than a little unusual for him to see this flustered and Isaac could see he looked tired, worn out by some internal struggle. Though every instinct in Isaac's body screamed in warning, he reached out a hand and gripped the insane priest on the shoulder.

"Are you alright man?" he asked, "you don't seem like yourself."

Sometimes it was easy to forget how young Beyn was. He normally moved and spoke with such purpose and determination that the normal hesitance and vulnerabilities of youth were invisible in the man, burned away by the heat of his conviction. In this moment, Isaac was reminded that he was, in fact, the older of the two of them. The priest was a young man, fresh out of church training and settling into his first post when the last wave had occurred, catapulting him from that humble life into something entirely different.

"I- I'm fine," Beyn replied, blinking in surprise as the anger and frustration just seemed to leak out of him, leaving him looking more like a confused young man than Isaac had ever seen him. "I think... I think I'm just tired. There has been so much to do."

"It's not mana sickness is it? Have you been back to the surface recently?" Isaac said.

Beyn shook his head slowly.

"No. No, I'm fine. I'm being careful."

"So, what is it?" Isaac looked at him carefully, trying to encourage him to open up.

The priest spoke hesitantly at first, then with growing passion as he went on.

"There is just so much to do," he sighed, "the antmancer class is a brand-new revelation, but the speed of our progress, our levelling, has fallen dramatically since the siege ended. I have tried to explain to the faithful that a class such as this is hard to train, and likely powerful as it advances, but they hunger so desperately for the next improvement, the next chance for the System to illuminate this glorious path. They take risks, they push too hard and no matter how I try to warn them, their eagerness and enthusiasm overtakes them. Several members of my church have been sent to the surface for healing and extended rest over the last week, their own actions slowing rather than speeding their progress. I find it hard to blame them, since I too share their desire for that next great leap."

"The antmancers have been joining in on all the patrols," Isaac protested this idiocy, "every single one of them. In terms of hours on duty, they exceed every single one of the guards, even the trainees we took in from Rylleh."

What a pain in the plops that'd been for Isaac. As the citizens of the underground city had grown more and more accustomed to life under the 'rule' of the ants, the more they had grown to like it. To the poor and working people, the Colony were liberating heroes. When Isaac had formerly opened the ranks of the guards to volunteers after the siege, there had been a flood of applicants. It was a good thing the Colony had decided to foot the bill, since Isaac wouldn't have the first clue how he would even attempt to pay them all.

Here's hoping the Colony never actually found a use for all the gold they'd found.

"Yes," Beyn agreed, "but to them this simply isn't enough. And the new members of the flock are often misguided and need a great deal of teaching, lest they do or say something that tarnishes the image of the Great One and undoes our work spreading the word. This has been a nightmare to manage and it has been some days since last I slept."

The priest rubbed his eyes and Isaac got a clear look at how lined and webbed with red they were.

"By the Path man," Isaac cursed, "how the hell are you on your feet? You need to get your arse to bed!"

"Don't curse," the priest admonished with a faint smile.

"I'm serious man!" Isaac said. "Even the Colony has a mandatory rest rule."

Beyn blinked.

"I'm sorry, what?" he said.

"You didn't know?" the head guard was shocked. Normally the priest would be the first to know anything about the Colony. "The, uh, Great One, mandated rest for every member of the Colony. I think they were sick of Colony members trying to work themselves to death all the time, so they implemented this rule. They're pretty damn serious about it, I've seen ants dragged kicking into the shadows to rest before."

It was such a strange and horrifying sight that Isaac shuddered upon recalling it. There was something so disturbing about the silent screams which seemed to emanate from that ant as it was slowly pulled into the darkness. It was chilling on a level he didn't quite understand. He came back to himself and turned his attention to the priest. For whatever reason, the mad fool was suffering and perhaps he, Isaac Bird, could be of assistance for once.

Instead, he turned his face back to Beyn and it was as if he had stuck his head too close to a furnace. The priest's eyes were blazing with passion, a fire roaring so bright that it appeared as if it would turn the tears running down his face to steam.

"The kindness of the Great One," he whispered reverently, "the ineffable wisdom!"

"Ah plops," Isaac muttered.

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Chapter 735: Straight from the ranch

It was with no small amount of pride that Sloan watched the first shipment of Biomass and cores come in from the newly established farm around the nest. Thirty soldiers, each carrying a full mandible load, as well as being weighed down with bags slung over their backs. It was tiring and difficult work, one that the ants performed with joy and pride, especially this group. All the Biomass being hauled currently was destined for the academy, to allow the hatchlings to evolve with full upgrades.

"Finally, some results for all of that work," Cobalt looked exceptionally pleased as she stood next to the general watching the soldiers run by. "The carvers were pushed to the limits of their endurance, but it was worth it to see this happen. I've heard they're already starting to harvest some cores as well."

"Already?" Sloan was a little surprised. Monsters could only form cores when the concentration of mana within their bodies reached a certain point. She had expected it to take longer for the requisite mana to accrue within the farms, even if they had installed a carefully controlled irrigation system to ensure that infused water was available in each of the farming chambers.

"Yes," Cobalt confirmed, "I heard Bella gushing about it earlier, though I'm not sure how many of those cores she expects to see considering that Eldest wants the academy graduates to reach tier four."

Even now most hatchlings weren't able to evolve with full cores from the second to third tier. Getting enough cores to max *every* ant from third to fourth? A pipe dream. Even so, the Eldest was determined and despite everything that happened, they were usually right when they insisted on things like this.

"Bella and Ellie have approached me about another idea to get more cores," Sloan said, "they want to send small groups of core shapers outside of our territory to obtain resources."

"Is that safe?"

The general shrugged.

"Safer for them than for any other caste. Every one of them has two or three pets that they can use to fight, which means two of them pairing up actually brings four to six combatants who each need cores, Biomass and experience to be effective. They won't get any of those things if they hang around here, we need every scrap for the hatchlings. I approved the idea; they've already started heading out."

Cobalt just shook her head.

"Things are moving fast right now," she muttered, and Sloan had to agree.

The end of the siege was only a week ago and the Colony had been working furiously ever since to get the farming project up and running as fast as possible whilst also building up their defences, holding off the wave, training an unprecedented number of hatchlings and ramping up their industry in all respects. It felt as if the Eldest were targeting their limits with laser-like precision with these projects, yet Sloan didn't think that much thought went into it. Not that she'd ever say that out loud, or where the Eldest would find out.

The two council members enjoyed a few moments of quiet as they watched their family rushing about on the thousands of tasks that needed doing, enduring the occasional pheromone message of "Slackers!" or "Stop being lazy!". It was only when they saw a large scout blazing a trail through the many other ants on the trails that they perked up and called out.

"Burke! Where are you off to in such a rush?" Tungstant called out.

The scout stuttered to a stop, her legs pumping hard to slow her momentum before coming to rest in front of the two of them.

"Just had word from an outlying scout relay that the Eldest has been spotted on the way back. I was rushing to get word back to the council."

Sloan and Tungstant both sagged a little with relief at the news, none more so than Sloan. She was the one to crack and tell the Eldest to get out of the nest and keep levelling, only for their mentor to up and disappear for five days! Rather than hang around just outside the defensive line like Sloan had assumed

they would, the Eldest had merrily plunged into the Dungeon without so much as a backward glance, during a WAVE. Tier six they might be but that was surely just madness!

So, it had been that the entire Colony had been on edge as the days ticked by with no word about the fate of the Eldest. Sloan had noticed she'd been getting some none too friendly glares as she moved in the tunnels recently and she was more than pleased *that* particular ordeal would be over.

"Any idea how far away they are?" Sloan asked. "Not too far I hope?"

"Nope!" Burke chuckled, eyeing the general off with amusement. "Shouldn't be more than ten minutes behind me. From what I hear the Eldest is after a rest."

Not surprising since they'd just returned from *plunging headfirst into the Dungeon during a wave!* At least Vibrant hadn't done anything that crazy. As far as they knew she was still rushing from one checkpoint to the next, lending a hand and then vanishing into the distance before anyone thought to ask where she was going next. Her evolution had only made things worse, increasing her speed to the point it was dizzying to even try to keep up with her.

A general buzz of activity and excitement started to build in the chamber as word got around that the Eldest was on their way back to the Colony and would be here shortly. Ants started to rush, trying to get through their work faster so they could come back and see the glorious return of the strongest member of the Colony, an odd sort of behaviour that Tungstant didn't remember seeing much before.

Had something changed? Or as the Colony grew, did the reverence reserved for the very oldest of their number simply become magnified. The number of ants who'd never met or seen the Eldest certainly increased day by day, increasing the aura of mystique around them, so to speak. She puzzled over this question as the hubbub grew and then, suddenly and without fanfare, a giant ant pushed through the tunnel and into the wide chamber followed by the guardians.

They looked rough. The gleaming diamond carapace of the Eldest was dirty and chipped in places, their antennae looked like they desperately needed a clean and it was obvious to those who were watching that they were tired, their movements a little sluggish. The great ape looked even worse, a mass of injuries and filth that caked over each and every part of armour still strapped to his body. The shadow looked much the same as always, her darkness impeccably clean and without stain. The eye was similarly clean, though several small injuries marred his tiny body.

It was with some trepidation that Sloan stepped forward to greet the Eldest on their return.

"Welcome back!" she said. "I hope everything went well?"

The Eldest blearily swung their antennae about for a moment before realizing who had spoken.

"Ah! Sloan. Fine. Everything was fine! I'm just tired. The third strata is *crazy*, you've gotta see it to believe it. Biomass for days down there if we can get it. Anyways, sleep. Bye."

Having said their piece, the Eldest continued to stumble onward toward a resting chamber, a thousand ants watching them go. The moment their hero had left the room, it was back to business for the masses of Colony members, and they rushed to their tasks with renewed enthusiasm.

Sloan was stunned.

"Did they say... *third* strata?" she muttered.

Tungstant and Burke nodded, not trusting their pheromones to properly reply.

"What sort of madness would inspire you to go to the third strata IN A WAVE?!" the general wailed.

Chrysalis

Chapter 736: Resting Up

Getting back to the nest helped a lot with my physical exhaustion, washing the fatigue from my limbs and easing the pain in my muscles, but the mental fatigue is still there weighing me down and after five days of almost continuous fighting, even the impressive constitution of a tier six monster is barely enough to keep me going. Even Tiny has no fight left in him by the time we make it back inside the defensive wall of the nest, stumbling forward like a punch-drunk boxer, the lights almost entirely out in his eyes.

Crinis has been asleep for a while now, just latching onto my carapace and falling asleep the moment she can, whereas Invidia is having trouble keeping himself in the air, his small wings flapping with more energy than usual to correct his frequent dips and lurches as he zones in and out.

All in all, the trip to the third strata was a success, but it nearly killed us a couple of times, which was less than ideal. From what I gathered from the troops stationed at the walls, our intervention was very keenly felt across a wide area along the deepest edge of the Colony's territory, which is gratifying to hear. Including all the experience, Biomass and cores we accrued over the journey, as well as the intelligence we gathered regarding the third strata, I would have to qualify our adventure as a rousing success.

By the time we reach our chambers inside the inner part of the nest, all four of us have had it. Collapsing into a pile of carapace, fur, and a giant eye, we fall into slumber immediately, the relaxing grace of torpor falling over me and dragging my mind into the void to rest. Until...

MOVSLAJAGGA!

I'm up!

Awareness rushes back to me and I spring up onto my legs, my mind refreshed and my body completely awash with energy. The thoughts, hopes and wishes of the thousands, tens of thousands of my kind in the nest pouring into me and bubbling up as a mass of spiritual power that, for a moment, threatens to overwhelm me completely. I grapple with it for a moment, my Will straining until I succeed in shoving it into the background, the roar of the Colony fading back to a dull murmur.

What the heck was that?!

It's never behaved like that before... Is it the accumulated desires of my siblings that piled up when I was resting? Are the members of the Colony just impressing more of their will onto me than usual? Are there just more ants around here than I was expecting as their numbers reacted with my new Vestibule? For a moment I'm tempted to ask for advice from Granin and co about the issue, but after thinking on it for a moment I decide not to. It isn't that I don't trust the gulgari trio, but I feel the need to keep *some* of my cards close to the carapace. Also, there's just something odd about the Vestibule and Nave and the way they interact with the rest of my kind that makes me a little hesitant to spread the word around. They

just seem so different from anything else I've seen from other monsters that I sometimes wonder if I'm the only monster in the Dungeon who would have an evolution like this.

Everyone I've ever spoken to says insect monsters tend to not reach tier five or six, so it might be entirely possible.

Ah well, something to worry about another day. I rouse Tiny, Crinis and Invidia, who wake with some reluctance, especially Tiny, before charging out of the chambers and into the nest in order to go about our day. So much to do, so much to see! As always, it's go, go, go in the nest, with ants rushing hither and thither on their innumerable tasks following the dozens of scent trails that lead to every destination in our territory. Such is the hubbub that it takes longer than expected to make our way to our destination, but eventually we find our way to the Core Shapers workshop to find Bella and Ellie busy arranging their caste in numerous teams.

There are thirty ants gathered into groups of three when we arrive, each lined up neatly and listening to Bella give a grand speech on their mission. She stumbles to a halt when I arrive and I suddenly find myself the centre of attention as each of them turns their attention to me.

"Uh... hi. Don't stop on account of me!" I wave an antenna awkwardly.

"Nonsense Eldest," Ellie rushes over to welcome me. "How nice of you to visit us when you are so busy. You haven't stumbled across any other revolutionary core shaping techniques on your latest outing by any chance?" she gushes, stars practically gleaming in her eyes.

"No," I crush her dreams immediately, "but I did bring you a couple of gifts."

[Crisis?]

From my back, Crinis extends a tentacle that arches back until it plunges into her own mass, fishing around for a few moments until emerging with a small cache of cores gripped in a curl of shadow flesh.

"A small selection of demon cores fresh from the third strata!" I proclaim as Crinis hands them over to a suddenly reverent Ellie, who grips the spheres in her mandibles as if they were precious diamonds. "We weren't able to grab many, things were a little hectic down there, but here is what we got."

"Thank you, Eldest!" Bella exclaims. "We've been given a few demon cores from the outer defences, but they've been trickling in. To have some directly from the source will be most useful to our research!"

"Glad to see they've gone to a good home. All the best you two!"

After waving goodbye to the two core shapers and their somewhat awestruck audience, we move on to another section of the nest for another visit that needs to be checked off the list. I find Granin and his group engaged in tea-time with Enid, surprisingly enough. The three oversized rock-people look a touch out of place in the neatly furnished rooms of the mayor, their cups of tea appearing comically small in their large hands.

[Anthony,] Granin rumbles in my mind, [nice to see you made it back in one piece.]

[Did you know that the third strata was like that?] I demand. [It's freakin' hot down there!]

He raises one stone carved eyebrow.

[People are more commonly disturbed by the idea of the entire surface of our world being supported by rocky pillars. But sure, yes, it's very hot]

[Also that! What the heck is going on there?! You cannot possibly tell me those rocks are strong enough to hold up the gojillions of tons above them!?!]

[Nice to see you too Anthony,] Enid says as she takes a long sip of her tea.

Ah.

[Sorry Enid, my manners have totally gone begging. How's things been with you? I trust Renewal is doing well?]

[Well enough,] she laughs, [don't mind me, I'm just getting old and fussy. Although, as we're speaking of it, is there a chance you could make an appearance on the surface? It would be wonderful to show you what we've achieved up there.]

Go to the surface? As tier six?

[Uh... I'm not sure -]

Before I even finish the sentence, I can see the disappointment flicker in the old woman's eyes.

[There's a wave on, lad,] Granin reminds me.

[Oh right. Would that be enough though?]

He shrugs.

[If the three of us tag along and help channel mana for you, I think you'd be able to manage for a little bit. You'll need to wait until the wave reaches its peak.]

It seems like a bit of a pain, but sure. Enid has done a lot for me and the Colony, I don't mind humouring her.

[Alright then, Enid,] I say, [you heard the man. When the mana levels peak, I'll try to sneak up there for a tour. Sound good?]

She puts her tea down to clap her hands together, her smile wide and eyes shining.

[Wonderful,] she says, [the people will be *so* pleased. Now please, continue your conversation.]

[Why are you interrupting me anyway?] Granin demands gruffly. [I'm trying to have some tea. Where the heck did you even get *tea* anyway?]

[I think we stole most of it from the golgari... I'm actually in need of a consult. Got some time?]

[For you?]

[Obviously not,] I jerk my antennae back toward Tiny and Crinis behind me. [For those two.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 737: Flowing Spirit

Discussions with Granin take a few hours as we discuss and weigh the different possibilities that may await my two pets upon their evolution to the sixth tier. Neither of them has reached the required level as of yet, but their mutations are close to maxed out and I thought it prudent to draw on Granin's wisdom earlier rather than later. Since he and I are both in the nest right now, may as well make the most of it.

Torrina and Corun are eager to pitch in, offering their own suggestions which are weighed and measured by their senior before he gives his own opinion on them. As the time passes, we narrow down on the better choices for the pair of monsters, Crinis listening intently whilst Tiny sleeps in the corridor.

[One thing you must do,] Granin stresses repeatedly, [is raise Tiny's intelligence so he can use the manual evolution menu before he evolves. It'll cost him a good amount of Might, but he can gain that back and more when he goes through with it. Normally for pets like this you would develop the pet Skill tree a little more to the point that you are able to handle their evolutions for them,] he raised a hand to cut off my protest, [... but I know that you don't feel comfortable making all their decisions for them. That's why bumping him up to the point he can do the manual evolution by himself is the only choice. The records on Lightning Fist Ape evolutions are *thin* and I'm probably one of the few who's even bothered to look into them, which I did after you left. As you suspect, they're so feisty, and stupid, that they basically never survive to make it to tier three. Those that do *are* strong, but are even dumber. The cult had never seen a tier four variant according to what I read.]

This and many other points were discussed before we waved goodbye to Enid and the three golgari. Time is precious right now and we can't afford to be away from the front lines for long. The job before the Colony is pretty straight forward right now: ride out the wave whilst dragging in all the resources we possibly can. For myself, that means getting Tiny and Crinis to tier six, as well as levelling up my bodyguards to tier five. The collective experience needed is massive and it's going to take a heck of a lot of grinding to get the job done. Which means we need to get back to it.

Rushing through the nest, it isn't long until we find ourselves the centre of attention as we move through the masses of ants. We do stick out a touch, my pets and I. Since evolving to tier six, I've increased substantially in size, whilst most of my siblings remain at tier three. It's no exaggeration to say that they could safely walk beneath my abdomen with only their antennae brushing against my carapace, that's how large I've gotten. It reminds me of when I met the Queen for the first time, except now I'm the one towering over hordes of much smaller insects. Having my family members looking up to me in the literal and figurative sense is a touch overwhelming if I let myself dwell on it, so I don't.

The whispers are always there, however. No matter how much I try to shut them out, a trickle always seeps through. As we run, I open myself up to them and I'm suddenly flooded by the inpouring of spirit from the Colony. Trying to steady myself, I reach out with my mind to touch the edge of this energy, to get a sense of their thoughts without getting overwhelmed. Dipping in one leg, I can feel the voices of hundreds of members of the Colony, their Will echoing in my mind. After steadying myself for a moment, it's actually kind of nice, even if I feel as though I'm eavesdropping in some way. Most of the thoughts I hear are devoted entirely to growing the Colony and making it more prosperous, of helping, of being useful.

The smith who toils on her projects, hoping to protect her siblings in battle.

The brood tender who raises the young with care and loving attention, raising the next generation as best she can so that the Colony may flourish.

The soldier patrolling the tunnels, defending the nest and protecting her siblings.

The worker, transporting food to the Queen's chamber, eager to do the work that will feed the growth of her family.

The mage fighting on the walls, using her magic to fend off the ever oncoming waves of enemies, her heart never wavering in the face of danger.

The miner digging minerals and ore, her mandibles working without rest despite the chaos of fighting around her.

All of their experiences flow through me and for a moment I feel as though I were them and all of them were me, lost in the collective of my family. It was an overwhelming feeling of togetherness, the sense of belonging I had experienced being amongst this caring group magnified a hundredfold. It was almost addictive and I found myself brushing around the edges of the stream of the energy flowing into me, experiencing the Will of hundreds of different Colony members at a time.

[Master?]

[Eh?]

Only when Crinis' voice echoed in my head did I come back into myself.

[Sorry, what's up Crinis?]

[You'd gone still, Master. For a few minutes now. I was wondering if there was anything wrong, I'm sorry if I disturbed you...]

[Really? That long?] I feel a little chilled. [No, you did the right thing. If I zone out like that again, feel free to speak to me, alright?]

[I will, Master,] she replies, happy to be praised.

Yeesh. The more I learn about the Vestibule and it's new addition, the Nave, the less I understand them. Having the Vestibule reformed using Soul Crystal has magnified the effect the organ has massively. Not only is the energy I receive vastly more than what I took in before, so too is the purity and clarity of Will. Being able to dip into it and experience the flowing thoughts and impressions of the Colony is not something I expected. Is that a product of the Soul Crystal? Or the Nave? Or both combined?

Bah, it's not like I have time to worry about it now. Onward! To battle!

"Ah, Eldest, heading out to the walls?"

"Wills? Haven't seen you in a while, what have you been up to?"

"Scouting," she replies, not a twitch of the antennae to give away the sarcasm.

"Ha, ha. A little more detail, if you please, Wills."

She clacks her mandibles in amusement.

"Not much to expand upon, Eldest. With the wave happening we've been pretty much locked into our territory, so the scouts have been doing a detailed survey of every inch of it, making sure we map the entire thing completely. It's been exhausting, detailed work, but we're just about done now."

"I guess you guys can't really go ranging very far at the moment, given the situation," I muse, "that must be annoying. I know you scouts like to get out on your own."

"It's annoying," she affirms, "but there's not much we can do about it. Wave and all that."

"So what are you scouts going to be doing now?"

"Running messages and helping to fight. Not much else we *can* do."

"You wouldn't happen to know where we're getting hit the hardest do you? I'm off to provide some relief and level up my group."

"Straight down, where else?" she points to the floor beneath our feet with one leg. "That's where the majority of demons come, along the lower edge. To the sides it's mostly shadow creatures."

"That's what I thought, but it never hurts to check. Care to come with? Since you're off fighting anyways?"

"Let's get to it. Wonder if Vibrant has made her way down there yet?"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 738: The grind of war

We move through the nest with Burke running alongside and once again I'm stunned at the sheer level of industry that the Colony has grown to. The farming territories swarm with ants, culling the ever-spawning monsters and ferrying a constant stream of Biomass back to the nest. From there the food will be transported around the territories, to the Queens, to the satellite nests, to the academy. Biomass is the lifeblood of our growth and for the moment, an endless river of it is flooding into the Colony such that we have never seen before. For however long the wave will last, provided we can fend off the never-ending foes from below, we are going to experience incredible wealth in terms of food.

The future is bright!

Though it's past time I got back to doing my bit. Past the farms and deeper into the tunnels we come across the emergency medical facilities, packed with wounded soldiers and other castes with heavy injuries. Medics fuss and fidget over them, using their medical skills to heal as best they can, feeding Biomass to the injured in order to speed up the healing process. Beyond them we come across the inner walls, each manned with a full complement of ants despite the wave not having penetrated this deep. As we progress deeper and further from the nest, we pass more layers of fortifications, walls, traps, pits, barriers, and spiked ramparts still being worked on by perfectionist carvers.

"They're preparing for another round of satellite nests?" I exclaim as Wills reveals the council's plans. "Is this really the time for that?!"

The scout shrugs.

"It was Victoriant and Antionette who pushed hard for it. I can't say I disagree with them either. It takes a significant amount of time to raise a Queen and lay the groundwork for a new satellite nest. The territory needs to be mapped out, the construction and preparation of the tunnels takes time, forging the gates, gathering the resources for enchanting. The egg-laying chambers will need to have the Dungeon veins removed. There's a ton that goes into it."

"I get that, but how exactly is any of that supposed to take place during a wave?!" It seems like madness to me.

She shrugs.

"The preliminary work can get done. Tungstant and Cobalt are already working on designs and pouring over the maps we were able to build before the siege started. For now, I think they're hoping to build four."

"FOUR?!"

"Yep, with two Queens in each. From what I gather, they'll be built quite a ways away, but together in a cluster, if you take my meaning. Since they'll be so far from the main nest and we can't support them at short notice, the idea is that they'll be able to lean on each other when needed."

Another eight Queens... if each is laying two hundred eggs per day... that's another sixteen hundred hatchlings PER DAY?! Holy moly! And two hundred is a lower bound... When they evolve further that can jump to as high as five hundred, each, which would be four THOUSAND. A DAY.

Oi.

Things are getting out of control here aren't they? What the heck is the Vestibule going to be like when there are literally millions of us? Do I even want to think about that? I know ant colonies on Earth could grow into the millions, that's not surprising, but thinking about my Colony, with giant, thinking ants, it paints a different sort of picture. How are we going to feed that many grubs?! All of a sudden, the vast farms the Colony has constructed feel entirely too small. We need to scale up! Quickly!

Even so, the council really did take my call to be ambitious seriously, didn't they? Four more satellite nests already in planning... The expansion of the Colony really is speeding up to an absurd degree!

Whilst I'm still digesting the news, we arrive at the frontline, the din of battle rising to near deafening levels as a blast of pheromones hits me right in the antennae. As expected, the fighting is fierce, ants swarming in numbers behind their choke points, pouncing on every monster who sticks so much as a foot through, dragging them back and piling onto them before they can fight back. Even with all of our advantages, ants still get injured, or worse, as the fighting intensifies.

We find a general nearby, directing traffic and providing buffs to the fighting.

"Reporting for duty," I snap out a quick salute with an antenna, "mind if we jump in for a while?"

"Eldest!" she seems surprised to see us here. "By all means, it'll be nice to have the pressure taken off."

[You heard the lady,] I tell my pets, [we're going through.]

I give a significant look to the ceiling as well, letting my guard detail know that I expect them to be levelling as well.

"You coming through with us?" I ask Wills.

"I think I'll provide some long-distance fire support," she replies, "I'm not exactly built for the front."

"Suit yourself," I shrug.

We charge forward, giving little warning to the ants who scurry out of the way. I burst straight through the choke point and drive into the horde of scratching, biting and clawing monsters on the other side, my mandibles gnashing for battle.

DOOM CHOMP!

Notifications ring in my mind, but I pay them no heed. With a little space created, Tiny bursts into the gap, his roar of fury and joy ringing from the stone walls as fists of light manifest and snap out with blistering speed.

[Get to work Crinis,] I remind her, [we aren't here for me.]

[Yes Master.]

She replies as she peels off my carapace, growing into her proper size, her three maws open wide, the dark void within ready to consume all that she can see.

[You and I are on support,] I tell Invidia and his pulses green to show his understanding. Already he's binding shields to Tiny and healing the minor wounds he's received.

I spin together the omni-elemental construct and prepare to start grinding levels. Every time I level up the Skill, handling the construct and the elements it creates becomes that little bit more fluid and intuitive. As time passes, I'll be able to fling around elemental spells with wild abandon. I do need to keep in mind my need to grind mind magic also, but that can wait for the time being. The elemental magic is going to be far more useful in this situation, so it gets priority.

We quickly settle into a rhythm, Tiny and Crinis in front, battling hard and fighting for every drop of experience they can get, with Invidia protecting and healing them whilst I throw fire, lava, ice and whatever else takes my fancy. Every now and again a more powerful monster, such as a demon, comes forward to challenge us and we team up to put it down hard, ensuring that the experience is taken by someone who needs it. This goes on for hours until our energy starts to dip and I order my group back through the chokepoint to rest.

[Wasn't too bad was it guys? Nothing compared to our last expedition!]

Tiny harrumphs, as if to say that the last expedition was pure madness, and nothing should be measured against that standard.

[Well, get some food into you and have a quick nap. We're going to relocate and then do it again as soon as you're ready.]

Crinis sighs and stretches a small set of tentacles as she settles onto my back, preparing to snooze while she can. I haven't even finished talking before Tiny is out, snoring up against the wall. Thanks to the Vestibule, I'm full of energy, but these two have been doing the bulk of the fighting and don't have my benefits. It's going to be a rough wave for them, since this is all we're going to do until they reach level eighty, which could take over a week.

I snack on a small piece of Biomass I snagged outside the wall and lower myself down. The life of a monster really is an endless grind.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 739: Bubbling from beneath

The power I held, it was so great I couldn't see the whole of it, couldn't grasp the scale, so vast had it become I didn't have a reference point for it, a way to see its true nature. As it was, I came to understand what I held far too late to make a difference to the final outcome. I cannot blame myself. Nor do I blame us. What were we, except the victims of our conditions, living our goals and ideals as best we could?

I weep for those who were left behind, but I did all I could. As did we all.

- *Unknown.*

It was always so damned hot down here. The wave certainly didn't help, the fire mana hung so thick in the air Alir could smell it, brimstone and sulphur tickling the edge of his nostrils with every breath. He coughed and spat, trying to get the foul taste out of his mouth to no avail, the spittle evaporating to nothing mere seconds after it touched the ground.

"Blast it," he muttered under his breath, stepping outside the inner chamber to try and get some air.

The acolytes outside stepped out of his way as he burst out the door, robes flapping behind him. They bowed low as he passed, their foreheads below the level of their waist, as was proper. Alir paid them no mind, such things were beneath his notice, instead he focused on his own restricted lungs as he marched through the temple and toward the front door, hoping to find relief.

"Grand Priest, a messenger awaits outside for you," a timid priestess informed him as he strode past, causing a frown to crease his face.

"Demon?" he snapped.

"Y-Yes, Grand Priest," she stuttered.

He grunted with irritation and continued his walk. A demon with a message usually didn't bode well, more likely than not it was a frivolous waste of his time for something only the twisted denizens of this place would consider important. The unfortunate reality was that there were some demons he couldn't afford to put offside, for the sake of the church's work here. Maintaining a cooperative partnership was a requirement of doing business on the third strata, not even the church of the Path was immune from this requirement. Foul mood growing by the minute, Alir shoved open the stone doors of the temple and stepped outside.

Rather than the clear air he sought, he was greeted by the sight of the blasted wasteland that was the third strata, the blistering heat and demon stench even more pungent than before. The demon city of

Roklu was no grand sight either, the rough stone buildings and even rougher denizens not improving the priest's mood one iota.

It might have been a *touch* less stuffy in the open as opposed to the enclosed inner chamber, although that may just have been his mind playing tricks. Regardless, he dragged in a few lungfuls and spat once more for good measure. He knew very well that only the most trusted members of the church could be given assignments like his, but the Path knew he regretted the strength of his own devotion on days like this.

"*Humanssss*," ground a voice from nearby and Alir turned to see a razor thin pride demon eyeing him hungrily from nearby.

"What do you want, filth?" he sneered. No need to be polite with the help.

The demon didn't react to his taunt, their kind seldom did.

"*Grokussss wantsss you*," a fetid grin stretched across the creature's face as it delivered its message.

Before Alir could even retort, the beast was gone, its wire thin limbs moving with uncanny speed to carry it away. Pride demons, he grimaced. They had a way of getting on his nerves. Thinking of the message that had been delivered, his mouth twisted, what did the petty despot ruler of this plate want with him today? The church had never failed to uphold their end of the agreement, despite the constant wrangling and sly machinations that were levelled against them from their 'partners'.

This day couldn't get any better.

He made his way through the city, the winding path leading him ever closer to the centre of the disk of stone the city stood on, and therefore, to the pillar. The various denizens of the city, mostly demons with a mix of sapient settlers, moved out of his way as he stomped through their midst. Judging from the look on his face, the Grand Priest was in poor mood and none wanted to be the unfortunate to feel his wrath.

There was something gratifying about having monsters ten times your size step aside as you walked, but Alir had grown numb to such things long ago, his focus was on the great pillar and the palace established on its face. Grokus' residence wasn't carved into the pillar itself, no force on Pangera could cut into that stone, but had been constructed around it, a compound that circled the full circumference around the centre of the city. What possible use the bloated demon could have for all of that space, he wouldn't want to guess, but he'd ruled there for hundreds of years, embellishing the décor to the point where it had become frankly disturbing to behold.

When Alir arrived at the entrance carved into the outer wall of the compound, he nodded to the two pride demons on guard and waited for them to open it for him. Pride demons as door watchers. Subtlety was not one of Grokus' strong points. If their post grated on them, the two wire thin figures gave no sign of it and hauled open the heavy gate to allow him entrance. As he stepped inside, Alir tried to block as many of the sights and sounds of the compound, his lip curling with distaste as he walked, gaze focused directly ahead. Despite years living amongst them, he was no closer to understanding the mindset of demons, to the point he doubted they *could* be understood. Their twisted natures and barbaric amusements were one thing, but their callous indifference to life, *any life*, including their own, was quite another.

From the corner of his eye he could see all manner of bizarre and horrific 'entertainments' being engaged in by the favoured lackeys of the City Lord. The victims, more often than not, were other demons, those who had wagered and lost, those who had failed a task given to them, or those who were simply bored. The charnel atmosphere managed to do the impossible and make the air even more unpleasant to breathe, the sickly stench of ichor and flesh mixing with the heat and brimstone to create a truly nauseating experience.

Even with his high Will stat, keeping his lunch down proved a challenge to Alir, and he battled manfully until he reached the inner courtyard to find the ruler of this place lounging, as best as a monster of his proportions could, beside a pool of liquid fire surrounded by depraved statues depicting various monsters being feasted on. Grokus himself was an old and particularly contemptible Excess Demon, a tier seven monster who had achieved a powerful evolution from the tier six Gluttony Demon. A bloated mass of pale flesh, a rarity for a demon, split across the middle with a mouth that measured more than ten feet from edge to edge. From the top of that bulbous pile of meat emerged a disturbing, human like figure cut off at the waist. It was to this that Alir directed his voice.

"You have summoned me and so I have come, Grokus," he intoned, trying and largely failing to conceal his contempt. "What do you desire of the Church of the Path? An absolution, perhaps?"

The human figure atop the mass smiled thinly at the poor joke whilst the huge mouth guffawed deafeningly, a green, barbed tongue lolling from between the fat lips.

"I have called you here because some information has come to my attention that might be of interest to you and your people, priest," the too pale figure of Grokus replied. "My scout has returned very quickly with news of the strata above. There appears to be an insect infestation above us."

Chrysalis

Chapter 740: The one true path

Alir cocked an eyebrow.

"What sort of insect?" he asked, his interest piqued.

It wasn't unheard of for an insect swarm to get out of control and pour into the second strata, their numbers making up for their generally weak individual strength, but that's usually where things would end. Generally speaking, the surface and upper layers of the Dungeon had far more to fear from swarming monsters than deeper down. For them to make it to the lower parts of the second strata was already quite the achievement.

"Ant," the massive demon replied succinctly.

"Ant?" the priest was surprised. Ants? "How deep were they?"

Grokus steepled his fingers atop his own bulging flesh.

"My scout encountered one just inside our strata, blocking the path to the second."

"*Inside* the third?" now he was *really* surprised, "what tier was it?"

"Six."

"SIX? An *ant*?"

"Do not make me repeat myself, priest."

Alir ignored the veiled threat, the novelty of the situation having tickled his fancy. Such a high tier ant was... exceptionally rare, if not completely unheard of. Without access to the complete Church records he wouldn't be able to check, but certainly he himself hadn't heard of such a thing in all his years. What could it mean for such a creature to emerge here?

"The ant in question had three pets, each of them fifth tier as well," the City Lord continued.

That information pointed in another direction entirely.

"Traveller. Has to be."

"That is my suspicion also," Grokus confirmed, nodding thoughtfully even as his larger mouth snaked out a tongue to grasp a hunk of Biomass being proffered by a servant, sucking it into his maw with a wet slurp. "There were other ants present as well, a small number, but each of them were tier four."

"You think this traveller is raising up their colony? Creating an army?"

"Perhaps so, perhaps not? Without more information, it's difficult to say."

Alir considered this news, his arms folded across his chest and he ignored the disgusting sounds of eating that continued to emanate from the tumescent wall of meat in front of him. This news was certainly interesting, and highly unusual. He was tempted to put off his work for an afternoon to document this rare occurrence for the church records, though likely they wouldn't take a demon's word for it. He'd need to see it himself if he wanted to submit a report, and he wasn't about to go hunting through the Dungeon during a wave. Which brought him to the point.

"So why tell me?" he asked. "The church maintains only a minor presence here in Roklu and we have abided by your strictures to the letter. If the ants invade, I'm sure you'll be able to deal with it, it certainly wouldn't be the first time the city had been attacked during my stay here. If you want the colony exterminated, then you're capable of mounting an expedition above on your own, you have no need of us."

Grokus waved a hand.

"I have no great desire to leave my post, nor do I wish to send my precious forces above at this time. We have a war scheduled with Orpule in a few days and I simply can't spare them."

The priest tried not to roll his eyes. Orpule, the City Lord of the nearest neighbour to Roklu, was an Avarice Demon, an unhealthy species for a ruler. Her desire for control led to endless conflict between her and ... everyone. Even so, Alir was taken aback.

"A war during a wave? Is that wise?"

"I am not the aggressor in this conflict, as I'm sure you know. Besides, the city's population has grown rapidly over the past week, with new demons tipping in every minute. We are in need of a cull."

"So you would like the Church to take up this challenge for you," Alir surmised, seeing what the demon wanted. With his own forces committed against his fractious contemporary, he didn't have the resources to try and nip the problem possibly growing above in the bud.

"There's a great deal of resources to be had in exterminating a Colony of such creatures," Grokus smiled with both mouths, a disturbing sight to say the least, "I'm sure the Church would be interested in mounting an expedition to claim such wealth."

"And you allow us free use of the gate?"

The demon *grinned*.

"I'm not sure *free* would be the right word. *Discounted* perhaps."

Alir grunted. Typical.

"I'll send word to my superiors and see what they have to say," he said, "I can't very well make a call on this myself. If that's all, then I'll be going."

"Do not be late with my next payment of Syrup," Grokus purred, "I am *ever* so eager for that flavour to hit my tongue once more."

When Grokus indicated his dismissal with a wave of one delicate hand, the priest turned on his heel and marched out, ignoring the repulsive sounds of eating that begun the moment he turned around. Back through the compound, his gaze strictly narrowed, through the city and into the temple once more. Back amongst his own people, he once again was able to breathe easy, or as easy as was possible in this cursed place. As he made his way back inside the inner sanctum and sat at his desk, the conversation with the City Lord continued to run through his mind. He was certain there was another angle to it, demons didn't live as long as that tub of lard without being clever at seeking out advantage. It's possible he just wanted someone else to deal with this problem for him, it's possible he just wanted the church to owe him a favour, or perhaps he wanted both at the same time.

A traveller, born as an ant. What a poor, unfortunate soul. He would love to take in such a creature, to help them put their experience to good use, to pass on that essence. At tier six, it would be a difficult capture, but not impossible. And all of those other ants, possibly thousands of them. It *would* be an immense harvest, and he was certain the bishops would be tempted, but he personally doubted they would commit. The church presence in Roklu, himself and a mere twenty acolytes, priests and priestesses, was hardly meaningful, and it was unlikely that they would be willing to move in force in this remote corner of the stratum.

Still, he took the time to write a missive to be delivered through the portal when the next delivery would be made, describing the situation and his own thoughts.

Speaking of the delivery, he had best get back to work.

Turning around in his chair, Alir stood and began to inspect the runic inscriptions carved into the floor in the centre of the chamber. Even unpowered as they were at the moment, they glowed with arcane power, the latent energy in the room enough to make them crackle with mana. He walked a slow circle around the edge of the room, studying every inch of the complex matrix with care. After two such circuits, he turned his eyes to the chalice that sat in the centre of the carvings, his eyes flaring with light

as he enhanced his vision to inspect the enchantments woven into the vessel. Another slow circuit and the light faded from his eyes, his interrogation complete.

Satisfied, he turned his eyes to the form hanging suspended upside-down from the roof, the bright steel wire mesh of the netting shining red in the dim light. A demon of ignorance, one of his most detested variants, filthy mind mages that they were, provided by the City lord himself. The creature didn't move, *couldn't* move, not so much as twitch an eyelid, such was the paralytic effect Alir had put it under. It was still conscious however, and he looked it carefully in the eye as he began the ritual once more.

"Monster," he intoned, "I take now your life, your experience, and your essence. In the name of the Path I do this. Be at ease, for you will not fade from this world, but be passed down to another in your entirety."

So speaking, he tapped a foot on the floor and concentrated as the matrix came to life, reaching up to the creature hanging above with a ghostly tendril that emerged from the chalice to connect to the flesh above. After a few seconds a single, shining drop of silver liquid pooled on the monster's head and dropped down into the cup waiting below. Then another. Then another. Alir watched, concentration never wavering as the holy work was done.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip.