

The ivid tunnels didn't provide convenient hiding places. The best the three adventurers could hope for was to duck out of sight around the many corners and bends whenever they saw one of the giant insects coming their way. The magical perfume—Victor wondered if it was somehow mimicking pheromones—seemed to work very well, however, and as long as they didn't stand directly in the path of one of the lumbering worker ivid, they didn't get attacked or, worse, swarmed.

After they snuck into the opening, he, Valla, and Lesh had hidden behind some of the fallen dirt as a dozen workers arrived and began sealing the opening the warrior ivid had made as they'd streamed forth to defend the nest. The workers looked much like the warriors but were smaller, closer to orange than dark brown, and had long, multi-jointed digits on their front legs rather than pincers. The trio had slipped away wholly unnoticed, and since then, something like an hour had passed, and they'd traversed endlessly descending tunnels with no sign that they were anywhere close to their goal.

Victor pulled his tiny Globe of Insight close, cupping his hands over the dim light and motioning for the others to come close. "I think I should send my coyotes out exploring," he whispered—they were afraid speaking aloud would alert the warriors who seemed to be lurking in omnipresent dugouts lining the tunnels every dozen feet or so. They were clearly in some kind of stasis with their eyes closed and completely motionless, but Lesh was sure the wrong smell or sound would have them up and swarming in a matter of seconds. Victor, obviously, wanted to avoid that.

"Can we mask their scent? Do they have a scent?" Lesh frowned, the expression very pronounced on his reptilian face, exposing half a dozen sharp teeth.

"I don't know," Victor sighed.

"I think we should avoid the risk while we can," Valla hissed. The tunnels were wide, easily ten yards across, and the soil and rock they passed through were somehow hardened with a clear, resin-like glaze. She'd been leaning against the far wall, keeping to the shadow as much as she could, but now she leaned close, speaking quickly and softly. "While we can find a way down, we should be content. If we come to a blockage or some obstacle we can't find a way around, then we should consider other measures."

"All right." Victor nodded; she made sense. They knew they had to get to the bottom, and so far, they hadn't had trouble finding a downward-sloping tunnel. He started forward again, and when he came to one of the alcoves cut out for a sleeping warrior, he veritably tiptoed past the opening. A layer of transparent resin sealed off some of the warrior alcoves, but others, like this one, were partially open, as though the warrior had been out of his pod recently and hadn't been sealed in yet. Who closed them in? The workers? It made sense; the workers were currently closing up the exit tunnel the three of them had come through. Would they seal the repacked dirt with this resin? Was it some kind of excretion, or was it made from a natural use of Energy? Victor was strangely intrigued by the insects and their weird lives.

"I wonder if any of them think for themselves," he hissed to Valla, who was silently shadowing him.

"I hope not." She didn't elaborate, but Victor could catch the further meaning of her words. So far, they'd remained undetected thanks to the workers' lack of critical thinking. They might be in

trouble if they came upon a different caste that operated on something other than instinct or hidden impulses from the queen.

“Something comes,” Lesh hissed, and, as they’d done ten or more times already, they hurried back, ahead of the incoming ivid, until they reached a junction they’d recently passed. They ducked down one of the narrower side tunnels and waited, watching the intersection. Half a minute later, with a sweat-inducing clatter of claws on the hard tunnel surface, ten workers scurried through it.

Valla let out a breath she’d been holding. “We’re lucky they never seem to turn down these side tunnels.”

“I believe these shafts lead to worker cells. There may be other tunnels accessible to other castes.”

Victor thought about it, trying to imagine the layout of the enormous hive. “If that’s true, if they don’t use that big tunnel up there for anything other than, I don’t know, like a highway, then maybe it doesn’t access the heart of the hive. Maybe we need to check out one of the, uh, cells where the workers live to see if there are other tunnels.”

Lesh nodded. “We haven’t seen any downward-traveling workers. Where are those that hunt and gather? Surely, they must bring some sort of harvest into the hive . . .”

“Well, let’s be honest: We don’t know shit about these guys. Maybe they have openings to their hive a thousand miles from here. Maybe they grow their food underground. Let’s check down this side tunnel, though, just to see if we get any ideas.” When Valla silently nodded, Victor turned and walked further into the side tunnel, away from the junction. This tunnel was smaller but still plenty large enough for Lesh and Victor. The workers, while smaller than the soldiers, were the size of small automobiles, and the tunnel was wide enough to accommodate one traveling in any orientation. Victor shuddered, imagining a horde of the things swarming through the tunnel, some on the walls, some on the ceiling.

They’d only traversed a hundred yards or so when the tunnel took a very steep downward turn, so much so that Victor worried he might lose his footing and tumble downward. He turned, facing backward, and, using his hands with his feet, began descending almost like he was backing down a ladder. Lesh followed his example, but Valla seemed unbothered by the tunnel’s slope, partially spreading her wings and lightly hopping down, keeping pace with Victor’s ponderous descent.

After another hundred yards, the slope smoothed out a bit, and Victor turned to continue creeping along as he had been up above. The tunnel wended left and right for quite a while, and Victor was beginning to worry he’d wasted a lot of time checking the side passage when he heard a strange, vibrating susurrations in the air. He paused, straining his ears, and looked to Valla and Lesh with raised eyebrows. “I know not,” Lesh hissed. Valla shrugged, and Victor continued down the tunnel. When it rounded the next prominent curve, Victor saw an opening ahead and, for the first time, the glow of a light source other than his own.

He pointed, and Lesh and Valla nodded. They both held their weapons ready, and Victor reached over his shoulder, trusting his magical harness to push Lifedrinker into his hand. He pulled back the thread of Energy feeding his Globe of Insight, reducing it to a tiny spark that hovered near his head, and then he silently stalked forward, ready to see what lay beyond the

dim opening. At the tunnel's edge, he leaned his head forward, peering around the strangely smooth corner.

A vast space greeted him, a hall that rose hundreds of feet in the air and stretched for such a distance that the far wall seemed tiny. Lining the long walls of the chamber were rows of cells just like those the warriors slept in, carved from the earth and stacked atop each other by the thousands. These were slightly smaller and lit with a faint amber glow. When Victor focused on one of the closer cells, he saw the source of the glow: The ivid within was slowly consuming a pile of yellow-orange, luminescent sludge that looked very much like peach jam. Another difference he noted was that they were all open—not a single cell was closed off by the hard, clear resin that coated the tunnel walls.

"There must be ten thousand in this chamber," Valla said, her voice just a faint breath beside Victor's ear. Victor nodded and pointed to the far wall, where he could just see a procession of much smaller insects winding out through a small tunnel. Valla leaned forward, close to him, peering where he pointed, and when she realized what she was looking at, she moved her mouth close to his ear and whispered, "Are those a different kind of worker?"

"Dunno," Victor said, trying to whisper as softly as she was but failing. Still, he didn't seem to have alerted any of the ivid, so he turned and included Lesh in his following words, "Those insects at the far wall are different. Maybe they brought the food in here. Maybe that tunnel goes deeper."

Lesh nodded, pulling his magical perfume dispenser from a dimensional container and holding it up. The message was clear—he thought they should refresh their disguising scent. Victor nodded, producing his own bottle. Valla did the same, and soon, they were all silently gagging amid a cloud of rank, eye-watering ammonia. Crouching low, eager to be out of the cloud, Victor started forward, trying to dart quickly past each occupied cell, hugging the short sections of wall between them. By the time they'd cleared half the chamber, the line of smaller insects had finished exiting, leaving Victor a clear tunnel opening to hurry toward.

None of the workers seemed to pay them any attention. It looked to Victor like their eyes were closed as they doggedly nibbled at the glowing piles of jelly in their cells. Did they rest while they ate? Were they too simple of mind to do anything but one task at a time? He figured he'd never learn the answers to his constant questions about the strange species, but he was glad for whatever kept them calm in their cells, ignoring the three intruders hiding in their cloud of caustic odor. The smell of the perfume was strong to Victor and the others, but to the insects, it must have been a familiar, non-threatening odor because they made it through the enormous worker dormitory without incident.

As Victor slipped into the new, much smaller opening, he had to duck to keep his head from scraping the hard, resin-coated ceiling. He took a dozen steps, rounding a slight bend, and then turned to look at Lesh and Valla. "Good?"

"If uncomfortable," Lesh replied, grimacing as his hunched shoulders rubbed the ceiling.

"Let's hope this smaller tunnel opens into something bigger. C'mon, I wanna see where those smaller bugs went." Victor turned and started forward again, and he heard the other two close behind. He barely rounded the rest of the curve when he found himself face to face with an insect that wasn't only much smaller—person-sized, as Erd Van might put it—but also bipedal with two sets of arms ending in three-fingered, hook-like hands. The two-legged ivid's eyes,

while definitely those of an insect, were far more expressive than those of the giant workers and warriors, and Victor swore he saw the carapace around them widen as its beak-like mouth opened and a warbling, clicking sound of obvious distress sounded from deep in its thorax.

Victor knew a cry for help when he heard it, and he reflexively cast Energy Charge and streaked through the ten feet between them in an eruption of hot, rage-attuned Energy. He barely had time to lift Lifedrinker, but he did, and her blade cleaved sideways between the sharp razor-like ridges of the insect's mouth, carving off the top half of its head. The warbling alarm cut off as abruptly as it had begun, and Victor stood in the silence, Lifedrinker dripping yellow gore onto the fallen body of the ivid. He strained his ears, worried it was too late, that the cry had gone out and nearby warriors would be on top of them in seconds.

He stood that way, with Valla and Lesh similarly silent, their weapons ready, for thirty long seconds, and when they didn't hear anything more, Victor finally lowered his axe and turned to regard Valla and Lesh. "What the fuck is this thing?" He'd barely finished the question before a bunch of golden Energy motes gathered around the dead insect. Victor sighed with relief and pleasure as they all streamed into him.

"Ah, that must be nice." Valla shook her head, *tsking* her tongue at him. "Anyway, it seemed more intelligent, and it's alone . . ." Valla shrugged. "I don't know enough about insects to guess."

"Some sort of hive attendant, I would guess," Lesh whispered. "Performing rounds, checking the status of the workers, perhaps reporting to the queen what it sees." The big lizard-like warrior strode forward, spraying some of his alchemical mixture on the corpse. "If these things communicate with scents, then we have to assume a corpse would alert something or other. Best to delay that if we can."

"Yeah," Victor said, then he stooped and pulled the dead body and its dismembered head into one of his storage rings. "How's that?"

Lesh didn't laugh aloud, but something like amusement rumbled deep in his chest. "Good." Victor grinned and then turned back to the tunnel, advancing with Lifedrinker held ready. The passage continued, more or less straight, for another hundred paces before they came to a T junction. Victor peered left and right and settled on going right because it had a slightly downward slope. It wasn't long before they approached another intersection, this one more like a Y, and from the left-hand branch, Victor heard clicks that reminded him of the strange alarm the insect he'd killed made. However, these clicks were more varied and far quieter, and he wondered if it was the sound of the insects talking.

"Are they communicating?" Valla whispered, echoing his thoughts.

Victor shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe one of those hive attendants is down there giving instructions to some workers or something."

"This tunnel is too small for workers. We should investigate." Lesh's hunched, dark form loomed close behind Victor, and his low, rumbling whisper barely carried more than a few inches. Victor was torn—part of him knew Lesh was right and that they should learn what they could about the insects before going deeper, but another part wanted to avoid any possible interaction. Shouldn't they just turn right and skip whatever was making those clicks? In the end, Valla helped him with the decision.

“Yes, let’s see what we can see.”

“Okay.” Victor stalked down the left passage, very carefully and slowly rounding the slight curve, aware of the faint glow of amber light from ahead. When an opening began to come into view, he froze, ever so slowly inching his head to the left, past the curve, so he could see what was there. The passage opened into a low but vast space, and in it were thousands of insects that looked to be halfway between the “attendant” they’d run into and one of the big workers upstairs. They were probably a match for Victor or Lesh in mass, but they walked on all six legs. Their forelegs ended in articulated joints but were only two-pronged, and their coloring was less yellow and more brown than that of the bipedal creature Victor had killed. Even so, they were clearly different from the workers up above.

Stranger than their appearance was their behavior. The smaller workers were arrayed in dozens of rows, fanning out from the center of the room. They all faced the middle, and there, on a raised dais of resin-coated dirt, stood one of the bipedal insects and, before it, kneeled, for there was no better way to describe their posture, five of the small workers. The kneeling insects faced the ground, heads low, and the attendant insect paced before them. It was from his beak-like mouth that the clicks emanated.

Victor felt Valla and Lesh press close behind him, peering down the short length of the tunnel to the large, strange gathering of insects, but his eyes were glued to the scene in the middle. The bipedal insect walked before the five workers, its four hands gesticulating as it clicked. After a minute, though, it bent before the kneeling insects, one by one, and while Victor watched in fascinated horror, it bit through the chitin atop their heads with a clear, echoing *snick*. With each bite, the victims spasmed, arms twitching, chitinous bodies shivering, but they didn’t die.

First, the attendant bit the two on the left, then the two on the right, and when Victor thought it would bite the fifth one, the one at the center, he was proven wrong. Instead, it took its dexterous-looking fingers, pulled something wet and glistening from the incision it had made in the workers, and held it in its palm for the fifth worker to consume. Victor felt his mouth go dry as a dizzying sense of nausea came over him. That thing was feeding parts of the four workers to the fifth one while they still lived! Valla’s hand tightened on his shoulder, and that was the first time Victor realized she’d gripped him.

He looked at her and saw her wide eyes and frantic gestures for him to turn around, so he followed her back toward the last intersection. Lesh was already there, waiting when they came around. The big dragonkin nodded when they approached and softly rumbled, “I know not what rite it was performing, but we should move while they are all in attendance. If it finishes and releases that horde, we’ll be overrun.”

“Yeah.” Victor started down the other branch of the intersection and continued to whisper, “Pretty weird, though. Did you see it pull something out of their heads to feed the one?”

“Perhaps it’s lifting one up.” Lesh said the “lifting one up” as though it had a universal meaning. Victor looked at him quizzically.

“Huh?”

“Perhaps it can elevate one caste to the next with the sacrifice of its fellows.”

“Is it replacing the one we killed? So quickly?” Valla asked.

“Perhaps. The Kothid were quick to replace forces we killed during the war. Evolved hives are . . . disturbingly alien in their operation. We should consider that there’s a greater awareness here, that there is a mind at work beyond that of each individual, even beyond the queen.”

Victor nodded, looking back to reply, “Like a network.”

“I wish we knew how deep we had to go. How deep we’ve come. I wish we knew what to expect.” Valla sighed.

“Yeah . . .” Victor started to agree with her, but Lesh spoke too, and his words came more quickly, his thoughts fully formed.

“I expect death. This cannot end well. We’ve been descending for a mere hour, and already, tens of thousands of insects lurk above us. Already, we’ve learned that there’s some intelligence at work. I’ll be amazed if this stinking concoction works much longer.” He wrinkled his short snout as he sniffed his forearm in illustration.

Neither Valla nor Victor responded to his sudden bout of negativity. Victor figured it was his memories of the war he’d fought back on his homeworld. It couldn’t be easy sneaking into a massive hive like this—it was bound to dredge up all sorts of feelings. Still, he had to admit he was feeling a little less optimistic. They’d passed a hundred side passages. They’d descended through miles and miles of tunnel. What were the odds they were on the right track? What were the odds the magical egg artifact would be waiting for them when they’d gone down as far as they could? How many hordes of insects would be waiting? What other weird castes were there? One thing gave him a glimmer of relief in the darkness of doubt—they had the recall tokens Erd Van had given them.

“Let’s just hope they work,” he muttered, rounding yet another gentle curve and nearly stumbling into a black void. His light was dim, only allowing him to see a few feet ahead, but it was enough to show him that his next step would be into empty air. He braced an arm on the tunnel wall, then looked back at Lesh and Valla. “Do we want to risk a brighter light?”

Valla sighed and stepped forward. “Perhaps it’s time I put my wings to use.”