

## Chrysalis 1041

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#### Chapter 1041: Stadiant

*Hello my dear readers! I hope you are all well, snug, warm, and ready for another rendition of my adventures amongst the Colony. Within the second stratum, the ants certainly had built a kingdom for themselves. The wonders of Anthome seemed endless, and with Emilia as my ever patient guide, we wandered the many tunnels and chambers, visiting historical sites, admiring the most incredibly detailed sculptures, carvings and artwork I think I have ever seen.*

*Nobody would have expected the soul of an artist to live within the body of a monster, certainly not me, but I was quite moved by some of the works I saw, almost all of them depicting the 'Eldest' at some point in their journey.*

*"Many of the most celebrated pieces produced by the Colony were created by Michaelangelant. She was perhaps the first ant to really dedicate herself to artistic pursuits. Most of the carvings in the old nest were done by her and her acolytes," Emilia informed me.*

*"She single-handedly... well I suppose she didn't have any hands now, did she? She was solely responsible for this aspect of the Colony's culture?"*

*The young woman nodded pleasantly.*

*"That's right. At least, as far as we know. At the time this nest was built, there wasn't that much civilian access. By the time more people were allowed inside, the bulk of the work was completed, so no one can truthfully say they saw it being done."*

*I cannot emphasise enough, my precious audience, just how remarkable some of these works are. The attention to detail, the intricately fine work, the patience required to complete such work was simply inhuman! Which I suppose is no surprise, given that the artist was no human!*

*But it wasn't just fine artworks that Emilia entertained me and my escorts with as we acclimated to the mana. One fine afternoon, we were invited out to witness a truly remarkable event.*

*"Have you witnessed a live sporting event?" Emilia asked me innocuously as we departed.*

*Now, I'm sure you understand where I'm coming from, reader, when my nose rose somewhat into the air as I stated proudly: "Of course!"*

*I make my home in the Golden City, as you well know, and we are a proud bunch, I am ashamed to say. Here we were, in one of the most frontier areas of the continent, and alongside a young woman who likely hadn't travelled more than a hundred kilometres from Renewal. I described with great pride and flowery language the great contests held in the famed Arena.*

*Spectacular duels held between the finest and most powerful warriors on the face of Pangera in front of tens of thousands of adoring fans. The spectacle! The whole city could be rumbling for weeks after a particularly amazing bout. Of course I knew about sport!*

*As I prattled on, Emilia simply nodded calmly.*

*“Wonderful,” she said when I finished my overly flowery explanation, “I had hoped you would have such experience. The Stadium can be a little overwhelming for people who see it the first time.”*

*The tunnel we walked through became wider and wider as more and more people filed into it. Not just people, but ants also. From the teleportation chambers, there was a flowing stream of eager beings, all rushing into the flow and making their way towards wherever it was we were going.*

*“There are certainly a lot of people,” I noted to Emilia, “is this a particularly noteworthy event we are going to see?”*

*I wondered what secrets of Colony-culture might be uncovered. For so many to gather, this must be a rare event indeed.*

*“Oh, nothing of the sort,” I was assured. “The Stadium hosts matches three or four times a week.”*

*“This happens multiple times per WEEK?” I goggled.*

*“Of course. Tunnel Ball is very popular.”*

*At that moment, the ever-widening tunnel opened in front of us, the ceiling rising a hundred metres to a cavernous, vaulted dome. Before us, the enormous wall, entirely adorned with carvings, swept away to the left and right. Scene after scene of ants, humans, golgari, bruan’chii and even the elusive Folk engaged in some sort of activity, usually holding a strangely carved rock, covered the surface, so many my eyes couldn’t possibly take them all in.*

*In the centre of the open space, ringing what I assumed was the exterior wall of the Stadium, were large statues that loomed over the passing spectators. Again, a curious mix of races and individuals. I remarked on it to Emilia, though it was becoming difficult to hear each other over the hum of the crowd. There were SO many people!*

*“Yes. These are all individuals who contributed to the sport in a serious way. Some statues are quite revered. If you look down there, you can just see the top of one.”*

*I could indeed. It seemed to be a colossal ant looking down haughtily on the patrons as they walked past.*

*“That depicts the one and only time the Eldest competed in an official event. They retired immediately afterwards, but the story has become something of a legend. To our left, though we can’t see it from here, is the statue of perhaps the greatest ever player. Jordant. She doesn’t play anymore, but she is fondly remembered. On the other side of the Stadium, in front of the main entrance, is a statue commemorating the person who created Tunnel Ball.”*

*“This isn’t the main entrance,” I boggled.*

*“Oh, no. Not at all.”*

*“And who invented the game?”*

*Apparently, a farmer named Peter is credited with turning a simple ant training exercise into the sport that took over the Ant controlled lands, and then entranced their allies. Even now, his humble visage watches over the grand entrance to the Stadium, and people come from far and wide to pay respects at his stone feet.*

*Emilia explained the rules to me and my increasingly bewildered escorts as we made our way into the Stadium. We joined the hurrying throngs, the buzz of energy high as we walked with purpose. It was clear from the clothing and paraphernalia of the audience that the two teams playing today were represented by green and pink, as the two colours simply blanketed everything we could see.*

*I have to say, my dear readers, I have no idea how we managed so promptly to reach our seats. From what I recall, we simply followed several winding tunnels that branched several times, and there we were. Emilia later explained the finest ant engineers had worked tirelessly on the most efficient system for funnelling the crowd to the appropriate seating, mostly because the ants got sick of waiting for the matches to start.*

*I was so focused on not getting lost amidst the crowd that I didn't take in the Stadium until I sat down, and when I did, I almost fell right off my seat!*

*It was huge!*

*Although huge doesn't really do it justice. It's not often that I, erudite writer that I am, find myself at a lack of words, but it really is difficult to describe the sheer scale of what I witnessed.*

*So I might instead give you a few numbers. The maximum capacity of the Stadium is over five-hundred thousand individuals.*

*That's impossible! Perhaps you had that thought? I assure you it isn't! Especially when you consider the 'seating' the ants use.*

*"Are they on the roof?" I asked Emilia, agog as I stared upward.*

*"Of course, they don't need chairs, and they get an excellent view from directly overhead."*

*The entire ceiling of the dome that overlooked the field of play was covered in ants, a dense cluster of them that seemed to be in perpetual motion. The seating rose all the way from the sides of the playing field until it connected with the dome, and it seemed as if every seat was full. All sorts of people, from every walk of life, packed into this one space.*

*The atmosphere was pulsing with energy and I found myself quite caught up in it, excitedly waiting for the game to start. They even provided snacks! The food was delivered via a strange mechanism that caused it to pop up right beside me through a slot that opened in the stone! Such convenience!*

*And when the match itself started, the roar of the crowd was simply deafening. There's something about that afternoon that still hasn't left me, reader. Only in the Stadium of the Colony can one experience a mixing of such diverse peoples, only there does the crowd produce that distinctive sound. The clacking of mandibles, the screams and roars, the ocean-like rush of leaves rustling.*

*And the game itself was jolly entertaining as well!*

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### **Chapter 1042: Grand Designs**

Tungstant woke from her torpor feeling just as tired as when she went into it. After her last... incident, she didn't want to lose the time by being captured by they who would not be named, and made sure she got regular rest, but there was so much to do.

An infinite amount of work and a very finite amount of time to do it in.

She exited the rest chamber set aside for the carvers and began to make her way to the build headquarters. Traffic was heavy and it took her a while to make it through the streams of bustling ants before she arrived to find dozens of the highest level carvers huddled around the design tables.

There were a dozen of them, each hosting an intricately detailed model of different aspects of the build.

“Finally awake are you?” Cobalt huffed.

Her sibling looked exhausted, antennae drooping with fatigue.

“Yes. Not that I think the rest helped much.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Any word on the Eldest?”

“No movement. They’re still asleep and it looks like they will be for a while. The tier seven evolution seems to be taking significantly longer than the tier six.”

“Well, I suppose that’s not too surprising. It does mean that things are going to remain tense around here for a while longer.”

With the oldest, strongest and most respected ant in the Colony sleeping, totally defenceless in the fourth stratum, where the family didn’t have a strong foundation, the situation was risky. Everyone felt on edge. The scouts were working double shifts, trying to be an early warning system for the rest of the family. The carvers were doing everything they could to rebuild and fortify this mountain to make it into an impregnable fortress.

But even they could only work so fast, and whatever the Eldest had done had blown the inside of what had once been the termite mound to absolute pieces.

“The inner shell is seventy percent complete,” Cobalt brought her sibling up to speed, “though we need to keep the pressure up until it’s done. The estimated time to completion is another twelve hours.”

“Can we speed that up?”

“Not if we want it done right...”

“Damn. We definitely do.”

“Exactly. The quad-layering technique is extremely strong, but time consuming and not everyone has the skills to pull it off. Once it’s finished, though, it’d take a drill team a full day to get through.”

“Who even invented that technique again?”

“I did....”

“Funny, you’ve never mentioned it.”

“Very funny. Once that’s done, we can work on the gates.”

Tungstant pondered for a moment. She'd been working on the frame to install the gates in before she'd gone to sleep. They *still* weren't done?

"What the heck is holding up the gate teams? That should've been done two hours ago!"

"It's Smithant."

It was *always* Smithant.

"What does she want this time?"

"She's come up with some fancy new enchantment method and got the whole team re-working the enchantments from scratch. It set the completion time back by ten hours."

"TEN!?"

The irritable carver slapped an antennae to her forehead in dismay. If one component of the build was delayed, then that would cause a knock-on effect, inflicting chaos in the schedule all down the line. Like a row of small rectangular bricks standing precariously on their edge. Once the first fell, the rest were doomed to follow.

"She's convinced it will be twice as effective as the previous setup," Cobalt said.

"Even so, it may not be worth the delay! Completing the shell won't mean much if there's a massive hole where the door is meant to go!"

"You want to tell her to compromise? She'll listen to us if we demand it, but I wasn't confident enough to make the call myself."

The inner-shell was the first layer of defence they planned to build around the sanctum in which the Eldest currently rested. Later, it would likely house the Queen, or other queens, but for now, it was intended to be a bulwark to protect their Senior during evolution.

They'd done their best to fortify the mountain before the evolution had started, but proper defences took a great deal of time and effort to implement. With all the tools that could be brought to bear to break down metal and stone using mana, reinforcing it became ten times as difficult.

Which meant the Colony wanted the highest quality methods and materials, but also had to be leery of the time required. Carvers, as a rule, *hated* to compromise on their craftsmanship. The corners they'd had to cut were like wedges driven under Cobalt's and Tungstant's carapace, constantly irritating and chafing as they continued the build.

"Let her finish it," Tungstant said, resigned. "The scouts haven't turned anything up, so the delay shouldn't matter. If it's as good as she thinks, it'll be worth the time."

This mountain would eventually become the seat of power for the Colony in this stratum, so they wanted the best for it just as much as Smithant did.

She'd been up for ten minutes and already, Tungstant could feel a headache coming on.

"What about our other problem?" she asked. "Have there been any developments on that front?"

Cobalt pointed with an antenna, and the two skittered over to one of the models. This particular carving was a nightmare tangle of knotted tendrils and jagged lines that snarled around each other endlessly. What was worse was that it wasn't finished. For now, the mass of root-like lines terminated in a solid block of stone.

"The mapping of the lower tunnels is taking much, much longer than anticipated."

"It looks like almost no progress was made since I last looked at it," Tungstant noted as she circled the model.

"There hasn't been," Cobalt noted grimly. "The last report came through an hour ago. The monster spawns down there are proving to be a nightmare. Fourth stratum monsters are difficult for us to deal with. The scouts aren't battling weak little termites anymore, these are the real deal."

"We *have* to have control down there," Tungstant fretted, "if we can't secure the tunnels beneath us...."

Needless to say, for the Colony to not have control of the terrain beneath them was... unnatural. The area beneath the mountain was a horrific mess of narrow tunnels that formed a nightmare maze of never ending terror. In other words, ant home ground. They should reign supreme under those conditions!

"The fighting has been intense, from all reports. The former fungus farms are still on fire and the smoke is everywhere. Pockets of lava are still melting through the walls and the monsters down there aren't happy about it."

"Well, darn," Tungstant muttered. "So what's the plan?"

"Plan? There's no plan right now. That's for you to work out, I'm going to sleep."

Cobalt gave her sister a hearty pat on the back with an antenna and dashed away, leaving Tungstant staring at the model. That headache was definitely back.

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### **Chapter 1043: Since when did we not like tunnels?**

"SHIELDS!" Advant shouted, her pheromones washing over the entire area in a mighty burst.

The two mages, thankfully, were quick to respond and a shield sprang into being around the large soldier, mere moments before the mess of vines engulfed her completely.

She lunged forward, mandibles snapping as she sheared through hundreds of the tough, living ropes, not noticeably making a dent in them.

"Need some fire?" Propellant asked, eager.

"Of course I want some damn fire! Why are you asking? Just cast it already!" Advant hollered.

An immediate burst of flame washed over her, igniting the vines and driving them back temporarily. Of course, it also set the fine hairs on her antennae on fire at the same time....

"Not me, you idiot!"

“Sorry.”

Unsurprisingly, Propellant didn't sound all that apologetic as she watched the plant monster retreat, smothering the flames with its innumerable vines. Coolant sighed and conjured a jet of water to douse the singed soldier.

“Really now, you should be able to aim better than that, sister.”

Now dripping wet, Advant fumed silently for a moment before deciding she could no longer hold it in.

“You two have been useless since we got down here,” she sniped at the bickering mages. “If I didn't know better, I'd think you'd had a falling out of some sort.”

Propellant and Coolant stood awkwardly for a moment.

“You *did*?” Advant asked incredulously, before she shook her head. “Fine, whatever. You're being ridiculous. Get over yourselves and stop making mistakes, or I'll tell the Eldest how stupid you've been while they were sleeping.”

The two mages had the grace to be embarrassed just long enough for the vines to surge up the tunnel once again to snag Advant and drag her into the darkness.

“That was your fault,” Propellant said.

“How was it *my* fault?” Coolant replied icily. “The creature is clearly weak to fire, you should have fended it off.”

“It has water within its vines. You could have frozen it.”

“You're just being petulant because you're mad the Eldest didn't teach you the volcano spell.”

“I am not! You're just being petty because they didn't have a mega-ice spell for you to learn. It's not my fault that fire is better.”

“If it's so great, then use it. Go help Advant without setting her on fire, for once.”

“Maybe I will!”

“I'd love to see it.”

The two stood off for a long moment, staring at each other until a bedraggled figure trudged out of the darkness.

“You both suck,” Advant ground out. “If the Eldest were here to see your incompetence, you'd be back in training before you could twitch.”

“I haven't done anything wrong,” Coolant defended herself icily. “*Propellant*, on the other hand....”

“No, I don't want to hear it,” the soldier cut the two mages off.

A small healer came forward and began to go to work, repairing the extensive damage done to Advant's carapace. There were a number of smaller wounds as well, places where the vines had pierced flesh and inflicted harm. The healer grumbled to herself as she worked, ignoring the council members completely.

Advant was somewhat stumped. It was unusual for any members of the Colony to have a disagreement of any kind. Beyond unusual, exceedingly rare, but it did happen. Then again, two individuals with such diametrically opposed personalities were seldom asked to work together as often as Coolant and Propellant were.

The two mages usually got along quite well, but for whatever reason, they were letting their argument get in the way of their task, which was not acceptable. Especially because Advant was the one counting on them to keep her alive!

"There's only two options on the table," she told the two mages. "Either you assure me right now that you can both operate at your best going forward, or we turn around and go back. I only agreed to come with so few in the team because I assumed you two would be such an asset that it didn't matter. Not only are you not an asset, I would rather have *any other* two mages than you right now."

The siblings looked at each other askance, antennae drooping with shame, though neither willing to admit fault in front of the other.

Advant let out a frustrated puff of pheromones.

"Look, I know everyone is stressed right now. The Eldest is out of commission for who knows how long, and we have a ton of things to do, but you two can't let something petty get in the way of your work. You're too important for that."

"You are quite right," Coolant said. "We are not performing our tasks with due diligence."

"You don't say," Advant remarked, still picking chunks of vine from gaps in her carapace.

"Sorry about that," Propellant said. "I'll do my best not to set you on fire. I can't promise you won't get singed, though. It's fire, after all."

"I can handle singed," the soldier replied. "The light roasting was the issue. I sincerely hope that whatever is bothering the two of you is resolved as soon as possible. For now, let's focus on the task at hand."

Namely, delving into these tunnels and rooting out whatever was found therein. So far, that had mostly been a variety of nasty plant-like things, grown thick and vibrant on life mana.

"You're good to go," the medic announced, climbing down from Advant's back.

"Thanks for that. Hopefully we won't need to call on you again."

"I wish," the little ant grumped as she scuttled back to safety.

Everyone was in a mood lately. The soldier brushed it off and began to face back down the tunnel into which she had recently been dragged.

"Let's go," she said.

The small group continued on their way once again, the coordination between them vastly improved over what it had been a moment ago. Coolant and Propellant still picked at each other, but kept their spat on the back burner.



They continued to encounter the subterranean monsters of the fourth stratum and continued to struggle. More of the vine-tangles, some much larger than the first, gave them a lot of trouble, but others were also difficult to fight. There was a sunflower-like monster that spat seeds at them, which would have been fine if the seeds didn't immediately begin to grow new sunflower monsters at a prodigious rate.

Worst of all was a strange, hairy mole thing with a fire in its belly and a mouth full of rolling, grinding teeth. In the end, Coolant managed to spike the creature through its hide with ice magic, but not before Advant had lost a leg.

"Sorry about that," she said to the little healer, not quite sure why she was apologising for losing her leg in battle, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

"Don't worry about it," the healer replied, "we get used to it."

Despite their best efforts, the team had covered a disappointingly small section of tunnel before they were forced to turn and head back home. There was a defeated atmosphere hanging over the group, despite the progress they'd made. Largely because they'd be right back down there, after their rest was done.

"Try not to annoy each other before we go back down," she told the two mages. "We were actually getting somewhere by the end."

Without waiting for them to reply, she trudged off to a resting chamber. She was slightly dreading the next trip, which was an unnatural feeling. Since when did the Colony struggle to fight in tunnels? It wasn't right!

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### **Chapter 1044: The Royal We**

The Queen crunched her demon prey with satisfaction. A strange, bladed creature, the monster had put up quite a fight before she'd been able to overpower it. There was something so *gratifying* about hunting for her own Biomass. She doubted she would ever get tired of it.

"This area isn't secure, Mother. We shouldn't tarry for long."

There was something else that she was *definitely* tired of, though.

"We are perfectly safe, my child," she gently reminded the soldier charged with managing her security today. Her antennae waved to indicate the area around them. "We are secure within the borders of the Colony. There are cities held by our family in every direction. What harm can possibly come to us?"

Indeed, the Queen was suffering from the overprotective nature of her children even more than usual lately. She insisted on her daily hunts, but the restrictions they tried to put on her grew more onerous by the day. The area she'd been limited to held only meagre prey, and wasn't large enough to replenish between hunts. What's more, it was bordered on all sides by Colony strongholds. She was literally surrounded by armies of her children.

She'd even begun to suspect they were combing the hunting grounds to prune out any creatures that they thought might be too dangerous.

She was a patient creature, the Queen, filled with love and acceptance of her children's quirks, but even she had limits.

"I think I'll head somewhere different and continue my hunt," she announced, "I am not yet satisfied with the Biomass I have collected."

Indeed, it was difficult for her to gain sufficient food on these trips, since there were so few higher tier demons.

Her guards grew still and looked at each other warily.

"A-are you sure, Mother? Normally you would need to return back to the nest right about now. You wouldn't want to miss your quota for the day."

"There is plenty of time. You are not obliged to come with me, of course."

"We will come! We wouldn't dream of abandoning you!" She paused after her outburst to steady herself. "Uh. Where would you like to go, Mother?"

The Queen thought for a time. The issue was, no matter where she went, there were likely to be a thousand family members sweeping the place clean before she got there. The Colony hadn't had the antpower to waste babying her like this when she'd hunted in the second stratum, but apparently that wasn't an issue now.

Every direction would take her into Colony controlled and sanitised areas of the third stratum. That is, every direction except for one.

"I think I'll head down through the tunnels to the layer below. I hear there are strong monsters down there."

All of her guards within range to smell what she'd said froze in place as the Queen began walking toward the nearest tunnel entrance. There was a little lift in her step as her six legs carried her forward toward excitement.

"Wait! Mother! You can't go down there!"

"Of course I can, child. The tunnels are more than wide enough, I know that many have been working on them."

The mining and exploration had been constant since the Colony had made their home here. Constructing wide and safe pathways was always a priority for the family. Luckily enough, even she would fit on the wider roads, despite her size.

Although apparently the troublesome one was evolving, which may mean she was no longer the largest ant in the Colony. That was likely a good thing. If the children started to make roads even larger to accommodate that danger magnet, then there would be even more paths she could take.

"That's not what I mean!" her guard protested. "That area isn't safe."

"Are you saying that I'm not strong enough? Do not worry yourself. I was fighting long before even the first eggs were laid. I know how to take care of myself, or retreat from danger."

She now had a long trail of followers rushing along behind her, and even more running ahead, desperate to reach the tunnels before she could get there. She didn't mind, she couldn't race faster than them anyway. In the short time they had before she arrived, there was little they could do to sanitise the area.

"That's not what I mean, Mother! There has been word of great danger brewing in the layers below! Powerful demons of extremely high tier. The whole stratum has been bracing for trouble."

Interesting, she hadn't heard of such a thing. Clearly, they had worked to keep it from her.

"I am the second strongest member of this family," she said firmly, "if there is danger, then I should, of course, be involved in protecting the family. I will not stand aside and have my children rush into danger in my stead."

Even though she had heard from her friend, Enid, that human Queens often behaved in that way, sending others to fight in their stead. Bizarre.

When she arrived at the tunnel entrance, it was crawling with her children. Hundreds of them, inspecting every nook and cranny to ensure there were no hidden dangers. Their care warmed her heart even as it exasperated her. Such a *waste* of time and energy! There were so many more important things for them to be worrying about.

With a friendly patter here and there with her antennae, she plunged into the tunnel and continued on her way down to the next layer. Her heart beat a little faster as the excitement built within her. Finally, somewhere she might find a real challenge. How long had it been?

The demons were closer to her tier and far more fierce than what she had been able to find in the second stratum. Now she had a chance to engage in a real hunt.

Her mandibles clicked in anticipation.

Of course, if it was too dangerous, she would return to the nest. The last thing she wanted was for her children to throw themselves into an unwinnable battle to protect her.

With how many were rushing down after her, there likely wouldn't be anything they found that they couldn't handle.

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### **Chapter 1045: The Demon Host**

Odin had seen many things in his first life. The pressure that came with being a professional assassin, the piles of bodies he'd left in his wake, none of it prepared him for the Demon horde that surrounded him now. They stretched in all directions, the living carpet of small, gnawing demons of which he once was one, replaced with a fearsome menagerie of monsters that towered over the landscape.

There were thousands of them, tens of thousands. Each one a creature of obsession and power. Each one a being of drive and desire that had known nothing but a desperate fight for survival from the moment of its creation.

Yet even the nightmarish gathering was not enough to outshine the horrors gathered in their centre. Even after all this time, the suffocating aura that rolled off the three demons suppressed him, driving the thoughts from his head and the strength from his limbs.

Torrifex, a mass of fire and violence, stood tall amidst the throng. The heat rolling from the giant demon was oppressive, even to a fellow denizen of this place such as Odin. Hidden behind the veil of black smoke that permanently billowed from his form, Torrifex's eyes glowed with malicious glee as he beheld the scene around him.

No less terrifying were his sisters. Pyrixan possessed a dreadful visage of ash. All that came near her was subject to her frightful power. Odin himself had seen three demons dissolve to nothing, disintegrated by her mere presence.

She had been the first. Torrifex had woken her from her deep slumber as part of his divine mission, issued through Odin by Arconidem himself. The Demon God had commanded that this layer of the Dungeon be made ready for his return, and Torrifex would not tolerate failure in this task.

With Pyrixan by his side, and Odin trailing behind, Torrifex had set out to liberate his final associate. Somonax had slept beneath a field of rusted weapons, stuck in the ground like a graveyard of armaments. Only later Odin realised that those had been placed to seal that which dwelled beneath.

Somonax rose from the cursed ground as a mass of red blades that writhed with her need for death. A concentrated entity of murder, the tier eight demon was, in Odin's opinion, the most fearsome of the three. Even more so than Torrifex himself.

With the three servants of the Demon God gathered, they had begun a campaign of terror amongst the lands, gathering powerful members of their kind to their banner as they went. Wherever they passed, the demon larvae that covered the ground seethed with vigour that exceeded their normal activity.

**[You think too much, little mouse,]** Torrifex noted, looking down on the former assassin. **[You are not required to think. You are required to serve.]**

The great demon often reminded him of his... obligations. The task had been laid on him by Arconidem himself, and Odin had been its prisoner ever since.

[How will I understand how to serve if I do not think?] he rebutted in a rare show of courage.

Such outbursts were rare, as Torrifex had ways of making him regret them, but he was not completely cowed just yet. At his core, Odin was a survivor. He wouldn't break so easily.

**[Simple, little mouse,]** came the response, **[you listen. Arconidem has spoken to you directly. All you need do is follow his instruction.]**

[I woke you,] Odin said, his courage failing under the direct glare of the three great demons. [I have done what he asked. When will I be... free?]

The last word came out as barely a whisper of a thought as the heat of Torrifex grew unbearable when he leaned closer.

**[You think, but you do not listen. My sisters and I are assembled once more, but the work has not yet begun. Recall what the demon god commanded. We are to purge the demon lands of the weak, slaughter the unworthy and burn the outsiders. Our task will only be complete when this entire layer of the Dungeon has been set aflame with cleansing fire. Only then will it be worthy of its master.]**

Odin paused, his fearsome demon form appearing to hesitate in the face of such indomitable power. He thought of all the slaughter that had occurred up to this point, the thousands of deaths that had been required to bring these three together. And they hadn't even *started*?

[I don't understand what that means,] he said, [this place already burns like a vision of hell. There is fire and lava everywhere I see. The entire place is covered in demons, top to bottom. What outsiders? Who are the weak? What makes one unworthy? I don't know why I am here.]

**[You stink of death,] Somonax breathed and he recoiled as her thoughts touched his. Even her mind reeked of blood. [Arconidem can smell it too. He called you for a reason. Not because of what you are, weak and pathetic, but what you may become. His return will herald a new uprising, when demonkind will set aside their obsessions and focus on their true purpose. To kill.]**

**[All that are not demon, do not belong here,] Pyrixan interjected. [This place is ours, it belongs to us. The demon god granted it to us long ago and now we must drive out those who have come to infest it.]**

The second sister was just as unpleasant to converse with. As her thoughts brushed against his own, he felt his own sense of self begin to weaken, nibbled at the edges by some phantom hunger.

*They're talking about some holy war. They want to annihilate everything that isn't a demon in all of these lands?*

Odin had seen numerous other creatures already in his journey throughout this blasted landscape. It was clear now, Arconidem, and by extension Torrifex and every demon he drew to his side, wanted to destroy them all.

**[Little mouse. Still you think. You are far too weak to be thinking so much. The demon god has done the thinking for you.]**

He spread his hands.

**[All we need do is kill. Let it begin.]**

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1046: Rumble in the... Lava Covered Wasteland**

*The resources of the third stratum proved to be a boon to the Colony, but none more so than the Fire Iron, as we called it. Found in naturally replenishing reserves between layers, the precious metal had several properties that made it of enormous interest, especially to those like me.*

*Obviously, it was heat resistant, but to such an extreme degree that it was shocking to us. Our finest quality enchanted steel couldn't compare to even the unprocessed ore.*

*The first challenge was trying to find a way to smelt it. The metal was usually found submerged in lava, or at the very least coated on one side with it. Producing a temperature hot enough to melt it was difficult, to say the least. It was Propellant who eventually solved the issue, creating a circular heating system that required five fire mages to keep it running.*

*The air within the furnace was so hot, we had to create a system to prevent the air from touching the walls to prevent those from melting too.*

*The first thing I did once we managed to smelt and shape the Fire Iron was make a new smelter out of it. From that point, basically all equipment in the Colony that needed to be fireproofed was formed of Fire Iron. I would be lost without my new tools, I barely have to cool them.*

- Excerpt from "Antdustrial Revolution" by Smithant.

"What in the name of Eldest's left foreleg is going on down there?" the scout leader, Amantsen, demanded.

"It's the demons!" the poor, harried scout replied as the medic worked on her burns. "They've gone crazy. It's all out war!"

"Between who and who? The demons are attacking someone? Is it the ka'armodo?"

A conflict between the lizards and the demons would suit the Colony down to the ground. While their most powerful fighter was asleep, the various spot-fires around the place cooling down would be ideal.

The injured scout shook her antennae.

"The demons are fighting *everyone*. Cities are burning, there's fighting on the plains, there's fighting everywhere! The second those crazed creatures find something to fight, they attack, doesn't matter who or what it is."

Amantsen flicked her antennae irritably. The demons had gone crazy? Why? How? The whole situation only threw up more questions the more she looked into it. The poor scout lay on the ground before her as the medic continued her ministrations, grumbling pheromones rising by the second.

Clearly, it was extremely dangerous. It would be irresponsible to send further scouts down to look when the chances for deaths to occur were so high. If the demons were being as indiscriminately violent as advertised, it was dangerous for anyone to scout out the situation.

Individual missions and small teams were out. Which left only a large-scale investigation, which may only serve to provoke the rampaging demons onto them.

"This isn't good," she muttered, "not at all."

Complicating matters, most of the council was currently on the fourth stratum, protecting the Eldest as they underwent evolution. Even so, this situation sounded serious enough that they needed to be contacted.

"Well done, scout," Amantsen thanked the suffering sibling on the ground before her, "you've done well to bring us word of this trouble. Rest and be healed, then report to the barracks for torpor. You deserve a break."

"But..." the scout began to protest.

Immediately the shadows around them deepened, a cold wind blowing against their antennae.

"But... I can't... wait that long... for torpor," she finished lamely.

Amantsen nodded.

“You’ll have to, but a second longer.”

Not willing to be in *their* presence longer than necessary, she turned and left the poor scout to the healer’s ministrations and began to spread the word. The machinery of the Colony was efficient and effective in almost all circumstances, and it wasn’t long until word had been passed through the gate and to the forces residing in the fourth stratum.

“By my aching thorax, what on Pangera are those demons up to now?” Burke demanded of the air when the message had finally reached her. “We’ve got enough on our plates already. I swear the Eldest does this on purpose, everything flies into a mess when they evolve.”

She knew that wasn’t quite fair, the Eldest had evolved during the invasion by Garralosh in order to fight the beast, which they had eventually done. Not to mention, the last evolution had been done during a largely peaceful time. Still.... It was the sentiment that mattered.

“I’ll pass the word to the others, we need to assemble a task force to investigate, we can’t go flying into this blind. Start looking for scout volunteers.”

She found Wills not far away and apprised her sibling of the danger. She similarly wasn’t impressed with the Eldest’s timing and the two rushed to gather the other members of the Council.

“You can’t be serious,” Advant groaned.

“This is typical,” Cobalt agreed.

“This is less than ideal,” Coolant observed.

“When am I going in?” Leeroy asked.

Sloan slumped forward, rubbing at her temples with her antennae. This was the last thing she needed.

“We know there are powerful tier eight demons down there. Clearly, they are responsible for stirring up this mess. We need to know how fast it’s spreading and when it might reach us. If we’re lucky, it won’t affect us. There are dozens of groups with territory in the third stratum. If they start fighting against the demons, then they might occupy them long enough for the Eldest to emerge so we can redeploy our forces.”

She needed a nap.

“In the event that they *do* come rushing at us, we need to fortify and garrison the paths between us as much as possible.”

A messenger rushed into the chamber, dropped some pheromones, then left.

“The Queen went WHERE?!” Sloan shrieked.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1047: Full Mobilisation**

Ants flooded through the tunnels, called to action stations by urgent pheromone messages distributed by the still under development “automated noiseless announcement system.”

If Sloan had any hair, she would be pulling it out of her carapace right now. Instead, she had to settle for tugging insistently on her antennae with her mandibles as her brain tried to spin the logistics needed for the required movements.

"It's fine," she said to the other council members, who stared at her, doubt plain in their eyes. "No, really. All we have to do is mount a campaign to secure this location, protect the Eldest and develop our defences, whilst *simultaneously* attacking into the teeth of a ravenous horde of demons on the third stratum to rescue the Queen. Simple."

"How is any part of that simple?" Propellant scoffed. "This problem doesn't go away or shrink into insignificance just because you pretend it's easy. We need you in reality, Sloan."

"Reality isn't my friend right now."

"Nobody is disagreeing with that. There has to be a way to turn this around. We need explosive action!"

"We need a calm, measured response," Coolant rebutted. "If we rush we might make a critical error."

"If we *don't* rush we're going to be too late! We don't have time to think."

"Both of you be quiet," Advant said with authority, causing the two mages to subside. "Sloan has already described what we need to do, and it *is* simple. There has to be a defensive force left here to protect the Eldest until they complete their evolution. There *also* has to be an extensive force assembled and launched into the third stratum to protect the Queen *and* prepare for a possible demon invasion."

They fell silent as they began to comprehend the scale of the task, and the limited amount of time at hand. It was an impossible ask.

"It could be even worse than that," Sloan said. "If something is turning the demons rabid, then we have to consider the possibility that it may also happen to our own allies."

If the demons within their own cities turned on them....

"I didn't think of that," Propellant said, looking shocked. "If that happens, this could escalate even further."

"Which means we need to move fast. There's too many council members here to properly manage the crises on the third stratum, so we need to divide ourselves between the two locations. I suggest that the bulk of the fighters be sent to combat the demon threat, while the crafters remain here. Obviously, one general and one soldier will need to remain on this stratum."

"I nominate Leeroy," Advant said.

"What?" the armour-clad Immortal burst out. "Why?"

"If an assault occurs on the Eldest while they rest, then it's likely to be far more dangerous than just demons. We need to keep our best here for the toughest fight."

"Well... I suppose that's alright then."

Advant nodded solemnly while the rest of the council gave her thankful nods. Without the chaos of the Immortals and their antics, the rescue mission could proceed much more smoothly.



“Alright then, let’s get to it. Good luck, everyone,” Sloan said. “I’ll be in the command centre down here if anyone needs me.”

The council quickly sorted themselves, and before long, a huge procession marched through the gate provided by the Mother Tree. Hundreds of thousands of the most battle hardened and highly evolved members of the Colony returned to the blazing heat of the third stratum.

All throughout the Colony, the alarm had been sounded. Reinforcements from the upper layers of the Dungeon rushed to descend in columns kilometres long, covering the vertical roads they had built in orderly rows of determined ants.

The Queen was in danger, and there wasn’t a single one of them who wouldn’t answer the call. Despite their fervour, at all levels, the Colony kept in mind the wisdom of the Eldest. It was ensured that normal operations wouldn’t be compromised, despite the grand muster.

So it was that, as the hours passed, more and more ants flooded into the third stratum. Demons gazing down from the occupied cities were confused at times, wondering if the Colony outnumbered the larvae on the plains. The great pillars on which the plate cities rested were covered in the crawling forms of the family as tens of thousands descended every hour.

At the forefront was Victor, directing traffic in the emergency command post established above the tunnel the Queen had taken down into the deeper layers.

Wills had already descended with an advance team of scouts, rushing to locate the trail of their lost parent, and once she’d found it, the massed might of the Colony would follow quickly behind.

Already, the staging ground covered several square kilometres as more and more ants arrived, were assigned to teams, and found their places. Luckily it was extremely easy to keep such a force fed out here on the demonic plains, demon larvae were... beyond plentiful.

Hunting teams swarmed throughout the lower second and third stratum, delivering an avalanche of Biomass to the army. The queens even refused to take their full quota, determined to do their part to ensure the Queen was returned.

Victor held herself in the centre of a whirlwind. Messages came and went in a blur, numbers, team allocations, supply counts, all were handled by her team as she paced back and forth waiting for the only message that truly mattered: the counting report from Wills.

It would be pointless to lead this enormous force into the tunnels without knowing where the Queen had gone, and so they waited. What they would be fighting, and where, were complete unknowns, but the general didn’t worry. With so many of her siblings gathered, and with such fervour, she would back them against any force in the Dungeon.

“Come on, Wills,” she muttered as she skittered back and forth impatiently.

She felt like a dam wall holding back a flood. The moment she gave the word, the Colony would pour into the lower levels of the third stratum like a tidal wave.

They hadn't planned to make such a move this early, but current events demanded they act. The demons would learn to fear the Colony, or they would vanish from the Dungeon. It was as simple as that.

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 1048: The Great Hunt**

The Queen was having a great day. Her mandibles gnashed with joy as she rushed across the plains, the small demon larvae wiggling out of her way as she chased down her prey. It had taken some time to get down the pillar, avoiding the inhabitants of the plate city as her delegation made their way down below.

"Mother, surely now you've had enough. Isn't it time to return and see to your tasks?"

The Queen continued to munch on Biomass as she replied.

"Yes, I do believe you are right. This has been a most pleasant hunt, but I am nearly full. I thank you for allowing me to indulge myself."

She was acutely aware that she had inconvenienced her children with her demands, which was precisely why she didn't like to do it. The frustration she felt at being coddled had bubbled under the surface for a long time before she had finally had enough. With this outing, she felt her stress had been relieved. For at least a good while, she would be able to accept her children being overly protective.

"It's time to return to the nest," she announced. "Is everyone here? Make sure that none are left behind."

The guards reacted a little oddly as their roles were flipped from trying to shepherd the Queen to being shepherded by her in a flash. She rounded them up, thanking them for their hard work, ensuring that each and every one of them was accounted for before they began to make their way back to the pillar.

Half the distance had been covered without incident, crossing over the plains as the larval demons scurried out of the way, but before they could complete the journey, something changed.

The Queen sensed the danger first, her antennae swinging wildly as a faint scent brushed against them. She wasn't sure what it was she sensed, except that it felt... wild and dangerous.

"Something is coming", she warned her children. "Get behind me."

"With respect, we won't do that," her chief guard replied. "You should get behind us, Mother."

The Queen clacked with irritation.

"I am far stronger than you children, do not be foolish."

Yet they refused to yield, the much smaller children rushing forward to take up defensive positions in front of the Queen. She repressed the urge to thwack them, they were only acting out of love, as her friend Enid had told her. Despite their actions being sub-optimal and a poor use of their available resources, she could only sigh and allow it to take place.

It wouldn't do to fight with her own protectors moments before they were engaged in battle. Instead, she braced herself, antennae beginning to shine with healing mana as she prepared for any eventuality.

The demons boiled up from a narrow opening in the ground, exploding upward like a plume of fire rising from a pool of larva. Frenzied bloodlust rolled from the creatures in waves, and the moment they laid eyes on the ants, they shrieked and rushed towards them.

Seconds after the demons had emerged, battle was joined, the two sides clashing against each other with total abandon, each knowing that in a fight between monsters, the one who hesitated was sure to lose.

The Queen unleashed a burst of healing magic that washed over her children as she charged forward, her great mandibles snapping around the first unfortunate foe to catch her eye.

All around her, the ants clashed with demons, a frenzied whirl of battle that was dazzling in her multifaceted eyes. There was no consistency or pattern among the attackers that she could detect. The demons came in all shapes and sizes, some gouting flames, others were dervishes covered in spinning blades, yet others were floating, pulsating things that laid about themselves with terrible spells.

The one thing they had in common was the frenzied nature of their assault. The higher tier the demon, the more capable of reason they became, yet these creatures seemed devoid of thought. Each one radiated a single-minded *obsession* with death and destruction, a need that had become focused on the present members of the Colony the moment they had come into sight.

Luckily, the ants outnumbered their foes. Suffused with healing light, they worked together to team up on the demons, lunging and ducking, latching onto legs, arms and whatever limbs they could find.

In the thick of it all, the Queen advanced. Her powerful carapace absorbed blows that would have crippled her smaller children, and her mandibles sheared through demons who were all but impervious to weaker bites.

She was the War Queen, and this was her element. With cold efficiency, she moved through the battle, chomping the enemy and healing her children until it was over and the ants stood victorious, though wounded.

“What was *that*?” her lead guard demanded as she tried to gather her thoughts. “They came from nowhere to attack us. Why?”

“I do not know,” the Queen replied, “but they have been defeated. We should be on our way, more may come.”

No sooner had she released that scent than her antennae tingled again as that faint wisp of danger brushed against them.

“Speak of the demons,” she said as yet more ravenous monsters burst forth from the hole in the ground. “With me, my children!”

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1049: One Unhappy Scout**

The tunnels between layers were uncomfortable at the best of times. Filled with smoke, ash and the bubbling streams of lava that made the heat unbearable, they were inhospitable *before* you took into

account the demons prowling through them. Or worse, the remnants of demon obsession that simply refused to die.

Yet, for one nameless scout, this was, by far, the most stressful trip through the tunnels that she had ever experienced. The knowledge that the entire Colony was waiting for word of the Queen's fate weighed heavily on her carapace, but she was determined.

Her six legs were more than enough to bear the burden. She would not fail the family.

Those six legs blurred as she raced through the narrow tunnels, flitting up the walls, across the ceiling and back down again as she dodged anything that might impede her path. Monsters were left confused, swiping at nothing as she rocketed past. Even the lava seemed confused, unsure if anything had disturbed its passage.

She was on a mission. She was speed.

Even Vibrant might have nodded, slowly, with deliberate grace as a camera zoomed toward her face, had she seen the scout perform this mad run. All the while, she left behind a clear trail of pheromones, indicating to any who came after that she had passed this way.

And then she was through, skittering out and gripping tight to the ceiling of a new layer of the third stratum, the endless plains stretched out beneath her, kilometres below. It was a perilous drop that would terrify many, but the scout was undaunted, her clawhold sure and firm.

She could see the pillar, not far from her current position. It would be difficult to navigate her way down alone; she didn't see any other scouts emerging from the tunnels just yet. There was no time to wait for them, and she couldn't see the Queen from these heights.

Down she climbed, face first, as fast as she dared. Down the pillar, onto the plate city, through which she rushed as quickly as she had moved before, onto the underside of the rock disc, and then down again.

Soon, she was on the plains themselves, having made record time in her descent. Her antennae thrashed wildly through the air as she attempted to locate any trace of the Queen and her entourage. There *had* to be a scent trail, no good ant went anywhere without leaving one behind, she just had to find it.

She circled around the base of the pillar until at last she detected the trail, then she was off. Demon larvae flailed wildly as they tried to throw themselves from her path. Usually they failed, and she trod on hundreds before she finally found what she was looking for, not that she was happy to see it.

The Queen and her guards were engaged in battle! Ravenous, maddened demons threw themselves at the defensive formation that had sprung up around the giant Queen, who held the centre herself, fighting with her usual determined, stubborn manner.

Cold fear washed over the scout as she raced forward.

"What is happening?" she asked as she drew near, careful not to be caught in the melee. "I've come from the Colony in advance of an expedition."

The vicious combat continued unabated, but even so, the reply came from the nearest general.

“We’ve been engaged by hostile demons who seem to be possessed by some strange fever. They fight with no sense of self preservation or purpose. We can’t reason with them. No matter how many we kill, they keep coming out of the tunnels below.”

“Can you disengage?”

“We can’t, they’d jump on our backs the moment we tried to move.”

“Can the Queen leave while we hold them off?”

The general gave a humourless huff of pheromones.

“You’re welcome to try and convince her.”

The scout gave that idea up immediately. Every member of the family knew it was futile to ask the Queen to abandon her children.

“Can you last until reinforcements arrive?”

“We’d better, or the Queen is lost,” the general replied, her scent grim.

Unwilling to waste more words, the scout turned and raced away, weaving between two demons who had drawn near as she did so. Back along the trail she ran, unflagging and unfailing. A new scent trail being left, one calling for all possible aid.

Only a few minutes into the return trip, the scout ran into one of her own kind, following the same scent she had followed.

“What’s happening?” the scout demanded.

“Queen and guards engaged by hostile demons. Retreat difficult. Extraction required.”

“Got it.”

Message delivered, the scout turned and raced back toward the Queen, while her sister turned and raced back toward the pillar. No doubt she would soon run into another scout and would be able to pass on the message before coming back to aid in the battle.

A message relay like this was common practice in the Colony.

Soon enough, she returned to the scene of the battle and was alarmed to see that the fighting had intensified. Yet more demons had emerged, several of them larger and clearly stronger than before.

She ducked left, feinted right and then dashed through the middle, throwing herself into the formation of her siblings formed around the Queen.

“Reinforcements are coming,” she announced. “Scouts are relaying your situation back to the task force.”

“How long until they get here?” the general snapped.

The scout hesitated.

“An hour, hopefully less.”

That wasn't the news the general wanted to hear, but she dismissed her frustration: it wouldn't keep the Queen alive, so it was useless.

"How many are coming?" came the followup question.

The scout twitched.

"All of them," she said, as if stating the obvious.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1050: Something Sensed, Something Strange**

*Dungeon Seers have long been a fixture in all of the major civilisations of Pangera; their capacity to detect some aspects of the inner workings of the Dungeon and its mana is an invaluable aid.*

*It can't have been easy, in the early times, when exploration of the various strata was even more perilous than it is today. As more of the space was explored, and more was understood, it gradually became clear that the secret to the Dungeon, was mana.*

*How did it work? How much could be gleaned from it? Mana was everywhere in the Dungeon, it created the rare and valuable materials that could be found and mined, it formed each and every monster that was created and killed. When monster bodies were left on the ground, they dissolved back into mana, absorbed by the Dungeon for its next creation. Everything was mana, even Biomass. If there was a way to "read" the mana, to understand where it had come from, or where it was going, would it be possible to gain insights into the Dungeon itself?*

*It was these questions that led to the discovery and widespread adoption of Dungeon Seers. Able to peek at the inner workings of the Dungeon. Reading the flow of mana is difficult, requiring experience and wisdom, but the most powerful practitioners of this Class are known to be able to sense significant shifts of energy over hundreds of kilometres.*

*- Excerpt from "Underneath the Below: Understanding the Dungeon" by Elric.*

Criclo leaned back in his chair and unchained his mind once again. The whispers that constantly circled him, nibbling on the edges of his awareness, became shouts roared directly into his ears.

With practised ease, he pushed them away and centred himself. Just another dive, nothing he hadn't done a thousand times before. He calmed himself by thinking that way, but many had been lost, doing what he did. They went too deep, followed the trails too far. There were beasts out there in the dark. Hungry and patient, they were all too happy to gobble up a Dungeon Seer too far from home.

Yet Criclo had the easy confidence that allowed him to thrive in this profession. He knew his limits. He'd walk right up to the edge, take a look around, but never, not once, had he ever put a toe on the other side.

That's why he was still alive.

Pushing one's mind into the mana of the Dungeon was in some ways similar to immersing oneself in a river, or stream. There was a sense of immersion, of being surrounded, enveloped. There was also current, a flow to the passage of energy through the innumerable veins that covered the inside of this world.

Yet the metaphor wasn't truly apt. The mana of the Dungeon was deeper than any ocean, faster flowing than any river, and more terrifying than any body of water could hope to be.

Bottomless, raging, vast beyond imagination and *alive*.

Criclo was sure it was alive. He'd only shared his belief with a select few others, those that wouldn't have him flayed for the heresy, and they'd universally dismissed his claim.

It was fascinating in a way. They saw the same thing he did, but they couldn't go as deep as he could, never able to range as far. They saw the same thing, but he saw *more*. His view was wider, wide enough that the seemingly chaotic flows of mana began to show hints of pattern. Of *will*.

He pushed such thoughts from his mind. Whether the Dungeon was a living thing or not made no difference to his daily task. He was a Dungeon Oracle, paid to sense the deep flow, not to amuse himself with theories.

Down he went, twisting through the veins and racing out in a thousand different directions. As his thoughts followed the flow of mana, he allowed the information contained within to brush against him, just enough to syphon what he needed.

Monsters, monsters and more monsters. Ninety nine percent of what he found related to a monster being created, the energy rushing to a spawn point to create another creature of death and destruction, or one being killed, the remains fading back into the Dungeon and being swept away.

A fight over there, hard to tell between whom. Spells were flying between the sides, the ambient energy being sucked in to fuel the violence.

A new node of water crystals? It was close to the surface, relatively. The Brathians had likely already found it, but there was a chance they hadn't. He'd report to the Church. With a little luck, they may make a profitable harvest.

What else, what else?

For hours, he slid along the endless pathways, tasting, testing, seeking. Many times, he brushed against the limits of his strength, and with the discipline born of a lifetime of caution, he pulled back every time. It was always so tempting to go a touch further, the sense that a great discovery lay just over the horizon was ever present, but he resisted. Pull back, try another path, see what could be found.

Hold on?

Something different...

Mana was being pulled in, gently on the outskirts, but as Criclo went deeper, he found the current grew stronger as he progressed, until it became a torrent. How many creatures were drawing on the power? Thousands? Tens of thousands? What on Pangera was going on here?

He slowed himself. This was new, and new was dangerous. His mind compressed itself down into a dense ball, and he allowed himself to drift. Every now and again, he would emerge to absorb a hint of information, then pull himself in tight again, smuggling himself deeper into the disturbance.

He extended himself once more, drew in a breath of mana and examined it carefully.

Interesting....

Something was evolving here. Something big. He dared to flit a little closer, hoping to learn more.

Except....

Criclo had reached his boundary. He could sense it clearly, in the back of his mind. This was his limit, he shouldn't go any further. He sighed mentally. He was tempted. More than tempted. But he pulled back, retreating out of the strange vortex of energy and following the veins back to himself.

The moment after he withdrew, two intangible mandibles snapped shut around where the intruder had been. The jaws hesitated, unsure what had happened when they didn't meet the resistance they had expected to find. After a moment, they faded away and Brilliant shook herself back to alertness within the nest.

She flicked her antennae.

"Well that's not good."