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Chapter 841: Mutating Makes the World Go 'Round

In the end, despite how much I want to see my old organs rise to the grand old height of +30, I decide to start with the new stuff, specifically, the Vestibule, Nave and Antennae. These reforged body parts are high performing and important to me so I need to invest in them. With the huge wealth that I have right now, I can blast them all the way up to +30 with a massive amount of change in the bank.

For starters, let's look at the antennae. One of the interesting things I discovered in my fight with Grokus is that looking into the future a few milliseconds is all well and good, but when you can't do anything about what you see, you can run right into the wall. In a way, the strategy the city lord applied against me was ideal. He didn't need to act first, he waited to see what I would do and then reacted. Given that he was much faster with his hands than I would have given him credit for, this was nearly enough for him to snatch me out of the air and crush me for good.

I have to keep reminding myself that I can't rely on my future sense alone, no matter how much of a leg up it might be. Where I'm going, deeper into the Dungeon, there might be creatures who can see whole minutes into the future, who knows? Either perfect one strategy of survival, or diversify, that's the only way to go about it.

Right now I have Future Sight Antennae +15 (Twilight Filament). The reforged antennae are hyper sensitive, tingling with every fluctuation of air, detecting scents far better than my old antennae did and enhancing my future sight once the mutation was applied. Right now I have a decision, do I index further into future sight, or do I now seek to add another sense to my antennae? I previously had heat detection, which was interesting, but I don't think it was useful enough for me to want to return to it. Given how sensitive the twilight filament is though, no matter what sense I apply to them through mutation, they will enhance it like a high quality radio dish.

It's a tough call. Right now my future sight isn't incredible, just a moment, maybe two, into the future. When combined with my reflexes though, it's more than enough for me to get myself out of the way of danger or angle my carapace to help deflect the blow. It's a good system and one that works well, really well. Even monsters that are significantly faster than me aren't able to get the jump and that makes a huge difference. But I'm just not convinced that I need more of it. At the very least, before I commit, I want to investigate to see what I may be able to add to the antennae.

Into the lists I dive, the innumerable different possible mutations rolling by in front of my mind. All sorts of incredible, bizarre and impossible seeming options swim past but I filter them out. What I'm after are *senses*. This is what will synergise with the material my new antennae are constructed from and I need to take advantage of it!

Of course the basic stuff is there. I can improve my sense of smell through mutation, which is probably more useful than I might give it credit for. My sense of smell right now is far better than a human's, it's not even close, I pick up all sorts of stuff wafting on the breeze when I'm paying attention, but generally I ignore it. If I chose to, I could improve my sense of smell to the point where I made a tracking dog look nose-less. It would be powerful, I've no doubt, but I can't really think of that many times that I've been *looking* for something that I haven't had other methods to find. Pass.

Eyes on the antennae? No. I mean, it's not really eyes, but photo receptors. Still, no.

Ears? My sense of hearing is quite possibly my worst, given that I don't really have ears in the sense that humans do, big flappy bits that hang off the side of the head that help to collect sound. I don't even have holes in my head, I mean, why would I? That'd disrupt my perfect carapace. Ants hear by interpreting vibrations through our legs and the hairs across our bodies. Increasing the ability of my antennae to detect sound waves could make a huge difference in my ability to interpret what is happening around me. I'll put it down as a maybe.

Taste? Obviously not. That'd be stupid.

Enhancing touch also seems like a total waste of time.

It's in the other options, the non-standard ones, that I turn over the really weird stuff.

Detect emotional state? That would be a little odd. Why would a monster even want that?

Detect lies? Again... I'm a monster ant, not a detective!

Detect Mana. Juicy. This is similar to how Crinis perceives her surroundings, by 'seeing' the mana in an organic way. My detect mana skill performs a similar function, though probably not nearly as well, still not sure I want to use a mutation slot on it.

Heat? Pass.

Electrical Current? No...

Movement? I mean... maybe? Looking at the details it seems like an upgrade to the ability to detect shift and vibrations in the air. Might be handy, might be handy.

Toxins? Being honest, the ability to detect poisons is going to be super handy if I live to see the fifth. Apparently the place is absolutely swimming in it. And the monster I faced from that level was no joke either. That perfect mana toxin was insane.

Dammit there is just so much here, as always. I flick through the lists and even narrowing it down to just senses is enough to give me a headache.

Then I stumble across something that gives me strangely mixed feelings.

The ability to sense, Gravitational Waves?

I mean... what?

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Chapter 842: More Choices in Menus

I don't recall seeing this before... if that's because I wasn't looking for it or if it was unlocked somehow... I can't be sure. Being able to detect Gravity? In what way? As in, the strength of the gravitational field in any particular area? Or from a specific object? Or both? Or neither? The description provided by the System is vague at best. I nervously eye the entry for a few long moments. On the one hand, I want to take it. This may help push my way to unlocking the gravitational mana speciality that I want so very

badly, but on the other hand, it might not. And then what? I'm stuck with this sense that I don't even know the usefulness of?

Let's not forget, I already reset my antennae! I'm not resetting them again! If I end up picking this mutation, then I'm going to be stuck with it forever, most likely. Argh!

After several long minutes of agonising back and forth, I decide to stop thinking so hard and go with it. I committed to gravity early on with my choice of free mana organ and I'm not leaving it behind now. Who knows? With a little luck, it'll turn out to be useful in the absence of the mana speciality and I won't regret this choice in any way. Without too much hesitation, I ramp it all the way up to +30 choosing to diversify my two separate mutations rather than emphasise one over the other.

Done.

Moving on! Think, but not too much, that's my policy! With my Vestibule, I'm keen to keep rolling down the path that I've embarked upon. Using the energy to supplement my physical strength has been a huge help in the clinches when the Colony is around and gives me a massive leg up when I want to frontline, which is usually all the time the way things are at the moment. Getting those free stats has been juicy to say the least. Sure, it detracts from my regeneration, but it's not like it cancels it out.

I'm fairly confident in ramping that mutation all the way to +30.

And finally, we come to the Nave. Right now, my Purifying Spirit Nave is concentrating and enhancing the energy it receives through the Vestibule, which goes on to fuel my regeneration or strength, so it magnifies that effect. I wager that if I were to have another organ added to the end of the Nave then this enhanced energy would have an even greater effect.

I've long suspected that this evolution path was going to be a three-parter, from the moment I saw the Nave really. The energy is collected in the Vestibule, magnified in the Nave, and then...?

Obviously, something is meant to come next! Which means I will step into my true power in my next evolution! Gwahahahahaha!

Maybe. Perhaps. I mean, who knows? Perhaps I'll veer off script and take a different evolution entirely. If there's one that offers me juicy resets for my carapace and mandibles that will enhance my incredible diamond shine, then I'm almost certain to take it, consequences be damned! Alright then, with the Nave I'll continue on the path that I've already set down. There's still a chance that I'll end up resetting the organ, so I don't feel too attached to my choices here. More concentrated and magnified energy? Can't go wrong with that.

That takes these three critical organs from +15 to +30 for the low, low price of one thousand and thirty-five Biomass.

...

Nooooo dammit! My wealth! My incredible wealth! Gone already?! Is this some sort of joke?! Damned greedy and despicable Gandalf! What's with these costs!? This is nothing but robbery!

For a few long moments I gnash my mandibles in disbelief before I manage to grind my frustrations out. Obviously levelling up means spending huge amounts of Biomass, I should know that by now. I can't have expected to bring half my organs up to +30 in one shot...

My remaining stock of... five hundred and eleven will give me enough to upgrade... three. Darn it!

Which three to choose? I mean, carapace and mandibles are the obvious choices. I rely on them a great deal, the carapace to keep me alive and the mandibles to make other things not alive. I briefly toy with the concept of disregarding my mandibles and instead upgrading my coordination cortex, but I end up disregarding that. Although I fight with my minds just as much as the rest of me, the mandibles will always hold a special place in my heart. Chomping is love; chomping is life. When all the chips are down and there's nothing left in the tank, the mandibles will still be there.

Which means I just have one more organ to take from +25 to +30. I could always do eyes, but I'm not doing too badly in the overall 'senses' department these days. I need to prioritise staying alive more than anything else, so a more combat oriented choice makes more sense to me. Inner Carapace Plating seems like a sensible choice, although the regeneration gland has proven its worth. Hard to go past legs... more speed and durability aren't exactly bad things to have. The neural network to boost reflexes would also be handy...

Gah! Don't think on it too long! Regeneration Gland! There, done.

For these organs, I think the choices are relatively clear. The carapace is simply a matter of reinforcing once again, there isn't a second line of mutation to be considered. With the mandibles, I currently have a few things going on. There's the infusion mutation, the savage mutation and from that point on I focused on the infusion aspect, which I'm yet to really test to the fullest extent with all the elemental properties I now have at my disposal. They are definitely next on the reset list at any rate, so I'll just double down on that. The regeneration gland has two aspects going on right now, the rapid refilling mutation line and the limb regeneration line. For now, I want to emphasise the rapid refill. With my reflexes and toughened legs, I've not had to worry *too* much about losing my legs right now.

Which means my final upgrades look like this:

Empowering Collective Will Vestibule +15 (Soul Crystal) -> Might Infusing Collective Will Vestibule +30 (Soul Crystal);

Future Sight Antennae +15 (Twilight Filament) -> Future Wave Sight Antennae +30 (Twilight Filament);

Purifying Communal Spirit Nave +15 -> High Purifying Communal Spirit Nave +30;

Complete Diamond Carapace +25 -> Thickened Complete Diamond Carapace +30;

Mana Flooded Mandibles +25 -> Mana Drenched Mandibles +30;

Frequent Potent Regeneration Gland +25 -> Hastened Potent Regeneration Gland +30;

Now it's onto the Skills! I feel I've done enough to shore up my foundations for now. It's time to see what the future holds in store now that I've pushed mind magic as far as I have. Come onnnnn Gravitational Mana! I can practically taste it!

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Chapter 843: Nope

Except it isn't there. DAMMIT! I'll have to check again after I get my mutating done, but holy moly I'd hoped it would be there... I'd ripped open the magical skills list the moment I had an opportunity and raced through it, my brain practically screaming for some sweet, sweet gravity. I'm crushed it's not there. There are new things for me to look at, I was able to recognise that much, but the disappointment after waiting so long and not getting what I was after is genuinely crushing.

Damn you, Gandalf! Just give me what I want already! Haven't I suffered enough!?

GAH!

Well, forget that bearded fogey and let's have a look at what was unlocked instead. It better be good! The earliest magic skills available were, of course, the basic elements, which evolved into the advanced elements and can be fused into other elements. Once I'd raised those high enough, I gained access to healing, mind magic as well as light and shadow. I was never particularly interested in light and shadow, but I've put a lot of effort into mind and ... some, into healing. Enough to make it useful at any rate.

What has this earned me in the eyes of the System? A few things apparently.

For starters, barrier magic has appeared, which is the field that Invidia has been pouring the majority of his effort into. A highly useful field of magic to be sure! I'll pick that up just on the off chance that I need it. Getting it to rank three or four shouldn't prove to be too much effort and I have a sneaking suspicion that those flying discs the demons use is based off an advanced or fused version of this. The second new field of magic to appear in my list is curse magic and right alongside that is inspiration magic. I mean, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what these two fields do. Curse magic exists to weaken enemies you cast it on and inspiration magic buffs those that you cast it on.

I'm not entirely sure I want either of them. I know that both are useful, but I need to be realistic and consider exactly how much time I'll have to devote to raising these Skills. I can't just buy every Skill in the shop. The cost of levelling them in terms of Skill points will become prohibitive, for one, but mainly I just don't have the time to level them to the point of being useful! If I get some clear air and have a month to sit on my backside and grind out spells, then sure, I can come back and buy a few of the branches I skipped over, but for now I need to focus on the ultimate goal!

And that goal is driving forward through the ranks of magic until I get what I want, which is gravity! Even the taste of the basic forms of its power have been enough to whet my appetite, nothing I've seen has come even close to the gravity bomb in terms of the sheer pants wetting terror it induces. I have to have the full power of this spell form at my disposal!

The other reason I'm not massively keen on curse and inspiration is that I know, through discussions with Torrina, that they are generally fused with dark and light magic respectively, to create the respected and feared Horror and Hope fields of magic. The spell forms unlocked by these combinations allow the effects of curses or inspirations to be applied more powerfully and over a wider area, using light or shadow as a means of spreading the buff/debuff.

This is probably a field that Crinis could go down if she wished, although the other option she has is to fuse her mind magic and shadow magic together to form Nightmare. From what I gather it's rather

unpleasant. Actually, I wonder if you could fuse mind, curse and shadow together? Torrina didn't mention anything on that topic, but it would be interesting to find out.

[Hey Crinis, when you get the chance, see if you can buy curse magic and start levelling it. There may be an interesting fusion you could use with shadow and mind if you get far enough down the line. Maybe at rank five?]

[Alright Master! I will!]

...

That was probably a bad thing to do. Haven't the monsters of the Dungeon suffered enough?!

Moving on! There are a few new magical fields that I want to take a look at which might be good. Wood, Metal, Lightning and Force magic. I've heard mention of these as 'advanced' elemental magic which are a lot more common with higher levelled Delves and Dungeon dwellers according to the gorgari. Usually, one would skip over the basic stuff as fast as possible and then invest their time more effectively in these, more potent elements. At least, that's what I hear. Lightning is generally considered very powerful offensively, I only need to look to Tiny for that to be proven true. Wood and metal are common magics for builders and crafters, though also have their uses in combat. Throwing a spike of ice at someone is generally dangerous, sure, but throwing a spike of metal? More threatening to put it mildly. Then there's force magic. Good ol' kinetic energy. Wanna grab someone by the throat with magic in the most literal sense? This is the method! Care to throw out a claw and have a wall of invisible pressure extend outward, knocking down your well armoured but comically inept foes? Boom.

Of course, I have to pick them all. Which ones I'll specialise in, I have no idea, but I'm sure there are some immensely juicy fusion options out there for combining these. There's even a chance that they all combine into something strong, just like my omni-elemental construct. I mean, now that I'm on a roll of collecting elements, I kind of want to have them all. I won't waste time levelling each of them, but I do want to have them, just in reserve.

The goal is to power through as many layers of magic as I need to in order to unlock gravity after all! I won't be stopped here!

With a sweep of my mind, I select each of the new elemental magic specialisations and nod with satisfaction. I may not have gotten what I wanted, but I least I have moved forward, taken another step on the path that will get me there. With my current stable of elemental magics to hold me in good stead, I won't have to grind nearly as long on this level before I plunge through and into the next.

Running through the list of purchases I have selected; I feel good about my decisions. I think this marks another step forward for me and having the first of my organs reach +30 is a very pleasant milestone. Let's do it!

...

Oh right.

...

Here it comes!

...

MAGGLESTAFFEN!!! DAMN ITCH!

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Chapter 844: Grind it out

When I eventually wake it's to find that the rest of the group has already completed their mutations and that Crinis has extended herself into a wall between me and everyone else. Preserving my modesty in my most vulnerable moments. What a good companion she is!

[Thanks Crinis.]

I mean that sincerely, with all of my soul.

[You are welcome, Master.]

I slowly pick myself up and this time it's a little more disorienting than usual. I stagger to one side before I manage to gather my balance and freeze for a moment. It takes a few seconds for me to work out what is giving me such trouble, but once I do it starts to make a little more sense. The antennae. When I upgraded to Twilight Filament, I did so because the description spoke of how sensitive they were, and I'd hoped that sensitivity would translate to the future sense, since it's essentially changing the antennae to 'detect' more sensory information. I've done the same again, but this time made them able to detect gravitational waves and they are doing a damn good job of it from what I can tell.

It's like... I'm not even sure I can describe it. I can feel the pull of gravity not just through my body but to an incredibly fine extent through my antennae. And not just the gravity that is affecting me personally, my physical body, but in an area around me. Naturally that pull is downward, toward the centre of the planet, but there are vibrations and fluctuations that perhaps someone with greater understanding over how these things work could explain. On top of that, the two mutations are functioning together, so not only am I detecting the gravitational waves as they are, but also as they *will* be a few moments in the future! Gah! As I twitch my antennae, it's startling to realise that I can actually sense the very tiny fields being emanated by my companions. Tiny's stronger than the others, but even Invidia's is large enough for me to detect. Perhaps I'm also sensing the mass he has stuffed away in his pocket dimension?

It's bizarre and a little nauseating, but I'm hoping that's a temporary side effect, otherwise I've just mutated my way into trouble once again. No worries, I'll get used to it. Other than that, there are other differences as well. It's easy to forget sometimes, that upgrading an organ does produce a small overall performance increase. In this case, taking my Vestibule and Nave from +15 to +30 at once, apart from the changes brought on by mutation, has produced a noticeable and startling effect. The amount of energy pouring in through the Vestibule has increased significantly, the range at which the organ is working has increased along with the amount of energy collected. The Nave is flooded with that Will and is condensing and purifying it to the point that it feels like liquid gold as it eventually floods into my system. The feeling is incredible, to be honest. I feel refreshed, energised and uplifted as the Will of thousands upon thousands of my siblings flows into me.

With a start I jerk my mind away from that path. I know from experience that sinking down into the thoughts and desires of my siblings that flow through me is a trap that it's hard to get away from. I've

been disciplined about it lately but it'll take some time to adjust to this new level of intrusion. Still, it's nice to see that the improvements have been worth the rather massive investment that I made.

My mandibles and carapace have also benefited from the process of course, the pure diamond coating that encases me has grown that little bit thicker, adding to my lustre and shine. My jaws are a little larger, a little more dense and even more responsive to my mana than they were before. I'm going to have to test them with every type of mana that I have at my disposal to really see what they can do, something I've been far too lazy and avoided doing. I mean, what happens when I bite something with mind mana infused into my mandibles? Goodness knows!

[Alright then, squad. It's time to get back out on the road. We need to keep grinding Skills, levels and Biomass. I've got a long way to go to maxing out for tier six and I'm sure that all of you are the same!]

My pets each acknowledge my words in their own way, for they are true for all of us, even Invidia.

"Brilliant, are you able to move around much yet?"

"I-I think so..."

She doesn't sound all that sure but looking at her I can already tell that a lot of the raw Biomass has been digested.

"Tiny can carry you if we need him to. I hope you're ready to reach tier four, because we aren't stopping until you get there!"

"Tier four?! Already?!"

"Yes, already. The Colony doesn't have time to wait around, you need to get cracking and you can't exactly do much as you are..."

"I can too!"

"Sure, sure. Come on then, let's get going."

It takes concentration but as we roam through the tunnels with Brilliant loaded into Tiny's arms like an ant-missile, I find that my sensitivity to gravitational waves is even more extreme than I thought. I can actually sense monsters through it so long as they are within a certain range, which is just ridiculous. The amount of gravitational force a monster gives off might be many times larger than a human would, but it's still pathetically weak! The fact I can find them, through walls even in some instances, just blows my mind. This is nuts!

At least it makes for extremely efficient hunting! As soon as we find a monster, we knock it down and pummel it to the brink of extinction before Tiny rams Brilliant into it and she manages to chomp it to the point of giving her a notification. Then we Hoover up the Biomass and move on to the next target. We only slow down when it becomes clear we are roaming deeper and deeper only to find fewer and fewer prey.

[I believe if we were to go much deeper we would break through to the next layer,] Al observes after a while.

I raise my head, letting my antennae swirl through the air as I attempt to detect anything that would indicate he was correct. The heat has only risen as we descend, the open pools of lava becoming more frequent as they drip down from above. If I were to crack an egg on a rock it would be charcoal in a minute, that's how hot it feels.

[By any chance does it get a little cooler as we get lower?]

The giant eye of literal flame looks at me steadily for a long moment.

[I'll take that as a no,] I sigh.

"How far off evolving are you?" I ask Brilliant.

"I'm level nineteen!" she informs me from her position as a harpoon in Tiny's grip.

One more monster and we can retreat back to the city.

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Chapter 845: Too Many New Toys

It's a good thing I have so many minds now, since I have so many new things to play with. Barrier magic is another defensive tool in the box and I'm quite keen to prioritise it. With my reaction speed and increasing magical prowess, I bet I can throw down shields in the blink of an eye, putting them where and when I need them before my opponents can even react. I don't think it would be much of a stretch to say that I'm attached to my life in this world, a heck of a lot more than I was to the one before, so I'm invested in being not dead. The more methods I can deploy to ensure I remain in a living state, the better in my opinion.

But then, I also need to pick which of the four new magics I'm going to grind up in order to get access to the next level of magic. I'm quite tempted by metal and wood both, but I think I'm going to have to go with force. It sounds way too useful to turn down. I mean, kinetic energy, on tap? The only limiting factor is mana and my ability to wield it!

Selection made, I put half of my mind constructs to work practicing the necessary construct to produce the required form of mana. As is tradition, the construct is a pain within a pain wrapped in an ache and garnished with a kick to the noggin. None of these damn things are easy, but then again I suppose converting mystical energy from one form into another isn't exactly an easy task. Despite the complexity, compared to the omni-elemental construct it's basically a walk in the park. I have every confidence I'll be able to put it together in a few hours and then I can start playing about with it.

As we make our way back to the city of Roklu, having completed our immediate tasks, I take some time to experiment with something else I've not investigated as deeply as I should. My mandibles are specifically mutated to accept mana and produce effects based on the type that I use. I had a lot of fun infusing them with gravity mana back in the day, but more often than not my opponents these days have too much mass for me to properly yank them. I think I phrased that correctly...

Basically, using the gravity mandibles is a lot more situational than it was before, since they don't have the desired effect on things that are too massive. If I had more gravity mana to pour in, then perhaps I could get it to work as it did before, but I'm limited since I only have what is available in my organ and

can't make more for myself. However, since I mastered the basic elements and learned omni-elemental magic, I now have ready access to every type of basic elemental mana, including the fusions!

Which means a whole host of different types of mana I can infuse into my mandibles that I haven't really tried yet! I'm not expecting anything world shattering, but it'll be nice to see what kind of effects I can produce. As we march back to the city, following the winding tunnels as they twist and turn back to the larvae flooded plains, I use my omni-elemental construct to flood my mandibles with every type of mana I can create and chomp on various things, rocks, the odd demon, to see what happens each time.

The mandibles respond incredibly well to the mana as I pour it in, drinking it up like some sort of mega-sponge. Continuing to mutate them down this line has clearly increased the strength of the effect that is produced but also increased the ability of the mandibles to take and hold the energy that I give it. I have to throw in a ridiculous amount of mana before they start to feel 'full' and the abilities that they grant are quite startling when fully charged.

For starters, water mana. To my surprise, the feeling I get from infusing this energy into my mandibles is one of cutting, and when I chomp down on a rock the mana floods out in a rush as tiny, concentrated blasts of water emerge from the spiked tips of my mandibles. When I withdraw my jaws and inspect the rock I find the pressurised water has drilled holes deep into the stone. Nasty! This might help me crack tough defences in a pinch! I'm impressed.

Fire mana I've tested before, essentially super heating my mandibles, though I don't really feel it, thank goodness, and sizzling whatever I bite. I'm a fan. Not much use in the third stratum, but I still think it's a strong effect.

Air mana is a bit of a weird one, similar to gravity in a way. Once fully charged, when I open my mandibles wide the air in front of me is sucked away, dragging whatever happens to be in front of me forward as the air rushes towards me to fill the void. The range is much less than the pull gravitational mana gives me, but this effect is targeted on an individual in the same way. *Anything* in front of me will be dragged forward, unless they are strong enough or properly prepared to resist the sudden drag.

I wasn't sure what to expect with earth mana. I mean, it was always going to be an unusual effect, but what I got was surprising and pleasing. The sense of peace and fulfilment that washed over me was immense and when I turned to the tunnel wall and began to dig, the earth just melted away beneath my mandibles. Bliss. True peace.

Ice mana was much as expected, when I bit a stone the mana flooded into it and even in these boiling temperatures the damn thing started to freeze, rapidly cooling to the point that frost started to form on the surface. Of course, mixing temperatures like this isn't particularly healthy for a rock and the damn thing cracked right in my face.

Blue fire was much the same as normal fire, except hotter.

Gas magic was subtly different from air magic. Whereas air magic created a vacuum in front of my jaws which dragged things in front of me forward, gas magic created a rush of air *inward* towards where I was biting, effectively locking in place the target of my ire, unless of course they were strong enough to resist the inrushing atmosphere.

Stone took the previous levels of ease of digging to all new heights, earth and stone positively crumbling away whenever my mandibles got even close to them, the mana leaching out and into the rock, dissolving it from within. This could be useful for the carvers...

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Chapter 846: The Reborn City

When we returned to Roklu and made our way up the plate on which the city was built, the changes that had taken place were clear to see. Not ones to mess around, the Colony had clearly gotten to work to an extent that left the remaining local residents' heads spinning. Around the central pillar, the carvers had clearly decided 'forget this' and just gone ahead and built an ant hill circling the base. What had once been Grokus' compound was now an elegant tower of stone and dirt, already displaying elaborate carvings and intricate arrangements on the outside as the more artistic workers set to their business.

The rest of the city was rebuilt, sturdier and neater than before. No longer quite as tangled a mess as it had been, the Colony had imposed some degree of order on the demons without going all the way and tearing down their warrens completely. Thousands and thousands of ants are still in residence, watching in all directions, building, scouting, shifting resources from above and bringing them down into the city. The elevator they constructed is rather impressive, no doubt about that. The ingenuity of the Colony knows no bounds.

Of course, once we are settled it's time for Brilliant to evolve.

"Hop to it!" I tell her. "Make sure you think carefully about your choices, don't make any dumb decisions. You really can't afford to waste your evolutionary energy."

"I know that," she grumbles. "It's just that I'm so tempted to choose everything I see."

"That curiosity is likely to get you killed one of these days," I scold her. "Obviously you can't pick everything. Be sensible about it."

"Fine."

I carefully watch her until I'm convinced she's deep into the menus and thus too distracted by the System and the process of evolving to worry about what is happening in the real world.

[Chuck her in the mouth, Invidia, she can evolve in there while we go about our business. Mind you, if she gets too large for you to hold make sure you let me know and spit her out.]

[*Very weelllll.*]

A few moments later the little ant is gone, vanished into a pocket dimension whilst the rest of us continue our tour of the city. It isn't long before we bump into some old friends.

[Sarah! I didn't expect to see you down here!]

We spot the big bear helping a few carvers by shifting some heavy stone blocks with not inconsiderable strength.

[Oh, Anthony! Welcome back! I thought I couldn't keep being lazy and should come down here and help. I might have thought twice if I'd realised how hot it would be.]

[I can see that Smithant got a hold of you too,] I flip an antenna toward the rings of metal that adorn her limbs.

She pulls a face.

[This is nothing. You should see the full armour set. No, these pieces are just for helping keep me cool. It's not great having fur down here!]

I bet. I walk over to her and give her a pat on the back with one leg.

[Just be careful with yourself alright? You'll be a big help in the fighting against the tier seven and six opponents we have to deal with here, but if it gets too much for you, make sure you back out before it becomes overwhelming.]

There are flashes of pain in her eyes as she recalls the near disaster she experienced the last time the Colony was under siege.

[Don't worry,] she assures me, [I'll be careful.]

We chat for a little while before she remembers to tell me that Granin and crew had come down looking for me so I bid her farewell and let her get back to building, which in turn got the carvers to stop accusing us of being lazy, and went looking for the golgari. I eventually find them resting just outside the anthill in a small compound that appeared to have been constructed for them to reside in. The Colony is nothing if not accommodating!

[Granin you old fogey!] I greet him jovially. [Torrina, looking wonderful as always. Corun, wonderful to see you!]

[Very funny,] the old shaper grunts. [It's great to see your big insect mug as well.]

[Is that any way to talk to a future Ancient?] I chortle.

He peers at me.

[Becoming an Ancient is no laughing matter,] he says, [you're talking about becoming one of the most powerful entities on the entire planet. Or are you telling me you've actually decided to do this old rock a favour and make it your goal.]

[Hell no. I'm just trying to support my family and make it to my next evolution in one piece.]

He rolls his eyes and glances at Torrina and Corun who are both radiating a noticeable level of 'I told you so' energy. It's interesting to me that the three golgari give off much stronger gravitational waves than one would expect given their size. I suppose the ore they cover themselves in isn't just for show after all, but even taking that into account, I feel like their bodies underneath that rock and metal are more dense than I might have expected. The golgari are rumoured to be naturally very strong, I suppose that's no joke.

[Oh, by the by, I've been playing around with a few new things. Check this out!]

I infuse stone mana into my mandibles and wave them threateningly in the shaper's direction and to my surprise, he reacts, leaping back from me with a scowl on his face.

[What the hell is that!? My danger senses are going crazy!]

[You have danger senses?]

[Never mind that!]

I can't help but give him an odd look.

[I infused my mandibles with stone mana. I tested it on the way over, helps me cut through rock like it's not even there,] I explain.

He shivers.

[No wonder. Made me feel like my skin was about to peel off. The golgari fought monsters with a similar power a long time ago. Stone Mantis. Except they infused the blades on their arms rather than their mandibles. We ended up driving them to extinction because of how threatening they were to our people.]

[Didn't mean to stress you out,] I apologise, [I just thought it would be funny.]

[Don't worry about it Anthony,] Corun laughs, [It was plenty funny for us!]

Granin shoots them a dirty look.

[Enough of this. How is progress toward your next evolution?]

[Give me a break! I only just evolved! You think experience rains down from the sky?]

[No,] he frowns, [but it's still risky for you to be down here as a tier six. Tier seven demons are no joke, as I think you've found.]

[I don't know,] I shrug, [we managed to handle Grokus alright.]

[This is what I was worried about,] the big shaper harrumphs and even Torrina looks a little disappointed.

[We heard about that fight,] she says, [and from what we understand you were almost eaten from the inside out despite having your opponent surrounded and outnumbered. If it weren't for your strange gravity spell, you would have lost for sure.]

I mean, they aren't wrong.

[And that big moron was Excess Demon. Not exactly the most feared combatant you can encounter down here,] Granin says.

[What is?] I ask, curious.

[There are a few tier six demons who are straight up designed for killing. Slaughter demons are among the worst, but they aren't alone. Wrath demons are a pain to deal with, blade demons, let's not forget torture demons, those are a *literal* pain to deal with.]

It's almost humorous how quickly the shaper can fall into a lecturing tone. The guy was born to be a teacher.

[None of those sounds pleasant. We had a tier seven war demon down here as well.]

[Those are massively dangerous. Don't forget that the one you ran into was only recently evolved, they can get far more deadly than that. At the tier seven level? Pride demons can evolve into Vain demons or Emperor demons, both of which are far more threatening than the tier six variant. Slaughter demons usually evolve into Massacre demons, which are as bad as they sound. Blade demons can become Slasher demons or sometimes Violence demons, those are particularly nasty. At tier six you can find blood demons which can evolve into bone demons. If you see one of those, I want you to get the hell away from it.]

That is unusually serious.

[What, why? What do they do?]

He tells me.

[Understood. I shall never go near them!] I vow within my mind and simultaneously within my soul.

That's just nasty!

[Keep pushing for your next evolution,] Granin advises me seriously. [Tier seven monsters are the real threats on this stratum and as a first stratum monster you are far below them. Your next evolution will give you two or more resets that can not only level the playing field, but push you past them with good choices. I won't feel confident for you down here until you reach that point.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 847: A Spoonful of Sugar

Enid looked down at her tea with a slight smile on her face. Not only had the ants secured a source of truly delightful tea leaves, they had also managed to procure sugar, goodness knows from where. In the same manner in which they tackled every issue, namely head on, they had begun cultivation and experimentation of the substance the moment they had the free resources to do so. One would have assumed that the ants would care little for such frivolous items, instead concentrating their efforts in other directions, yet she had visited the tea plantations herself, seen the vast amount of energy they put into the care of their leaves.

The Colony truly didn't believe in outsourcing labour. The idea of having someone else grow the leaves and then purchasing them seemed almost alien to their insect minds. To be fair, labour wasn't exactly something they were short of, but she could only imagine how frustrating she would have found to deal with these monsters as a merchant. The second you found something they wanted to buy, you also created a competitor, because no sooner did they purchase it than they started trying to make or grow it! Two weeks later they would turn around and start selling your own merchandise back to you, and probably at a higher quality than you yourself had been able to obtain!

Infuriating.

The tea fields couldn't be described as vast, but they were certainly extensive, and now with the sugar plantation added alongside them, they almost extended over an entire expanse, with further expansion planned. Not only had her own people in Renewal become addicted to the pleasant flavour and

delightful sweetness, but so had Rylleh and an increasing number of the ants themselves, most particularly the Queens. And if the Queens wanted something, they were going to get it.

"Mayor, are you ready?" the calm voice of her secretary reached her through the door.

"Yes, Terrence. I'll be there in a moment."

With a groan she forced her old bones to move and forced herself up out of her chair. She'd been feeling her age more keenly than ever over the last few weeks, ever since the siege had ended, but she had long gotten used to forcing the niggles and aches that plagued the elderly to the back of her mind. She gathered her things and regretfully left the plush and comfortable lodgings the Colony had provided for her in the nest behind. They'd even installed heating sigils that kept the room at a comfortable temperature at all times! Such an extravagant use of valuable cores was something only the royalty and noble class would dare contemplate in Liria before the wave, and now she was able to enjoy it.

Once she opened the door she was greeted by the warm and cheerful face of Terrence, her latest secretary. He'd been a scribe in the capital before the destruction, a skill he was now able to put to good use in the service of the survivors.

"How are you today, Ms Mayor?" he asked politely.

"I'm fine," she grouched, "stop harassing me. You're worse than a grandchild."

The middle aged man just smiled as he fell into step beside her.

"There are a few things that demand your attention today," he said, "but I presume we are heading to the hospital first?"

"Of course."

"Right you are then, mayor. Good thing I scheduled your appointment with the Rylleh merchants for the afternoon."

Enid groaned.

"What do those crusty old bats want this time?"

"They have approached the Colony about the possibility of imposing copyright law. I understand there are quite a few enterprising merchants who are already prepared to lodge claims."

"And the Colony, having no idea what on Pangera they were on about, asked for me to sort it out," she grunted.

"That is most likely the case."

"I assume they want to claim the copyright on basically everything under the sun, since the Colony's legal system, such as it is, is detached from everyone else's, thus *nothing* is currently protected intellectual property."

"There has already been a claim laid on the wheel, Ms Mayor."

"Damn vultures," she muttered as she rolled her eyes, "I suppose this is how they're hoping to stop the ants from competing with them, by having the Colony agree that it would be illegal to do so."

Terrence didn't say anything in response, but they both knew she was right. Competing with the Colony was an exercise in futility, since they had an essentially limitless workforce that wasn't paid for. This was hardly the first time that Enid had been tasked with hammering out the details of trade between the Colony and the societies that lived around them and likely wouldn't be the last. So far, the wily old trader had proven to be more than a match for the greedy merchants who'd seen her as an easy mark. Though having an army of thousands upon thousands of monsters backing her up didn't hurt any.

When they arrived at the hospital that had been set aside for the non-insect members of the nest Enid wasted no time in stepping forward to comfort the injured and sick. A kind word here, a held hand there, she lifted the spirits of her people with her mere presence and seeing the gratitude on the faces Terrence couldn't help but feel his deep gratitude to this old woman strengthen. She worked so hard for them when by all rights she should be retired and resting in a comfortable chair.

"There are quite a few with mana sickness..." she fretted after she finished chatting with a soldier who lay infirm in his comfortable bed.

He nodded.

"The assault on the third stratum hit quite a few harder than was anticipated. We think the mana levels were still elevated since the end of the last wave and the conditioning program wasn't enough to make up the difference. Every non-monster has been evacuated from that stratum for the time being until the Colony is confident that those who wish to join them have sufficiently adapted."

"They are pushing too hard."

Terrence raised a brow.

"The Colony?"

"No," Enid snapped, "our people! I have no doubt the council didn't even ask if people would participate in the assault. They would have just incorporated the ones that showed up! It takes time to adjust to the mana levels in the deeper layers. In some cases, a long time. Rushing is only going to get good people killed."

"I feel some of our people want to follow the Colony wherever they go," Terrence observed softly, "like a child toddling after a parent. They don't want to be left behind."

"They don't have to be left behind, but they have to be *patient*. The ants are monsters, they don't suffer from mana-sickness, but *we* do! How many of our people have already become too adapted to the Dungeon? How many can no longer walk on the surface without pain?"

"Hundreds at least."

It was something her husband had struggled through many times, the pain that came with delving deep and then rising back up. If not for her, he would have lived deeper in the Dungeon and thus spared himself a great deal of suffering reacclimating to the low mana conditions of the surface whenever he

finished a job. It was taxing, and could have long term effects. If he hadn't been as tough as mountain bones then he likely would never have been able to do it.

"Perhaps I should talk with the Colony about establishing a program to help people acclimate to differing mana levels. Make it easier for those who want to return to the surface..."

"I actually had word through a contact that they've already started work on that. They've created a few mana deprivation chambers close to the nest. They've peeled back the Dungeon veins and opened the rooms for our use. I meant to tell you yesterday."

Enid could only shake her head.

"Damn ants," she muttered, "they spoil us too much."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 848: Offense Is Best

While the hatchling is sleeping through her tier four evolution, the rest of us take a break to strategize a little with Granin and co before we rest. Sometimes it's easy to forget that the others need a break a lot sooner than I do, at least, whenever I'm within range of the Colony. There's just something about never getting tired that seeps into your subconscious, before too long you start thinking of fatigue as abnormal. While everyone else is getting some shut eye, I keep my minds spinning, working hard on practicing new constructs and weaving spells. The grind train is on and it don't stop for nobody!

If the demons think I'm going to rest on my laurels they've got another thing coming.

Still, talking to Granin and the others provides a much more sober evaluation of where we sit in the power scales. Despite having risen so far, there is so long to go.

[That's the way of it in the Dungeon,] the old Shaper shrugs, [until you get all the way to the middle, there's always going to be something stronger than you are. The only time you can really feel safe is when you're the highest tier in a particular stratum and there isn't a wave going on.]

[The way things have been lately, there'll be another wave before too long,] I grump.

He nods.

[That's true. There haven't been two waves this close together in recorded history, and the ambient mana level is still elevated. Some of the more anxious members of the cult feared that this might indicate the cataclysm would come again. I wasn't inclined to believe them then, but now I'm not so certain.]

[The cataclysm? You mean the Rending?]

[Right. You'd probably describe it as 'not a good time'. Which sums it up. If we are indeed trending on that path, then the mana level will continue to rise higher and higher, with wave after wave until the energy becomes so fierce that the Ancients will rise from the centre of the world and consume the surface once again.]

[That... sounds bad. Aren't you supposed to worship these guys or something? Yet you think they're going to come up here and eat all of us!? What the heck is the point of that?!]

Wouldn't it make more sense to be actively working *against* the ancients rather than with them? Granin just shrugs whilst Torrina and Corun stand to the side, equally unfussed.

[First of all, we don't really *worship* the great worm. The ancients are close to gods in a lot of ways, beings capable of ripping the world apart if they so choose, but they are monsters. Our cult and the others around the world understand that the ancients follow their nature. They seek growth, as all creatures in this world do. It's not like we can be mad at them for taking experience and Biomass when they get the chance. If any delver had the chance to stab an ancient through the brain while they slept, you think they wouldn't take it?]

[I guess not...]

Seems a little unsporting though... Mind you, I would definitely do it if I had the chance. I'm a monster, so manners aren't expected. I'd likely get enough experience to go straight to tier eight or something. Not to mention the Biomass... or the core!

[Hang on a minute. If that actually happens, and they rise again, then won't all of us be killed? Like, the entire Colony?]

[Maybe. Unless you can hide from them or fight them off, then yes, they would likely eat you. Or the flood of absurdly powerful monsters from the deeper strata would do the job.]

I slump.

[The only answer is to keep getting stronger, right?]

[Right,] Granin grins.

[This isn't news to you, Anthony,] Torrina tells me gently, [if you wanted the Colony to thrive, you were always going to have to keep growing.]

[I get that, but I didn't realise there was an *ancient* level threat on the horizon!]

[I wouldn't stress too much in the short term,] Corun encourages me, [it's a big 'if' that what Granin is suggesting will even happen. The Cataclysm has only happened once, and nobody was alive in the Dungeon at that point, so nobody has any idea what the conditions that led to the Rending even were.]

[Weren't the Sophos down here at that time?]

The younger mage pulls a face.

[Getting the Sophos to say anything is hard, let alone spill their secrets.]

[They've been more than welcoming to me...]

[Maybe because you're a monster,] he shrugs, [they might sympathise with a sentient reborn as a monster. If you find them again, maybe you can ask.]

After chatting and discussing my magic progression with them, the shapers retire to get some rest and I check in with the Colony leadership to make sure the plan is progressing as it should. Despite everything falling into place, I can't help but feel a little disturbed. The ancients might rise? Demons I can deal with,

if only barely. The Legion I was able to deal with, if only barely. Gigantic mega-monsters rising from the depths? I'm not confident.

I have to take everything Granin says with a slight pinch of salt. He's a cultist himself after all and he's readily admitted that he wants me to rise to that level, become the twentieth ancient... for whatever reason. Come to think of it, *why* is it so important that there be twenty humungo monsters lurking in the centre of this world? Is it supposed to achieve something? Do the civilisations on Pangera just hate odd numbers? I've never actually managed to get the triad to admit what they actually get out of making me reach the peak of monsterhood...

Practicing spinning barriers while I wait for the evolution to complete, I'm finding it more difficult to handle than I expected. My low Skill level is obviously an issue, but more than that I think I'd underestimated how difficult it is to form these things due to how easy Invidia makes it look. Grabbing hold of mana in the air, pressing it down, weaving and shaping it into a physical barrier takes time and a considerable amount of mental effort, especially since I'm working with mana that is external to my body. At the moment, dedicating three mind constructs to the process, they can form a barrier in around five seconds. That's clearly way too slow, but the Skill is still only rank two. I've been told over and over again that Skills below rank five aren't really worth mentioning. More practice required!

My experiments with force magic have continued apace and I'm happy with how they're going. The bulk of my mind constructs are dedicated to this branch of magic and I'm trying to rise through the levels as quickly as possible. I've raised it to the second rank already, but I'll need proper combat practice to accelerate its growth faster. At the moment the pushes, pulls and other forces I can control aren't nearly strong enough to be useful. I mean, sending out a force bolt is like whacking someone in the face with an invisible rock, except I have a spell that throws a rock, and it's cheaper in energy, easier to cast and is more effective! I may as well just throw a rock!

More levels are needed for this magic to reveal its true potential.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 849: Hatchling Hatches ... Again

It didn't take much longer for the hatchling to complete her evolution. The jump from tier three to four isn't nearly as large as that of four to five. I imagine that my next evolution is going to put me out of commission for days, perhaps as long as a week! That does make me wonder about the further evolutions. Will going from tier nine to ten take a year? What about the ancients? If they evolve from where they are now, will they end up sleeping for a thousand years or something? Absurd!

When Invidia notices that Brilliant has begun to stir in her System-induced slumber he immediately lets me know and spits the little ant out onto the surface. Her size hasn't increased that much, which means she's continued to invest in almost purely mental stats, pretty much as I expected her to. In fact, she's probably still smaller than carvers, mages and core shapers at this tier, making her the smallest tier four ant in the Colony. I don't know what she spent her evolutionary energy on, but it sure as hell wasn't to beef up her physical form! When I'd initially created the different castes, I'd been sure to give at least a little boost to their Might and Toughness to make them a bit more durable. Dying is not the desired outcome for any of us!

It appears as though the hatchling hasn't put as much thought into that. She looks so flimsy I could probably break her carapace with one leg! If she's going to remain at this size then she's going to be easy pickings for the kinds of opponents that we face here in the third stratum. Surely she came up with a few alternative methods to protect her own life? Actually, considering the attitudes within the Colony, that's far from a guarantee.

After ten minutes of gradual movement, Brilliant eventually springs up to standing and greets us.

"Ah! Hello senior! I hope you weren't waiting long."

"I can already tell that you'd hoped I wouldn't be waiting when you woke up so you could sneak away and explore on your own."

"How?!"

"You're as clear as glass to me hatchling! How'd the evolution go? Manage to pick up something useful?"

"Definitely! I'm getting closer to being able to peel back all of the secrets of this world! Soon enough, nothing will be able to hide from me!"

"Really? What did you end up going with?"

"Muahahaha! Take a look and see!"

"Wait a second, did you just evil laugh? I'm the only one who is allowed to evil laugh!"

"It's not an evil laugh! It's an ominous chuckle! Not even remotely the same."

"Fair enough..."

Activating core shaping with one antenna pressed lightly against the hatchling's head I take a peek at her status.

Name: Brilliant

Level: 1 (Special) IV

Might: 40

Toughness: 40

Cunning: 80

Will: 65

HP: 80/80

MP: 0/110

Skills:

Advanced Digging (II) Level 8; Acid Shot (II) Level 2; Expert Grip (III) Level 7; Crushing Bite (II) Level 5; Rapid Dash (III) Level 7; Exo-Skeleton Defence (I) Level 2; Advanced Stamina (II) Level 7; Mana Moulding (IV) Level 12; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) Level 2;

Mutations:

Energy Reactive Exoskeleton +15; Vampiric Mandibles +15; Potent Gripping Legs +15; Mana Weave Eyes +15; Mana Sensitive Antennae +15; Melting Acid Gland +15; Diverse Pheromone Language Gland +15; Heightened Mana Core Lattice +15; Penetrating Dungeon Oracle +15; Dimensional Eye; Energy Stone;

Species: Omni - Seer (Formica)

Skill points: 21

Biomass: 24

The heck is this?!

"Did you spend all of your energy on sensory organs? The dimensional eye and energy stone?"

"I did! I also increased my mental stats. The things I can see right now are incredible! My sensitivity to mana is unbelievable!"

For an ant that always wanted to see everything for herself, I shouldn't be too surprised that she decided to go in this direction. She'll never be content until she's ferreted out every piece of information, every hidden secret for herself. Not satisfied with her current level of sensory information, despite having access to some level of information from the Dungeon itself, she had broadened her options. The dimensional eye in particular is a rather potent organ and likely the main benefit of her current species. Combined with the energy stone, she was now able to detect fluctuations of energy across dimensional boundaries! Nothing could remain hidden from her sight!

"In fact, I can sense energy flowing toward you, senior. And it's coming from me!"

What?!

"Don't worry about that!" I cut her off. "As long as you are happy with your choices, I'm satisfied. I can see you've been diligently practicing the foundational Skills of magic as well. Great work!"

Despite only having the one brain, Brilliant has shown incredible growth with her handling of internal and external mana. This further confirms my suspicion that she has a powerful natural predilection for these Skills.

"You'll need to start working on an elemental Skill before too long in order to work your way up the tiers," I instruct her. "Try a few different choices and see which ones you like. I wouldn't stress too much about which ones you pick, play with all if you want, but be wary of how you spend your Skill points."

I take a few minutes to instruct her on the upgrades and fusions available at the entry level of magic before bringing everyone else into the conversation.

[Alright then, with Brilliant finished with her evolution, it's time to move to the next phase. Are you ready to go on the offensive?]

Tiny nods and flexes eagerly.

[Good! Time to head over to Orpule and see what the next addition to the Colony's territory is going to look like!]

I'm no good sitting around here on my backside! The Colony is more than capable of fortifying and defending the city without me. Vibrant should already be out there causing chaos, time for me to make my approach as well! Our main strategy has never been to sit back and wait for the enemy to come to us. Since the 'rules' of demon combat allow us to attack during this timing window, we shall! Of course, we can't assault the city itself until the set date, but we can do a lot of other things. When they see what we have planned, the demons of Orpule won't dare put a toe out of their homes.

After declaring as much to my pets and the hatchling, we zoom off! The Colony has already been kind enough to establish a lift from the city to the ground, mainly to shift materials in and out of the city without having to climb the pillar holding them in a pair of mandibles, but it serves equally well in order to send a group of heavy monsters down. And I do mean heavy, since Sarah is joining us on this outing. With myself, the massive bear and Tiny standing on the platform, we are surely putting the thing through its paces. It does creak rather worryingly, but we make it to the bottom just fine in the end.

[Let's go everyone! Time to cause some ruckus.]

I love it when I get permission for this.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 850: Movement

The shadow falls like clouds, like rain;

Creeping dread begins to stain;

Shudder the heart, freeze the brain;

Ring out the laughter, again and again;

Call of you lover, daughter, son;

Sinks into your ears, your will undone;

Forward you step, your soul is wrung;

Cannot resist, Gon has come;

Who can defy that fateful call?

Who can escape the shadows pall?

Forward you go, heedless to stall;

Into the depths to meet the fall;

Lament the brave and pity the meek;

None can flee the song of the freak;

- Rinnidan children's rhyme.

There was a time that Titus had thought his daughter would never return to the Legion, that the untimely death of his son had robbed him of both his children. Now that he'd been reunited with

Morrelia and she had integrated into the Legionem Abyssi a part of him that had long been dead was once again full of life. Not that anyone could tell looking at his face, of course, to the world at large he appeared as stone faced and duty bound as ever. Ever since Morrelia had been selected for accelerated development his pride had almost been ready to burst out of his chest. It would seem odd to most people, but watching her earnestly work herself to the bone in order to achieve her ambitions had filled him with powerful emotions. He had dearly wished his son had survived his initiation, so he could have seen both of his children rise to the challenge presented to them.

With a slow release of breath he pushed out the grief that rose within him as his thoughts dwelt on what had been lost. It had grown easier to bear over the years, but only a little. His acute awareness of how fleeting joy could be only made his current appreciation for his daughter all the more potent.

With a wrench of will Titus dragged his mind away from Morrelia and back to the numerous papers scattered across his desk. Administrative work was the backbone of the Legion, and though he would rather charge into a horde of demons without armour on, the commander would do his duty and defeat the enemy that rested on the flat surface before him. Once more focused on his task, Titus took hold of his pen, dipped it in the waiting ink and returned to battle.

Resupplying his new Legion after the members had been recalled from their postings during the wave was a monumental task. Thousands of soldiers and thousands more auxiliaries needed to be accounted for, equipped, fed, billeted and kept happy. Promotions, training, Skill development, Class upgrades, managing morale, all of it demanded the careful attention of the commander in charge and Titus knew just how important each of these were to the successful running of a military force. This was the sort of discipline that the Legion drummed into their officers! It was also something Morrelia would need to learn...

"Damn it!" Titus crashed his fist down on the table as his thoughts strayed once more.

"Something wrong, commander?" Aurillia burst through the door, his old comrade looked around the room as if expecting to see a lurking monster!

The commander didn't lose his temper. He just didn't! For him to yell like that, something must be seriously wrong! As she glanced back to the face of her old friend and superior, she froze when she saw the hard lines of his expression. Though he always looked carved from granite, right now the commander appeared as if he was forged from Abyssal Iron! Knowing him for as long as she had, Aurillia could tell he was furious!

"What's wrong, Titus?" she demanded, using his name in a breach of protocol. "Is something bothering you?"

Unlike most officers of his Legion, she was prepared to face his wrath if the moment demanded it. After a long moment where he took hold of his temper, Titus breathed out his tension once more, his expression softening imperceptibly as he did so.

"Nothing is the matter. I'm just irritated and finding it difficult to concentrate," he admitted as he waved a hand towards the piles of forms and applications in front of him.

"Thinking about your daughter out working hard in the Dungeon?" she grinned. "I know how proud you must be."

Titus frowned.

"Of course I'm proud, but that doesn't mean I want to hear gossiping amongst the ranks."

"Gossiping? About little Morrelia who we trained when she was a young lass? Why would we?" the old tribune innocently spread her hands.

"Hmph," Titus snorted.

"I have to admit to you Titus, a few of us are concerned about the pace she is setting. Overwork is a real issue and she is clearly pushing up against the boundary," Aurillia grew serious as she laid out her concerns. "We've seen her stumbling into camp once every few days, covered in ichor and half dead on her feet. She spends so much time in the field they are rotating three squads to accompany her. She's doing three times the work of a normal legionary! You can't be alright with this."

Titus didn't blink.

"What did she say?" he said.

"That it was her decision and the rest of us should leave off," the tribune grunted.

"There it is."

"You can't be serious, Titus! This is your daughter we're talking about, don't tell me that you aren't concerned!"

He was concerned, but that didn't mean he got to overrule Morrelia's choices. Or the Legion's.

"You never went through the advanced officer's training Aurillia," he told her, looking her straight in the eye, "you don't know what it takes to succeed at that level. If she worked any less, she wouldn't have a chance of making it through."

"This much is insane! She could die!"

"It's her decision," Titus stated, his tone hard as steel. "I will support her choices. She understands the risks and is willing to shoulder them. I will hear no more of this matter!"

The tone of his voice brooked no discussion and his loyal tribune knew when she could push no further. Aurillia was far from happy with how hard Morrelia was being pushed, but she swallowed her objections for now. Seeing his officer no longer intended to question him on this matter, he moved the conversation to other topics.

"Has the scouting report on the progress of the ant colony come back?"

"Yes," she forced her mind to move on to the business at hand. "Our sources in the third stratum have made contact with the Church. Apparently a demon city fell to an invasion of ants from above only recently."

"Which city?"

"Roklu."

Titus frowned.

"I'm not aware of that one."

"It's a relatively minor city directly beneath where we fought the ants."

"So they dropped straight down into the vacuum. Is the territory around there contested?"

"It is, there are various powers at work in the area, including the Kaarmodo. We expect to hear more feedback in the coming weeks as the ants seek to expand their influence."

The commander leaned back in his chair and pondered for a moment.

"We spooked them," he said.

"That is what our strategists believe also," Aurillia confirmed, "the ants are seeking to aggressively expand in order to stave off further extermination forces. The intervention of other actors has also complicated the scene."

The tree and the folk. Neither of them friends of the Legion.

"We may have to wait until the ants manage to pull another enemy down on themselves" Titus grunted.

"The Legion doesn't have the manpower right now to stamp out these insects now that they've spread. There are fires all over the place that need putting down, especially down below."

"I'll keep you informed sir."