

Chrysalis 1011

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Chapter 1011: Going Deep(er)

It is difficult to say how the Colony's attitude to the pets raised by the eldest came to be what it is today. There was always a level of respect afforded to them, naturally; they were allies and assistants to the Eldest, and therefore allies to all of us. Some of the dignity and power of the most august ant, the first among equals, attached itself to them.

But that began to change as we and they continued to develop. Our society grew more sophisticated, our understanding of pets and their attitudes more developed, and at the same time, they were changing. They grew stronger, learned, fought, evolved and with the astonishing level of freedom and independence that the Eldest fostered in them, they began to interact with us in new ways.

The Shadow began to contact... some ants... in clandestine ways, seeking to assist in their task and develop their skills, teaching them the ways of the darkness.

The Storm would often go out of its way to help hunters in need, sharing food and protecting them from harm. Many would tell stories of the Storm descending from above and smashing foes to bits, before being patted on the carapace and fed Biomass.

The Eye was much less inclined to interact with the Colony at first, its taciturn and hoarding nature precluding such activities. But with time, this changed. When the Colony had something to teach, the Eye would always appear, ready to learn, and exchange knowledge in return.

We called them Guardians for a long time, as they protected and defended the Eldest from harm, but in time they grew into that name, and became defenders of us all.

- From the notes of Historiant.

[Holy moly! There's a ton of the buggers,] I exclaim to my pets.

[Perhaps the ka'armodo were holding back their true numbers to prevent losing too many in the collapse, Master.]

[That makes a lot of sense, Crinis. Good thinking.]

I notice the dark tentacles flail wildly for a moment before they steady and go back to extracting their terrible toll on the enemy.

She's getting much better at taking compliments, it's good to see.

And she's likely right. Now that their whole "cutting the mountain in half" strategy has failed them, the lizards seem to be getting desperate. From out of the deep tunnels an absolute tidal wave of termites is breaking, climbing up all of the walls and launching themselves at us with unbridled ferocity.

To make matters even more interesting, they burst out from side tunnels as well, rushing into the flanks of the Colony formation, much as we'd predicted. Even if it's all within expectations, that doesn't mean we aren't almost entirely surrounded by a ravaging horde of termites on their home turf.

It's the final gambit of the ka'armodo, they need to drive us back or drag us down, and fast.

Naturally, I feel delighted to disappoint them.

[Tiny, time to go loud. Light 'em up. Invidia, you go second. Once that's done, we dive.]

[RAAAAAAH!]

The big ape's mind and body harmonise and he unleashes a mighty bellow with both, exploding with electricity before hurling it around him in deadly bolts. The sheer amount of juice Tiny can output nowadays is slipping right off the scale and he takes full advantage of the wattage, unleashing a devastating electrical storm that savages the termites within the narrowing tunnel entrance.

If they had wiring in this place, it's wrecked now....

Filled with fury and glee, my first ally in the Dungeon throws himself down the tunnel, bursting everything around him with punishing bolts of lightning that sizzle through the air, leaving a sharp tang on my antennae. All around, termites are dropping like flies, zapped right in their big dumb faces by a massive, gorilla shaped zapper.

I plunge forward to join the ape in his mad assault, Void Chomping whenever I need to clear space in front of me as Crinis and Invidia rush along behind.

It's all going great for Tiny, he's having the time of his life, roaring and smiting as he goes, until it all comes to an abrupt and sudden end. It's obvious he hasn't been keeping track of how much he had left in the tank as he suddenly runs out of spark mid-leap and lands in the centre of a termite cluster. He immediately becomes covered in a gnawing pack of bug monsters, the confused expression on his face covered by termites.

Crinis comes to his rescue, her tentacles snapping out, dozens at a time to wrap around the offending enemies and rend them into bite-size delectables.

Which means it's now Invidia's turn.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Repeated explosions rock the tunnel entrance as the envious little demon, his eye flaring a bright green, begins to unleash his pent up frustration. What could be more painful for an Envy Demon than to watch someone else get all the experience and glory while you've been ordered to sit and wait?

That's why Tiny always goes first.

Filled with ire and the need to satisfy his obsession, Invidia explodes into action, with explosions! The tunnel descending down into the bowels of the nest before us is lit with repeated detonations. The termites have thick carapace and can take an unusual amount of punishment for their tier. Each time the demon casts his spell, he doesn't actually finish off that many of them, but he often dislodges their grip, sending them tumbling down into the darkness, scrabbling at each other and clearing our way forward.

I quickly check behind me to see the Colony fiercely defending the ground they've taken in the nest entrance, but halting their advance for now. Even Leeroy, somehow, has restrained herself and the Immortals hold position on the front line, several of them igniting into glorious, healing flames.

It's time to finish this war.

[Give it to them, Invidia! Let's see the laser!]

[Yessssssss!]

A lance of pure green light blasts through the darkness, annihilating every termite it touches. We follow along as he flutters ahead of us, the deadly beam of destruction both lighting, and securing our descent.

When he finally runs out of power and the power of his eye fades away, the four of us pull together and continue our trek into the heart of the termite nest. The Colony is depending on us to finish the fight and I'll be damned if I let the family down.

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Chapter 1012: Heart of the Nest

Down in the darkness we plunge. It's strange. Normally this kind of environment would be so familiar, so welcoming to me, it's a social insect nest after all, but it just... doesn't. Instead, it feels alien, and twisted from everything it should be.

There are no comforting pheromones of my family spread across the walls and floor, no warm messages or encouragement or friendly reminders to get some rest or they'll come for you. Instead there's an omnipresent, suffocating stink that coats my antennae and makes me twitch in discomfort. The design of the nest is also not what I would expect. Despite being similar(ish) creatures, the construction of an ant nest isn't all that similar to a termite nest, depending on the variety of termite and ant you choose to compare.

The flow of air through the tunnels isn't what I would expect, the complex ventilation systems these cockroach descended mugs build are all about temperature control, ensuring that exactly two places inside their fortress are always kept at the perfect temp: the fungus garden and the queen's chamber.

Which means if I follow the warm air current... I should be able to find the royal family...

And of course, the other unwelcoming and disconcerting aspect of this nest is the neverending hordes of termites and their desperate attempts to rip me limb from limb. Naturally, that goes without saying.

The four of us continue our push, advancing steadily into the nest and refusing to allow ourselves to get surrounded. With the Colony warring on the surface, the termite forces are divided, allowing our small team, with its overwhelming, concentrated power, to dive deep without being overwhelmed.

[Crisis, do you sense anything?] I call to the writhing mass of tentacles flowing along behind me.

[I sense too many of them to be sure of anything. They're all around us, the disgusting filth! How dare they lay a single claw on Master...]

[I mean... we are trying to kill them.]

[Our cause is just!]

[Going to leave that well enough alone. How about you Invidia?]

[Thisssss wealth. I shall havesssss it all!]

[I mean... what wealth? Are you talking about the Biomass?]

That bulging eye glitters, darkly.

[Yesssssss.]

[We don't have time to eat! We need to find the queen's chambers, dammit!]

[I will havessss them too,] he assures me quietly.

[Just look for concentrations of mana, would you?]

I turn to Tiny. He looks back at me.

[Just punch stuff, Tiny. You're doing good,] I sigh.

He grins and continues to do just that. I know I can't depend on him for anything requiring any more brainpower than that. I swear to goodness I'm going to force him to raise his Cunning to 30 on the next evolution.

[Master! I think I have something, another hundred metres down, on our right.]

[Any idea what it is?]

[I can't be sure, but it feels heavily warded. I can't stretch my shadow sight into the chamber. Perhaps the ka'armodo have shielded it?]

Sounds promising. Maybe we'll find what we're looking for, or maybe we'll find the ka'armodo themselves. I'm totally happy with either outcome, if I'm telling the truth.

I've got words for those ka'armodo...

[Bomb out! Pull back, people!]

As the crew ducks behind me I unleash the gravity bomb I'd been preparing with a flex of my will. The small sphere of slowly rotating doom howls down the tunnel, dragging termites to their unfortunate crushing demise. That'll slow the speed of reinforcements from this tunnel at least.

[That's the last of the gravity mana for the time being,] I warn the others. [I spent almost all of it on the mountain thing.]

If only the Vestibule could help recharge my mana, but alas that would completely break the thing. Having virtually endless amounts of stamina and replenishing my other organs, such as acid and regeneration, is already bonus enough.

[Once the bomb vanishes, we'll need to rush forward. To try and get some depth. I don't want to be left hanging onto the wall here any longer than we need to.]

[*We will have all their secretssssss,*] Invidia purrs.

Down in the darkness, the mad shrieking of the air and the panicked chittering of mandibles can be heard. We cling to the wall, our claws, tentacles and fingers lodged deep into the stone to prevent being pulled down into the crush.

When it fades away, we leap down, throwing ourselves out into the almost vertical shaft and plummeting through the air. The termites behind us thrash wildly, but catch themselves before they join us in our fall, putting a gap between us and them.

We drop for dozens of metres before we catch hold of the wall again, our huge mass causing us to carve deep grooves into the rock as we arrest our descent.

When we finally stop, I look down and see the tunnel network below us *boiling* with termites. They're furious. They're desperate.

They're *afraid*.

I can practically smell it on them. I recognise that terror in their eyes, because it's exactly what I've seen in my own siblings when the Queen has risked herself in battle.

We're close!

[Go crazy guys, we aren't far from the target!]

In response to my call, my three pets unleash their best and most powerful skills upon the hapless termites. Even if some of them are tier five, even if they've been able to mutate multiple organs, none of the bugs can stand up to the power of a perfect tier six monster.

Tentacles lash, fists fly and explosions roar as the surging masses of termites are beaten back by a devastating barrage from my allies. With the limited time I have, I cast about with my most tenuous sense.

If there's one thing I know about termite queens, it's that they *chonky*, among the largest of all social insects. Interestingly, they aren't born that way, in fact termite queens are essentially a normal member of the colony, and when they die, they're replaced by another who takes up the role, unlike most ant colonies who die along with their progenitor.

But once they do take up the role, they undergo a transformation, their gaster swelling and lengthening to ridiculous proportions, over ten times the length of the rest of them. All that space is taken up with thousands upon thousands of eggs which are born at a rate of one every three seconds. If I understand the Dungeon and monsters at all, those queens are going to be even bigger than they should be compared to the soldier termites we see, and pumping out eggs even faster than that.

All of that concentrated heft must generate some potent gravity, and I'm gonna find it!

It's not easy. The walls around me are alive with gravitational pulses from hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of individual creatures. They pile on top of each other and swarm all over the place, sending out strong signals that muddy the waters...

Aha!

[I have them! It's close!] I tell the others.

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Chapter 1013: Heart of the Nest pt 2

Big 'ol chunk of mass, surrounded by many more, smaller chunks of mass. Huge amounts of toing and froing. It has to be the queen's chamber. There's no way the termites would allow egg production to cease, not even during a crisis. *Especially* during a crisis.

How is a social insect supposed to overcome its challenges? With overwhelming numbers! I didn't come here with a half of a million of my own siblings because I love their company!

Although I do...

[Can you sense it Crinis?]

[I can't... this whole area is shielded.]

My shadowy companion of death and darkness sounds frustrated, unusual for her, but I can understand it. For someone who started off completely blind, Crinis has evolved to the point where she's possibly the most visually acute of us all. She can't see light, but she can see mana, and shadows, and use both to 'see' through walls and deep into solid rock. Not being able to look at something right in front of her face must be a weird sensation.

[It's fine,] I assure her, [this is it. We just need to dig our way through. You three keep them off of me and I'll take care of the rest.]

Zen of digging, activate!

Not that I want to actually relax here, that would be profoundly unwise, but I do need to get my dig on in a serious way. I aim myself in the direction I need to dig and begin to pump my mandibles with furious energy, ripping into the stone. Haha! Making good progress here. At this point in my journey, I can cut through regular stone like it's butter. I'm just too strong and too heavily mutated to be resisted when it comes to digging!

THUNK!

Ouch! That is to say... unless you go ahead and heavily reinforce the rock. That one chomp has set my entire face to wobbling. What the heck did they *do* to this stone?

I scratch and scabble at the wall to clear some space and get a good view before I set my antennae to tapping and my mana sense probing.

Holy moly! They've done some work on this... in fact... I'm not even sure what it is that they did. It's not condensed rock, that'd ping my gravity sense due to how much heavier it is. They've done something else entirely... this is a different type of rock from the stuff surrounding it. It's chock full of mana, I can tell that much. In fact, it's likely to be a big part of why Crinis can't see beyond this point. The enchantments they've used may even be plugged into this material itself.

Behind me, my three friends are desperately trying to stave off a ravenous horde of termites and are bound to succumb if I take too long. The sound of skittering legs and gnashing mandibles is almost deafening in the narrow confines of the tunnel. I have to work fast!

Without a second thought, I pump earth mana into my mandibles, vastly increasing their cutting power, lock my jaws into place, and let it rip.

CRUNCH!

Oof! I... I did it! A little bit! My mandibles *have* managed to rip two long grooves out of the mysterious stuff, but I haven't been able to rip through it like I would have liked. I could get through it like this, but I don't have the time to waste. I have to roll out the big guns!

VOID CHOMP COMBO!

I brace myself and unleash my most potent bite eight times in rapid succession, draining my stamina to almost nothing. In fact, by the time the last bite slams shut, my vision nearly blanks out for a long moment. Thankfully I have a half million ants close by and in seconds I can feel my strength returning.

[Master, are you all right?]

[I'm fine, just a little winded,] I tell her. [I've cleared the way, let's go!]

I jump through the opening I created and feel my pets following along close behind. What I see spread out before me is a scene from a horror movie.

We have indeed breached the inner sanctum of the termites, and boy oh boy, have they been busy. The chamber itself is large, over a hundred metres across and completely lined with that strange stone. Opposite from us I can see a weird sort of observation chamber shielded behind a shimmering pane of glass. It's currently empty, but I can easily imagine that this is where the ka'armodo conducted their experiments and modifications on the queens.

And queens is the right word.

Below us are six, SIX, heaving, pulsating, white blobs of insane egg production. The queens are massive, their abdomens swollen to over twenty metres in length. A constant stream of termites rush into the chamber, delivering ton after ton of precious Biomass farmed in the caverns below to the royal majesties who are spamming out eggs at a stupid rate.

How can I know that? I can see it!

Behind each of the six queens is a freakin' *queue* of workers waiting to grab the next clutch and let me tell you, those lines are moving *fast*. Forget about one every three seconds, this is more like three per second! Times six!

There must be *millions* of termites packed into this nest! Just how many workers do they have tending to the fungus?!

It has to be a lot to maintain the kind of production I'm seeing here....

The ka'armodo must really have lost their minds. Imagine if this had gotten out of their control, which it most likely would have. This colony of termites would have been a plague on the fourth stratum. With the start the lizards had given them, along with the power they would have gained from annihilating the mother tree, it would have been a nightmare to get rid of them.

[Master!]

[Oh, shoot!]

No time to get distracted. We have entered the very heart of the nest and the termites are *not* happy. Sensing that their precious queens and brood are at risk, they are going absolutely *mental*. Even the much smaller worker termites who swarm all over the chamber are posturing aggressively at us, trying to jump up to our level and bite at my legs.

[Stick to the plan, people! We need to drop down a level. Tiny, I need you to punch a hole in the floor, do you think you can manage it?]

BOOM!

[Nice! Down we go!]

The four of us jump down, Crinis clinging to my carapace and Invidia holding onto Tiny's back. We pass the queens, who chitter menacingly at us, though I'm not particularly threatened since... they literally can't move, and drop down to the level below, which happens to be filled with angry termites.

[Crisis, take care of crowd control!]

[Die, trash!]

[Oookay. Invidia, focus on barricading us in and I'll get to work on the spell.]

Eye ablaze with power, my little demon puts his overwhelming mental powers to the task and begins to create thickened barriers of stone around us even as Crinis slides into the shadows and starts to annihilate the worker termites. Tiny busies himself smacking everything nearby, but I notice that even his unbreakable fist is suffering after blowing a hole in that rock. His bones haven't broken, but the poor guy's fingers have certainly seen better days.

I'd heal him if I could, but I have to focus all of my brains and every drop of mana I have on this next spell.

Things are about to get... volcanic!

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Chapter 1014: Explosivo

We warred for survival. That was our driving motivation for so long that when we eventually reached the point that survival wasn't threatened, we almost didn't know how to act. We had established enough power, enough allies, that the forces who sought to exterminate us were unwilling to pay the cost, and thus secured our ongoing existence.

Some theorise that it is only when one doesn't have to struggle day to day that their true personality can shine through. In that case, this period would reveal who the Colony was, what our priorities were, and who we saw ourselves being in the future.

Even the Eldest, so often the driving force behind our development and direction, stepped into the background. Left to our own devices, the Colony had to search deep within itself to find a new direction, a new channel in which to place its bottomless energy.

- *Excerpt from the private notes of Historiant*

Turns out, it takes a lot of mana to create a volcanic eruption.

[Stay away from the master you trash! Die!]

[GRAAAAAH!]

[Ssssurrender your livesss to me!]

BOOM! BOOM!

And it requires an extreme level of concentration and focus.

[Succumb to fear! Retreat from the shadows!]

[Ahhh. The experience isss mine!]

[HRAAAAAAAAAA!]

[Can you keep it down, dammit! I'm trying to focus!]

[Sorry, Master!]

I take a moment to push away my irritation. It's not exactly reasonable to expect them to be quiet as they protect me from an unending torrent of furious termites.

[It's fine. Do your best up there and I'll try and get this ready as quickly as possible.]

[Okay!]

Invidia and I have created a little bunker for us to huddle in, but it doesn't take long for the larger termite soldiers to start scissoring away at it. Even the workers are capable of nibbling at the stone and tearing it down piece by piece. Since neither I, nor Invidia have the energy to spend on repairing it, we are becoming more exposed as time passes.

I suppose the little demon could divert his attention to whipping up some stone, but personally I'd rather have him on explosion duty.

Gah! This spell is such a freakin' pain in the noggin!

Multiple types of mana flow out of the omni-elemental construct at a constant rate, each seized by my mind constructs and condensed before they are added to the intricate weave that is this spell. Its structure is almost like a spherical cake, one with dozens of wafer thin layers that surround an explosive, condensed lava core.

Not something that I want to be standing next to when it goes off, but I don't know how long it takes to detonate after I finish it.

Exciting!

[Master! There's more of them coming!]

[More? How in the name of all that is ant can there be *more*?!]

[I don't know, but they managed somehow!]

I shift to look and what do you know, she's right. It's horrifying, but also fascinating to see. The termites flood around the tunnel corner like literal water, a densely packed wave that sloshes and froths as individuals are sent tumbling or flying by the sheer weight of mass behind them.

Word must have gotten out to the wider nest that the queens were under threat. Naturally they drop everything, no matter what is happening, to come and defend the queen. In fact, the ka'armodo might have found their mental control breaking if they tried to deny the termites their most basic instinct.

I wager there's a few lizards with mighty headaches out there right about now.

[There's nothing I can do about it!] I tell them. [Unleash everything you've got. I need more time!]

[I-I've got it, Master.]

[*I hasssss it! Givess it to me!*]

Invidia bursts out, his eye crackling with power as he unleashes his devastating eye beam. In fact, he appears to have supercharged it this time, the green light shredding through everything it touches. It looks like it's shredding anything that even gets close to it! Holy moly you little eyeball, you've been holding back on me!

Except now his eye is bleeding, thick ichor dripping onto the tunnel floor beneath his hovering form. That is less cool.

[Don't overdo it, Invidia,] I tell him. [We're okay.]

[*We willssss be,*] he replies with supreme confidence.

As much as I want to worry about him, I can't. Instead, I turn and pour all of my attention into the spell, weaving threads with all the delicacy and speed I can muster. Within, the omni-elemental construct spins and whirls as raw mana is pumped in one end and converted into the elements I need.

Just managing the damn thing is taking me five mind-constructs!

Come on mana, just... frickin... work!

[BWAHA!] I cry out in triumph. [I've got it!]

[Is the spell complete?] Crinis asks.

[Heck yeah! Check it out!]

[Master... shouldn't we run?]

[Oh, right.]

When it's finished, the spell flashes into existence, a hovering sphere that has almost every drop of mana I had within me contained inside. Coated in a jagged, rocky exterior, the spell begins to radiate immense heat just a few seconds after I complete it. As impressive as it is, we need to get the heck out of here.

[Which way isn't covered in termites?]

[None of them!]

Well nards.

[Then let's make a new one! This way!]

My brains creak as I draw on them again, grabbing hold of ambient mana and yanking it into my drained core. From there I pump it into the omni construct and grab hold of the earth mana that comes out the other side, which I flood into my mandibles.

[We're digging our way out!]

I throw myself at the wall and start ripping into it even as I use the mana I've created to break up and soften it. A blizzard of stone chips and loose soil is funnelled behind me as I pump my jaws, repeatedly using the combo skills.

The second I clear enough space, the other three pile in behind me, Tiny fending off the ravenous horde with his feet as they rush in behind him. Even now I can feel the heat building behind me, starting to conduct through the stone around us. It must be blazing hot down there next to the thing.

Keep on digging, Anthony! Dig like your life depends on it!

The next few seconds are spent desperately scabbling. Even Crinis uses her tentacles to tear and sweep at the earth as we try and gain even just a few more metres of space.

Then there comes a deep rumbling, followed by a shattering CRACK that resounds throughout the mountain.

Then comes the lava.

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Chapter 1015: Eruption

Dig, dig, dig, dig, DIG, DIG, DIG!

The mountain *shakes* beneath us as a catastrophic BOOM rips through the nest and the temperature skyrockets again. The tunnel opening behind us glows brightly before the first hint of lava is seen.

[Invidia! Block it off, quick!]

Another BOOM shakes the stone around us as Invidia quickly weaves stone to protect us. Experience notifications are starting to pour in, but I don't have the time to pay them any attention. Instead, my focus is on pumping my jaws as quickly as possible.

Have. To. Dig!

My earth mana infused mandibles rip through the dirt and stone at incredible speed, but we have a long way to go before we reach safety. Just how powerful is this spell going to be? I knew it would pack a punch simply based on the amount of mana and complexity required, and I compressed all the energy I poured into it for good measure. Even so, this literal mountain-shaking response is more than I expected.

In fact, I so didn't expect it that I'm once again at risk of getting roasted by my own spell. I really need to work on this issue, I've come closer to ending my second life than my opponents have.

Enough thinking! More digging!

My face is on fire, even with the refreshing energy of the Colony rushing through my body. The combo biting doesn't stop, and Crinis does her best to sweep away the loose material and funnel it behind us.

[The sssstonesss won't holdsss!]

I shift my head slightly and I can see the "plug" that Invidia has been working on is starting to crack, the seams glowing bright as the rock heats up. Poor Tiny still has a foot on it, and he yanks it off as his skin starts to sizzle.

Ah, nards. This is going to get hairy.

[I'll help with the rock, keep pushing!]

I divert some of my minds to helping channel earth mana, hardening the layer of rock being pushed up behind us by the lava pressure. The only thing that gets us out of here is if we break through!

Chompchompchompchompchomp!

Come on!

My next bite slams through the rock and I feel the resistance break as I blow through into a tunnel.

[Get through! Gogogogogogo!] I roar at my allies.

I dive through the opening to clear the way and am immediately dived on by a dozen termites who start gnawing on my antennae and pulling at my legs.

I don't have time for you morons!

VOID CHOMP!

It feels like the muscles in my face are on the verge of snapping, but I unleash my potent bite and evaporate the offending cockroaches, only to find a hundred more in their place.

Because *of* course there are.

Their nest might be collapsing around them, but are they going to let the opportunity to gnaw on me pass them by? Of course not!

I wonder if the ka'armodo are still in control of them. Actually... it's possible the lizards have just abandoned ship at this point. Alternatively, they may be directing the termites to munch on me in an attempt to secure vengeance.

Either way, they aren't going to get what they want.

[Hustle! We need to get uphill.]

It's easy to tell which direction slopes upwards and we scramble to get to higher ground, pummeling any insect that gets in our way. Not a moment too soon, because only a few seconds after we clear our emergency tunnel, a burst of lava jets out of it, roasting all in the area.

Our little tunnel is now acting as a lava hose, more and more of the stuff beginning to burst out each passing second, the flow increasing as time goes by.

Just how much lava is coming out of that damn spell?!

RUMBLE.

At that moment, an ominous shake rattles through the mountain, sending the fine hairs on my antennae trembling. What the heck was that?

[Crisis... the fungus gardens were beneath us when we cast that spell... right?]

[I think so, Master.]

[And that fungus is... highly flammable... right?]

[Yyyes... yes it is.]

[Plops.]

RUMBLE.

[MOVE IT, PEOPLE! SHE'S GONNA BLOW!]

Ignoring the termites who try to cling to us and pull us down, we push, shove and dash our way further up the tunnel. I frantically check my tunnel map, trying to get a sense of the fastest way to the surface.

[Here! Straight up!]

I rocket up the side of the tunnel and onto the roof before I slam my face into the ceiling and start chewing a new tunnel. The ground below us is steadily being covered in lava and the slower-moving termites are already aflame. Things are getting toasty, real quick.

[Get up here, Tiny!] I yell at the ape as I burrow into the new tunnel.

Face filled with concentration, the big ape leaps up and digs his thick fingers into the stone, Invidia clinging to his back as he hauls himself up behind me.

A blizzard of stone chips and dirt fills the space around me as I turn myself into a tunnel-digging threshing machine. If this entire mountain is about to go up in smoke, I don't want to be in it!

After a minute, though I swear I aged a hundred years in those sixty seconds, we crash through the last layer of stone. I immediately roll out of the way to see the mountain towering over me, and that thing is *smoking*.

I don't mean it's an attractive mountain, though I mean, I'm sure it's fine as mountains go. No, I mean it is *literally* smoking.

A second later, Crinis, Tiny and Invidia burst out of the tunnel and into the clear.

Then fire.

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Chapter 1016: Exploding Mountain, Burning Heart

The mages have achieved a strange dichotomy that can largely be attributed to the identities of the Council members who came to lead them. The two not only differ in the magics that they choose to employ, but also the tactics. Where Propellant favours direct, forceful action, and the application of excessive force to achieve a goal, Coolant is more subtle and desires efficiency of resources, though it may take her longer to complete her objective.

At first, this didn't matter so much as the two cooperated well, and indeed, they still do. But as the caste grew larger, the two of them were no longer able to oversee all the mage ant activities, having to pass certain responsibilities on to their subordinates.

At first, this also didn't matter; all of the members of the Colony are family, after all, and despite their differences, they will work together without complaint.

However, due to this expansion of the caste, and the implementation of a larger authoritative structure, the two schools of thought held by the council members became entrenched in a way that neither of them intended.

The school of fire, and the school of water.

Each individual ant, upon evolving into the caste, had to take it upon themselves to choose their place. Once they did, they would begin their training, engrossing themselves in the mindset, mana types and favoured tactics of their founding mentor.

Although some have sought to exploit this divide within the Mage caste, they have been unsuccessful. Differences of opinion within the Colony are common, betrayal is unheard of.

There is also a third school of mages, though much smaller than the others. Those who follow the path of the Eldest. Of that chaotic group, I will not speak.

- From the notes of Historiant

"What the hell are they *doing* down there?" Propellant yelled.

"I don't know," Coolant replied, a faint trace of irritation marking her scent. "Perhaps you should focus on the battle that we are currently engaged in."

"Of course. Right. Yes. The battle."

Propellant did her best, she really did, but as she pulled forth the fire mana to give it shape and purpose, she couldn't help but flick her senses down beneath her six legs. It was like a hook caught in her brain, and no matter how hard she tried to look away, it always managed to drag her focus back.

Somewhere down there, the Eldest had done something. And whatever they'd done, it was quite literally *boiling* with *incredibly* dense fire mana. This was orders of magnitude more potent than any spell she'd ever seen before, and she was the premier fire mage in the entire Colony. Nobody had fire mana manipulation as high as she did!

Come on, Propellant. Light some stuff on fire. Focus!

She admonished herself and flung a few balls of fire out into the massed wall of termites in front of her. Even the delightful explosions that sent their hated foes flying through the air weren't enough to distract her fully. Her mind was constantly pulled back downward.

It.

Just.

Kept.

Growing.

"How is this possible?" she wondered.

"I don't know, but is it relevant to us?" Coolant replied. "We are here to support the front lines and prevent them from being overrun. Are you going to help or not?"

"I am! Of course I am!"

She hastily wove and threw out more fireballs.

"But I still can't believe what is going on down there. Aren't we the highest level mages in the Colony? Aren't we supposed to have pushed the knowledge of basic spellforms further than anyone else? The Eldest is levelling up all sorts of crazy stuff, we just focus on magic. How do we not know what is going on down there?"

"I don't know," Coolant said coolly, "but being surprised by the Eldest is a pointless endeavour. When they do the unexpected so regularly, it becomes expected."

"Expected?" Propellant spluttered before pointing with one leg. "Coolant, the *mountain* is on fire!"

And it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Coolant watched her sister become wholly entranced with the scene in front of her and rolled her antennae. With her forceful mind, she began to weave her spells even more dexterously, picking up the slack of her dumbfounded partner.

What had begun with billowing smoke rising from the various openings on the mountain had now become titanic gouts of fire rising dozens of metres into the air. Out of the holes poured termites, fleeing the burning hell their nest had become before it was too late.

Propellant watched with glistening eyes as the flames roared higher, the smoke rising thicker and thicker.

Pockets of pure fire covered the mountain. The crackle and roar of it was such that she could hear it clearly from where she stood, her antennae tingling with the pleasing sting of the smoke.

Then came the lava.

At first, it was a trickle. Liquid fire dripped out of the openings, setting all it touched aflame. The lava followed the cuts and ravines, snaking down the mountainside in dozens of places, the flow thickening with each passing second.

More fire. More smoke. What a glorious spectacle.

And then the mountain shook. Then again.

Propellant was so spellbound that she nearly forgot to grip the ground despite the shaking. So it was that when the mountain exploded, she was nearly knocked flat onto her back.

Thankfully, she was able to hold on and watch the entire spectacle from start to finish.

With a colossal roar, the mountain *split* open, an impossible force surging upward from within. Lava and rock catapulted hundreds of metres into the air, enormous chunks of stone that weighed dozens of tons just thrown up like a human child's toy.

The lava jetted up in a constant stream, the red glow illuminating everything it touched. The fire mana was so thick it rolled off the mountain in waves, buffeting against the stunned mage's senses.

She stumbled, no longer able to send the strength needed to hold herself up into her legs. She fell to the ground, still staring up at the magnificent spectacle in front of her.

"It's just... so perfect," she whispered.

Coolant looked down at her sister for a second, taking in the adoration and feverish joy that had seized the fire mage.

"This won't end well," she remarked, before turning back to her work.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1017: Slither

Rassan'tep looked back at the still burning mountain, his eyes gleaming with interest. The warmth he could feel, even from this distance, was pleasant on his scales, and he didn't mind indulging himself in a little basking every now and again.

[Master, we should leave,] Ammon'sil urged him. [This place is not secure.]

The Old One flicked his tongue to taste the air. Smoke and ashes came through powerfully, expected, given the circumstances, but underneath was that vibrant ruffle of energy and life so common in the fourth stratum.

The Colony would rebuild that mountain, he was sure. It likely wouldn't even take long. With tens of thousands of mages to create and shape the rock, they'd be able to make it bigger and better than it had been before in a matter of weeks.

In attempting to push the ants down, the ka'armodo had only made them stronger.

He huffed in displeasure and the Set'sulah pulled back from him, concerned they had drawn his ire.

Hubris had been the downfall of many among the old races, and so it continued to be. The assumption that they were the highest, greatest and strongest on Pangera, simply by virtue of their birth, simply because they were first, was deeply flawed.

The place at the top was not a birthright, but a constant struggle.

The ants understood. They fought and strove every minute of every day to carve out a place for themselves. If the ka'armodo had displayed a fraction of their drive over the past two thousand years, his people would be the undisputed rulers of this world.

[Master,] Ammon'sil urged him again, [we must away. I am not confident we can keep you safe if we remain.]

The great lizard turned an eye toward his favoured servant.

[Peace, Ammon. A few minutes longer. The winds blow quickly here, sands are shifting beneath our claws. I wish to observe this change with my own eyes.]

[Is it worth risking your life? They will kill you if they find you.]

Rassan'tep closed his eyes.

[It is.]

[As you wish.]

He was dimly aware of Ammon'sil directing the others to form a perimeter, to watch with eyes and sense with minds for any danger, but he paid them no mind.

Instead, he cast his focus out toward the mountain once more. Not long ago, it had been teeming with their enslaved termite colony. A vast operation that had been guided and controlled by just a few of his people. Millions of individuals that created an ecosystem of their own, farming, gathering, building and making way for the next generation.

All of it gone in one glorious eruption.

He pondered on what this might mean for the potential Ancient, the ant, Anthony. Surely, he was the one who had cast the spell that destroyed the nest. A haul of experience like that may push the monster all the way to tier seven if it was close enough. If so, he might *really* see something interesting in the coming days.

A slight twitch in his senses alerted him to something approaching. He focused, using his prodigious Skills and experience to peer through the glamour they had shaped around themselves. One look inside, and he huffed once more, irritated.

[Mount,] he told his servants. [We will soon be gone.]

Relief radiated through the bond, and perhaps, under normal circumstances, the Old One would have chastised his Set'sulah for allowing their emotions to echo so powerfully, but he restrained himself. He knew they were relieved for his sake, not their own. In short order, they had climbed onto his back, comfortably holding the golden tassels woven into his covering to help them balance.

A few moments later, one of his own arrived on the hill he stood atop.

[Oolan'tep,] he greeted her, [I am pleased to see you were able to survive the calamity.]

Not unscathed, by the looks of it. The ka'armodo looked more than a little singed. In several places, her scales had been burned black. She must have lost one or more Set'sulah whilst escaping the mountain. A terrible blow for any of the bonded.

He hooded his eyes and dipped his head.

[I grieve for your loss,] he stated formally.

The younger ka'armodo's eyes locked onto his, fury burning openly in her gaze.

[You,] she growled.

Rassan'tep observed her with surprise. She was clearly emotional, the repeated catastrophes of the day had been more than she could bear. Even so, he expected her to retain her dignity. She was baring her teeth at him!

He looked down on her from the height his fully grown physique allowed him, his upper arms folded across his torc.

If his status and posture that declared him her elder slowed her at all, she did not show any sign of it.

[This is your fault,] she fumed, [everything was going well before you came. The plan was proceeding according to projections.]

The temerity of the declaration was almost enough to stun him.

[Everything proceeded according to your plan until the *ants* arrived,] he said. [I came here explicitly to warn you of them, which I did. I can hardly be faulted if the design you and your team created was not up to the task.]

Oolan'tep hissed at him.

Rassan'tep felt the rage of his Set'sulah rise to boiling point at the blatant show of disrespect.

Before their emotions could boil over, he took one long stride forward and struck his junior across the face with his upper claw.

As one, her remaining servants cried out and stood, ready to launch themselves at him in defence of their mistress.

[**DOWN**,] the Old One bellowed in their minds.

In the face of his fury, Oolan'tep and her servants bowed their heads, shame finally showing in their posture.

[How *dare* you act in this way? You bring shame upon yourself, and upon *me*, for having to strike you before my honoured servants. If you had not suffered such loss today, then I would challenge you to the Ank-Kai and wash this stain from my scales with your blood.]

He took a deep breath to calm himself. To lose his temper in such a fashion... such disgrace.

[This entire project was a folly from the start, and it has cost our people dearly. We lose support amongst the old races. The Legion has turned its back on us. And for what? We strengthen our enemies and bind their alliances tighter together.]

[What will happen to me?] Oolan'tep asked piteously.

Her anger had drained from her with that strike, leaving her with nothing but shame and grief. It overwhelmed her now, threatening to pull her down into despair.

[You will be disowned,] he told her bluntly. [They will say you started this mad project of your own volition and blame you for everything that happened. Your kin will turn their tails against you, even your clutch-mates will deny you sun and warmth.]

His words rained down like hammer blows on the young mage. How could this have happened?

[This cannot be...]

Rassan'tep gazed down on her, his eyes calculating. Oolan'tep was a promising mage, skilled with core manipulation and fiercely attached to the monsters she created.

He paused for a moment to ensure he was thinking clearly.

[You need allies to shield you from the fallout and a place in which you can develop and display your Skills,] he told her softly. [Tell me, what do you know of the Truth?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1018: Beneath the Burning Sky

The war is over. Well, this war, anyway. Man, the Colony really gets into too many wars. Can't an ant take a break?

And no, it's not my fault! Most of the time!

This conflict with the termites wasn't started by me at least, and the skirmishes with the ka'armodo are also not my (direct) responsibility. My conscience is clear!

I lie on the still smouldering ground for a while, keeping a watchful eye on the lava flow to make sure that I don't get baked while I flop. The mountain is still a smouldering wreck, belching smoke and fire into the normally pristine skies of the fourth stratum. The voice of Gandalf still rings inside my mind, letting me know there are still termites inside the nest somewhere getting roasted.

I don't even want to begin wading through the barrage of System notifications I received. I must have killed hundreds of thousands of termites with that spell, and maybe a few ka'armodo. The bulk of them

would provide me with almost no experience, being a much lower tier than me, but hey, one experience apiece from a million monsters is still a million XP!

I'm almost nervous to check my level. Was that enough to push me over the top and get me to one-sixty?

"You look comfortable, Eldest," Coolant observes from nearby.

"Eldest, you HAVE to teach me that spell. That was the most glorious thing I've ever seen in my life!" Propellant gushes.

I suppose a volcanic eruption would be rather exciting for a fire magic specialist. Judging by the stars sparkling in each of the thousands of lenses that make up her eyes, Propellant isn't going to leave it alone until I tell her.

"I'll try," I say, "but the spell requires combining a number of mana types, compressing the heck out of them, and it isn't cheap, cost wise. Without all of the relevant skills, you might not be able to use it until you hit tier six."

After all, unlike a specialist like Propellant, I happen to be able to use whatever elements I like.

"Noooooo!" Propellant howls. "I have to evolve! I have to evolve NOW! Coolant, let me kill you."

"Excuse me?"

"I need experience! You wouldn't deny your closest sister her dreams would you?"

THWACK!

"Calm yourself a little," I scold the fiery mage, "before I tell your sister to coat you in ice. Yeesh. Be a little patient and you'll make it to tier six soon enough."

Coolant eyes her sister, who is still rolling on the ground rubbing at her wounded head, for a moment before she turns her attention back to me.

"Speaking of evolving, Eldest. Have you...?" she trails off.

I shake my head.

"I haven't checked yet. I kind of wanted to enjoy the sensation of not being exploded for a bit. Me and the crew were a little too close to getting flambéed. I'm pretty sure Tiny's feet are medium rare at this point."

"Well, you should probably check anyway," a new scent breaks into the conversation and I roll a little to see Sloan arriving.

The general looks tired, but triumphant. The battle is won, another great victory for the Colony, but her work is still far from over.

"If you've reached the threshold to evolve to the next tier, then that will change what the Colony will do over the next several days, perhaps even weeks."

I throw her a confused look.

“What do you mean? I’d just be evolving right? I’ve maxed out my mutations, you don’t even have to feed me. Let me rustle up a heap of cores from the nest and I’ll be good to go.”

There’s an awkward silence around as the council members all shuffle back and forth. In the end, it’s Coolant who breaks the tension.

“Eldest...” she starts, “not having you available to protect us is a bigger issue than you seem to realise.”

“The Colony isn’t so weak,” I scoff, “what are you so worried about? It’s getting to the point where you don’t even need me around anymore, and I’m happy about it. I’ve got other important work to do besides fighting all the time.”

Like grub tickling.

“We have to be careful,” Propellant tries to pitch in. “You’re an important part of the Colony, and we need to know in advance if you aren’t going to be available.”

What on Pangera are they talking about? I give all three of them the stink eye as I try to work out what is going on here. However, I’m saved from over-taxing my brain by the appearance of Protectant, the nigh invisible guardian appearing seemingly from thin air.

“They are attempting to lure you into a secure location and have an extensive protection detail placed around you at the time of evolution,” she says, blunt and to the point. “They fear you’ll reject them if they make a straight up request.”

Coolant, Propellant and Sloan all slap themselves in the head with an antenna.

“Why would you say that?” Sloan complains. “Now the Eldest will never agree.”

I stare at her.

“You want to protect me while I evolve? Did you think I was going to wander over to a ka’armodo fortress and evolve on their doorstep or something? Just how dumb do you think I am?!”

A pause.

“You weren’t?” the general asks.

“No! Of course not. I was going to evolve under the Mother Tree or something. If I could get back to the third stratum without feeling like my guts were getting ripped out, I’d probably do it there, but I can’t.”

“That’s part of the issue,” my bodyguard pipes up. “They don’t fully trust the bruan’chii, or the tree. It isn’t even a question of if they will attack you while you are vulnerable, the Colony isn’t sure if they can defend you adequately.”

“What do you mean? Who’s going to come and attack me while I’m evolving? I think you are all getting paranoid. Wait, what do you mean the Colony?”

I shift my focus and see there are thousands of ants nearby, all dead still as they focus on our discussion.

“Ooooookay. Don’t we all have work to do?”

“They want to know if they need to build a fortress in the next few days,” Cobalt breaks in this time, wearily joining our small circle. “If it has to be done, we need to make sure it gets done right.”

“A fortress?!” I yell. “Why in the name of the shining strands of the bounteous beard would I need a fortress?! You’ve all gone gaga!”

It’s Protectant who breaks it to me.

“The Colony will not risk anything happening to you while you are at your most vulnerable. Here, in the fourth layer, we are weak, with little knowledge of the threats and with no fully fortified position. Our enemies could take advantage and attack if they were to learn you were comatose.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” I protest, but I feel like I’m losing this argument.

“You won’t be allowed to risk yourself, Eldest,” my guard tells me. “Once you’re awake, you’re in charge and can do what you want, but while you’re asleep, your safety is entrusted to us and we won’t let you be hurt.”

All of my siblings around me present a unified front, and I find myself casting about to try and find a way out of the spotlight. I really don’t want all this fuss! I just want to evolve in peace. Maybe I don’t even have to evolve! I might not even have the levels... all this worry for nothing!

“Look, there’s no need to worry anyway. How could the termites provide enough experience for... erm... ah, nuts.”

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1019: I Hate Being in the Spotlight

I really hate this.

And when I say that, don’t think that I’m speaking lightly or any such thing. This isn’t one of those times when someone says they hate it when they put their socks on inside out, or they hate it when their food is a little cold.

I mean I *hate* this.

Currently, I sit, a sullen lump of sparkling carapace, in the centre of a vast formation of ants. There are scouts roaming and looking for threats. There are healers monitoring my condition. There are squads of soldiers and generals patrolling around the clock. There are teams of mages tunnelling beneath me and fortifying the stone.

Even the humans are in on it! I can see Beyn from where I sit, leading the gathered faithful in some sort of ceremony whilst his followers weep and point at me. Some even fall to their knees, raising their hands to the sky as if overcome with emotion.

I’m just evolving! This is what monsters are supposed to do, right?! It happens all the damn time... nothing special is going on over here.

[Do I really have to sit here and wait?] I complain for the hundredth time.

[Yes, Master,] Crinis says happily. [You aren’t allowed to move until the fortress is complete.]

I give her the evil eye, which she brushes off easily. The little murder-ball has been way too pleased by this turn of events. Having me under this absurd lock-down protocol seems to have finally relieved her of a deep-seated source of stress.

Namely, me.

She's busy humming to herself and weaving her tentacles into fantastic shapes in order to practise her control, pleased as punch that, for once, I can't get myself into trouble.

[What about you, Tiny?] I cast about for an ally. [You must be bored out of your brain, right? Want to break out and leave?]

My first ally on Pangera opens one eye lazily. Then he yawns.

[Sleepy,] he says, before he closes his eyes and rolls over.

[Traitor,] I grumble.

Invidia is my only hope now. The green eye blazes as he stares down at me from his position on top of Tiny.

[Give your levelssss to meeeee,] he hisses.

Not getting any sympathy there.

If it weren't for the pressing need to maintain my dignity, I'd roll onto my back and kick my legs in frustration.

I want out of here! Let me go! Let me goooooo!

"Here's the next batch of cores." Protectant appears and dumps another pile on the ground in front of me.

The leader of my imposed bodyguards has never looked so smug as she does in that moment. It's enough to make my blood boil.

"Do you really have to inspect the cores before you bring them to me?" I whine. "What the heck are cores going to do to me? They're *cores*."

It's not just the spherical gems that are carefully examined before being brought within the Carapace Curtain. Everything is obsessively checked, even the Biomass. It's insane, and what makes me even more exasperated is that I appear to be the only one who realises it.

"During this time, we can't be too careful," Protectant smugly says, her smug face smuggling up the air with thick clouds of smug.

"You love this, don't you?" I collapse, filled with bitterness.

"I do," she readily admits. "I wanted to have you under this sort of protection from day one."

"That would have been unwise," Coolant says as she approaches. "The Eldest will only tolerate this for a short time, and only because they believe we are at least partially correct to act as we are."

“For the record, I believe no such thing,” I declare wearily. “This is me humouring you to the best of my ability.”

I can't really do anything else now, can I? I know the Will of the Colony as it flows into me as clearly as I know my own thoughts. They are determined, *obsessed* even, with ensuring that I evolve perfectly and safely. It's such an overwhelming outpouring of support and love that I can't exactly spit in their faces and say no. Right now, there are hundreds of thousands of ants rummaging through the wreckage of the termite mountain, securing and rebuilding it into a secure location for my evolution.

“We appreciate it,” Coolant assures me. “Arrangements are being made as quickly as possible. Granin and his team have been notified and are on their way down. We are doing everything we can to secure the most powerful cores we can find to push your energy as far as it will go. Construction is occurring around the clock, and the bruan'chii have agreed to lend their support in defending us. It won't be long now.”

“In the meantime, I just sit here, smush cores together and eat?”

“Yes.”

“... Fine.”

It's not exactly a bad life, but having all of this focus, attention and effort being put on me makes me feel like I'm covered in crawlies. It almost feels like I'm mutating!

I'm tempted to pull up the evolution options now, just to have a sticky-beak, but I know that's a bad idea. All the advice I've ever had suggests that it's far better to wait until everything is set before exposing oneself to temptation. There's no do-overs when it comes to evolution.

“How are things in the mountain going? Any luck flushing out the last of the termites?” I ask, desperate to keep the conversation going while I have someone here to talk to.

“We are still finding pockets of the enemy in the depths,” Coolant replies, an uncharacteristically displeased tilt to her antennae.

“Something wrong?”

The mage ponders for a moment before replying.

“I struggle to believe that the ka'armodo were fully cognizant of what their creations were doing,” she replies. “They tunnelled so deep, and expanded their gardens so far, that we believe they may have begun to brush against the edges of the fifth stratum.”

I boggle at her words.

“What?! That's insane!”

“I agree. The tunnel complex they created beneath the nest is vast. Despite the numbers we have available, it will take weeks to thoroughly explore it all. By that time, I believe it highly likely that one or perhaps several groups of termites will escape.”

That... isn't good.

If monstrous termites are similar enough to regular termites, that means any female worker can become a queen. They may not even need to evolve to start the process! Despite crushing this colony, we may have spawned another three or four smaller ones that will have to be put down later on. A distraction that we can't afford.

"That's going to be a pain in the abdomen," I groan. I flick my antennae at the thousands of ants currently posted to guard me. "Don't you think they have more important things to do then?"

"No," Coolant says, unruffled. "Your successful evolution is the most important priority for the Colony. It will be months before rogue termite nests have grown enough to be any sort of threat."

Dammit. Well, I tried.

"Have we started to come across more interesting fourth stratum monsters at least? I really wanted to see something cool down here, and all I've had to fight so far are termites, more termites, and yet more termites."

Coolant hesitates.

"We did... find something. We weren't sure if we should show it to you or not."

How intriguing....

"And why is that? I'm bored out of my mind over here, I welcome any and all distractions."

I wave my antennae magnanimously.

"Whatever it is, bring it over. I'm keen to take a look."

Coolant twitches a little before she nods in assent.

"Very well. I will have your guards bring it to you. I will come see you... tomorrow, Eldest, I have an important issue to attend to."

And with that, the mage turns and scuttles away with unusual haste. That's curious in and of itself, but I put it out of my mind as I await the arrival of a new morsel.

I wonder what sort of creature they've managed to find? Some sort of jade dragon creature? Or a super cool-looking elemental entity? That's the sort of thing I was expecting to see when I got down here. The tree obviously predates most of the things that spawn on her mountain and the termites took care of everything on this one. Now that the lesser bugs are gone, we can finally start to see something interesting.

Ten minutes later, Protectant arrives with the new creature in her mandibles. It's mostly intact, which is nice, so I can get a good look at it. Whatever it is, it's long and sinuous, and it glitters in the light! Shiny!

Is this actually a jade dragon or something?

When Protectant finally puts it down, I eagerly rush forward to examine it.

Then I freeze.

It's long. And sinuous. It glitters brightly, that is also true. There are a few other aspects that I see as well, things that I recognise. The pinching claws, for one. The sting at the end of the tail is also familiar.

Are you KIDDING me, Gandalf?

This is a diamond centipede!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1020: Roll like a Boulder

[You look happy,] Granin rumbles over our link.

[Har, har. You're a real comedian, you know that? In fact, why don't you take your show on the road?]

[Don't mind him,] Corun grins, [he's just excited.]

[It's not often you get to see a Mythic monster born,] Torrina adds.

I'm currently splayed out on the ground, my six legs stretched flat in all directions as I lay on my underside. The boredom has finally defeated me, and now I adopt the posture of surrender, unmoving and unthinking.

You can do an awful lot of not-thinking with this many brains, let me tell you. It's like having static in stereo.

[There's a lot of guards here...] Corun notes as he casts his gaze across the ranks of ants positioned around me. [Is there some kind of danger?]

[Not as such,] Wills, the guide for the trio, chips in. [The Eldest tried to break out yesterday, so we had to reinforce the garrison, significantly.]

I'll get those damn centipedes if it's the last thing I do.

[Well, we're here now, so you won't have to wait much longer,] Granin sighs. [Once you've evolved, you'll be free to move around again, from what I understand.]

[Oh, will I?] I say. [What about the Call, huh? Won't the Ancients have an even bigger hook in my guts once I evolve? Seems like the opposite of being free to move around, if you ask me.]

Granin spreads his hands.

[Maybe yes, maybe no. It all depends on how strong they think your potential will be. It's not ideal, I know, but at least you can take it as a sign that your evolutions are strong.]

[I don't care. Am I clear on this, Granin? I. Don't. Care. Whatever your precious Ancients want, I couldn't give a single pip of Biomass. If it gets in the way of me protecting my family, I will go down there and kick them right in the teeth.]

Man, I'm grumpy. These past few days have piled insult on top of injury. Not only have I been locked here under constant supervision while hundreds of thousands of my own siblings wait on me hand and foot, building an entire *fortress* just so I can evolve in it, the idiot Dungeon even went and made a diamond centipede!

When I, quite reasonably, insisted that I be released, that I might wage a holy war to purge the many-legged devils from existence, to scour them from the Dungeon until not a claw remained, I was prevented from doing so! Outrageous! Never mind the indignity of having ants pile onto me until I couldn't move; even Crinis, Tiny and Invidia pinned me down! My own closest friends!

The sting of betrayal cuts deeper than any centipede claw.

[You're in a mood,] Granin bluntly observes before he sits down in front of me, one hand resting on the tip of my mandibles. [Let's get started. The sooner we finish our discussion, the quicker you get evolving. I know you don't care about the Ancients and any of that nonsense, that's fine. You aren't an experimental subject to me, Anthony, you're a friend. That's why I came down here and risked mana poisoning.]

That's actually touching.

[W-wait a second. Mana poisoning?]

The big rock-covered golgari rolls his eyes.

[I haven't spent much time on the fourth in decades. Torrina and Corun have never even been here. We're acclimated to the third now, but it'll take a week of careful exposure before we can move around down here.]

[So how long until you get sick?]

[We're already feeling sick, idiot. Now are you going to sulk or are you going to consult with us?]

[Sorry! Consult!]

[That's better. Let's get to it then.]

I didn't realise they risked that much to come here and help me. It warms my little ant heart to know they care that much. It also scares me, I don't want them to suffer because of me. I do my best to shake off the malaise and focus. This is important stuff and we don't have that much time.

[Well, talk to me about the whole "Mythic" thing you mentioned. What's all that about?]

[That's about the strength of your core. You have a rare core right now, but after you push your core all the way, it should transition to a Mythic one.]

[Does that mean I get a Mythic evolution?]

[That's right. And we have a theory...]

Corun steps forward, although "bounces" might be a better term. He's as excited as a puppy.

[Yes. We think that ants are compensated for their weak starts with better and better evolutions as you proceed up the tree. This is due to the System presuming that almost none of you will ever reach that high.]

[Rrrright,] I say, [didn't we kind of know this already?]

[We have more evidence now. Back when you evolved to tier six, you were literally the only one to progress from worker all the way to six. We don't mean in your colony either, we mean on record, at all.]

[Now, there are more of you and the results are *remarkable*.] Even Torrina has an uncharacteristic gleam of enthusiasm in her eyes. [The Immortals and their Phoenix Fire Organ are a great example.]

Heh. A hilarious example.

[So you're saying... what? I can expect something good?]

[What we're saying,] Granin smiles, actually *smiles*, [is that you can expect something rock solid.]

[... I'm going to assume that's high praise coming from a people who cover themselves in rocks.]

[Damn right it is. I actually think we might need to revisit plans on your resets based on our findings.]

[What? Why?]

[Because we were hoping to get some juicy fourth or fifth stratum options for your carapace, inner plating and mandibles, but now I believe you might be given something better.]

[You mean...]

[Sixth.]

Oooooooooooooo- wait.

I have absolutely no knowledge of the sixth stratum.

[Is... is that good? I don't know anything about what it's like down there.]

[That's not surprising,] he grunts, [the fifth is a poisonous, toxic wasteland that is inimical to life. Very few are able to get through and explore what's below, so knowledge is limited.]

[What about portals?] I protest. [Surely only some need to get through and build a portal for others. It should be easy to travel through it.]

[The mana in the fifth is... special,] Corun fills me in. [Even using a portal to travel through it is... risky. And prohibitively expensive. I've never met anyone who's been down there.]

[Don't look at me,] Granin raises his hands before I can ask him, [you might just have to find out for yourself. All you need to know for now is that upgrades from that level are good. If you get to choose them, you should.]

He turns and looks over his shoulder at his two triad mates.

[Get started on the core,] he tells them, [I'll go over the rest with him.]

They nod and move away a short distance before they sit and begin to sift through the hundreds of cores the Colony has delivered, as well as taking out a few rare cores of their own.

[They're going to start making a Mythic core for you to absorb,] Granin tells me. [Going to take a while, even those we brought that fat demon's core to use as a base. Mythics make rare cores look like pebbles.]

Oh boy... that's gonna sting.