

Chrysalis 1051

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Chapter 1051: Fame and Fortune

The practice of Delving into the Dungeon is as old as the Rending. No sooner had the desperate struggle for survival begun than people were throwing themselves into the depths, desperate to find the tools they needed to fight back against the onslaught.

Most died, but some didn't, and even fewer actually became good at plunging into the depths. Being able to descend, fight, gather materials, and return alive, was exceptionally valuable, and therefore lucrative.

Just like that, the practice of Dungeon Delving as an enterprise was born. At first it was largely unorganised and unregulated, but as the devastation of the Rending began to fade, and exploration became safer and more common, the delvers began to cooperate and merge, forming societies, organisations and guilds, to ensure they were treated fairly and to protect their interests from interlopers.

Over centuries, these groups gradually converged to form the major Delving associations that still exist in modern times. The Mercenary Guild remains the largest and most powerful, most who seek materials or wish to lay contracts against certain monsters will always post the task within their halls.

- Excerpt from "Society and the Dungeon" by Antuar

"Hoo boy," Drake's eyes shot up as he beheld the new entry on the board.

His voice drew eyes, which led to further exclamations in turn, attracting yet more, until a crowd gathered, mercs discussing the new development.

Turning his back on the glowing bounty board, Drake made his way back to the table around which the rest of his crew sat.

"Not sure I appreciate that glint in your eye, mate," Lacos drawled, the scaly-skinned Brathian's eyes sharpening as he sensed a development.

"Contract just went up. Big one."

The group turned in their seats to look at the crowd gathered around the board, now four people deep.

"Holy heck. Look at them go. This must be for huge money! How much is it? Wait, don't tell me. Actually, tell me. No! Shut up! There's no way it's worth the trouble."

Drake smiled.

"Are you done, Elly? At least let me give you the information before you make a decision."

"No way." She held up a hand, then thought better of it and raised both, for increased emphasis. "Big numbers have a detrimental effect on the merc mind. Ninety percent of deaths happen on big jobs at least seventy percent of the time."

"Did you make up those numbers?"

“Yes. But my point stands! Big reward means big danger. We don’t need to take the risk right now.”

“What is it?” Lacos said, waving off Elly as she began to squawk in protest. “I wanna know, Elly, shut it.”

“Alright then.” Drake pulled up a chair and helped himself to a few taro chips, the rich life-mana inside tingling in his mouth before it suffused his being. “This job is going to bring in a heck of a lot of eyes, and I think more than a few will go for it, but that doesn’t matter so much, since the reward is general rather than specific.”

“Unusual.” Lacos stroked his scaled chin.

“True. The job was posted by the Path. Seems they’ve detected some beastly evolving out near the tree.”

“Which tree?” Elly broke in.

“*The tree,*” Drake emphasised.

“Oh.”

“Whatever it is, it’s pretty big, estimated at max Rare or early Mythic.”

The listening pair sucked in a long breath. Monsters at that stage of evolution were a big deal. Deadly, hard to kill, but worth a fortune if you could pull it off. A mythic core would let them live like royalty for a decade.

Lacos frowned.

“Mythic.... That’s dangerous.”

“It’s still evolving. As of this moment, there’s no need to tangle with the monster. If we can get to it before it wakes up, it’s free money.”

“That’s what everyone always thinks,” Elly scoffed. “How many times have we heard stories of delvers walking up to an evolving beast, only for the thing to wake up right before they stab it? Did they post an estimated time on the job?”

Reluctant, Drake shook his head.

“There, too dangerous, end of story.”

“Now hold on a second,” he said, “there’s more to it than just the big beast, although that’s the main prize. For whatever reason, this monster is being guarded by thousands and thousands of weaker creatures.”

Elly stared at him.

“That makes it infinitely worse,” she said. “Are you out of your mind?”

“*Except,* the Path is willing to pay bounty on *all* of them. Not just the biggin’.”

“They what now?” Lacos sat up straight.

Drake grinned.

“Tier four or five, the bulk of them. Thousands. If we can pick off ten or so, that’ll be a year’s worth of income in one job.”

“Everyone is going to want a piece of this,” Lacos said.

“Which makes it *better*, not worse. Thousands of delvers crawling over the mountain will make life easier for us, help spread the heat. If we come at it from the far side, keep as much distance between us and the tree as possible, we can cash in.”

Elly was frowning.

“I don’t like this,” she said, “something feels off. We’ve got a giant monster sleeping in a mountain crawling with thousands of defenders, and we don’t know when it’ll wake up. This is weird behaviour for monsters.”

Lacos nodded thoughtfully.

“But still worth investigating,” he said. “I think we pass on word to the boss. There’s likely to be an expedition mounted for this, which will help with travel and support, and he can get us on there. I’m not saying we’re going,” he held up a hand to Elly before she could protest, “I’m saying we should check it out. Even if we get all the way out there and don’t like what we see, it will hardly have cost us anything with the fees being split so many ways. Fair?”

“Fine,” the other grumbled as she sat back and took a long pull from her mug.

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Chapter 1052.2: Fame and Fortune Part 2

What is it that a delver seeks? Many don’t devote enough thought to this question, because there are several answers, not all of them financial. Of course, the main fiscal return of any delve is cores and valuable monster components, that goes without saying. By defeating monsters and harvesting these rare and desirable items, a delver is able to sell these back to their mercenary company or guild and earn their pay, through which they support themselves, this much is obvious.

What many fail to consider, is the other, less tangible objectives of delvers. Experience is a massive motivator and goal for all mercenaries who delve. Improving their Skills, gaining levels, upgrading their Class. Despite not being of direct financial benefit, they are absolutely crucial for the success and prosperity of mercenaries in the future. With more power, they are safer, able to deliver more reliably, and crucially, able to operate in smaller crews, which means a larger share of the profits.

Lower levelled mercenaries will sign onto expeditions and volunteer for a lower cut if they can negotiate a higher share of the experience. This means they’ll do the bulk of the fighting, for a smaller reward, but in doing so, they are attempting to set themselves up for the future.

The other intangible, and possibly even more rewarding, sought after benefit is reputation. The most dangerous, and therefore the most profitable jobs, are only open to those who have proved they can deliver.

These are the contracts that delvers hunger for. Delivering on even one such job can allow them to retire in luxury. One big monster kill, even divided over a crew of fifty to a hundred, can deliver such rare and valuable rewards that the mercenary is effectively set for life.

When a big contract comes up, there is never a shortage of brave hands willing to take the risk.

- Excerpt from "Society and the Dungeon" by Antuar

Rillik took a long, slow pull on his pipe as he beheld his crew. The three were young, but surprisingly seasoned for their age. Elly, Lacos and Drake had worked exceptionally hard over the past few years, enough to build a solid rep that got their foot in the door.

Being able to take on the big jobs. It was a first for them, a heady experience, being able to sit at the grown-up table. Rillik was an old hand, he'd been here many times before, which was exactly why he was so wary.

"This contract has a tricky odour," the golgari rumbled.

Drake rolled his eyes, while Elly stood a bit straighter.

"Exactly!" she declared. "The whole thing stinks all the way to the surface. I said it, Rillik agrees, let's abandon it and move on with our lives."

"He didn't say that," Lacos noted patiently. "Let the man finish his thought."

Rillik nodded.

"It's too good a job to pass up," he said, "but we will need to be cautious."

A piece of paper with the extended details sat on the table between them and he reached out to tap it with one thick, ore-covered finger.

"There's a lot here that wasn't in the initial listing, which likely means information is still coming in. Last minute additions aren't welcome to folks like us. Once we get out there, there's not many crews that would turn around and go back after learning that the situation's shifted. That's a trap that too many mercs fall into."

He took another slow pull before he puffed the smoke out again.

"Most crews are going to give up any intention of hunting the big one from the beginning, which is smart. Despite that, I still anticipate a group of thirty or forty will assemble to take a swipe at the prize. I want to make it clear to everyone here and now that we aren't going to be part of it. No matter how good it looks, we aren't going. Clear?"

"Are you sure about that?" Drake said. "If we confirm the monster is still asleep when we arrive...."

The young human tried to hide his frustration, but it leaked through in his voice. He wanted this job, he wanted the big kill. Rillik cut him off harshly.

"No," he rumbled, glaring. "Anyone who tries to assault that beast is off my crew immediately. I don't even care if you succeed. I'll gladly give up a fortune to have an idiot off of my team. There's not enough information to justify the risk, end of story."

He stared down the other two, just to make sure they understood how serious he was, then eyeballed Drake until the man settled.

“Good. Now, my contacts in the Guild are saying that an expedition is going to ship out soon. There’ll be almost five hundred mercs in the train, and we are going to be part of it.”

Drake balled his hands into fists as excitement washed over his face. Elly looked grumpy, but nodded her acceptance. Lacos’ face barely changed.

“Our aim is to hang back and pick off what we can after assessing the situation. We have a big enough cash reserve that we can afford to return empty handed if I decide the job is too risky. It’ll mean taking on scut-work for a couple weeks to keep us in the black, but I’d rather be alive grinding trash than dead.”

He eyed the others one more time before he pounded the table once with his massive fist.

“Good. It’s decided. Get your things together and meet me back here in two hours. We will set out to the union building, sign up officially for the expedition and secure our place. It leaves in roughly five hours, so there isn’t much time. No dawdling. That means you, Elly.”

“Fine....”

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Chapter 1053: Colliding Waves

Victor almost sagged to the hot stone floor of the stratum in relief when a runner finally made its way back to her command post with the news. The Queen had been sighted, still alive. Great news, they hadn’t been too late. Then came the rest of the message. She was under attack, a swarm of crazed demons surging out of the lower layers tearing into everything they saw.

The Queen (obviously) refused to retreat and leave her children behind, which meant they needed to go down and extract her. Once the situation had been made safe, their mother would be more than happy to return to the nest, but until that time, she would fight to the death to protect them.

Noble, admirable, heartwarming, but for the children trying to keep their mother alive, it was immensely stressful!

“Pass out the orders,” Victor snapped to her messengers, who focused on her with unwavering antennae. “We are go for full-dive. Every brigade, right now.”

A barrage of quick salutes, and they were off, running so fast they blurred to her eyes. The general stepped outside the command area to look out upon the vast force that had assembled on the plains. Hundreds of thousands had answered the call and they spread out now beyond the limits of her sight, a living carpet of chitin and rage.

The messengers spread out in all directions, rushing down the narrow paths between battalions. She could see the ripple effect of their passing, as the waiting troops reacted to the pheromones each of her subordinates left behind. Antennae rose like a spreading wave, then a pause as the generals marshalled their troops, then came a surge of motion as they dove toward the tunnels.

Victor had heard about whirlpools from the humans, the way water would circle a drain, the current growing faster and faster as it moved in ever tighter loops around a hole. She saw something similar now, except it wasn't water, but a tide of her own people, draining into the tunnels and pouring down into the deeper layers.

With coordination and discipline that was only possible to their kind, unit after unit, battalion after battalion, brigade after brigade, thousands upon thousands rushed forward, found their place in the swirling formation as they were swept ever closer to the tunnel entrance. She could only imagine what fate awaited any demon foolish enough to still haunt those tunnels. Her people had no patience today, no restraint, not until the Queen had been returned to them.

For a moment, she battled an almost irresistible urge to fling herself forward and join that frenetic downpour of reinforcements, but she restrained herself at the last moment.

Turning around, she could still see more of her siblings rushing down the pillar that supported Roklu, descending from the second stratum to join the ranks. Someone had to remain behind to organise them, ensure that some order was kept. If each family member had been allowed to act as they wished, goodness knows what chaos would result. The Queen might have been saved, or the ka'armodo cities would have been burned to the ground, possibly both.

"May the Eldest guide you," she saluted the torrent of soldiers entering the tunnel, then she turned back to her work.

Below, in the demon city of Rik'chak, quite a few of the monsters were curious as to what was happening. A stream of ants had rushed through, coming down the pillar, through the city and down to the plains below, a huge ant in their midst.

After that, a long series of smaller ones, usually alone but sometimes in groups, running back and forth along the pillar, urgently thwapping their antennae with each other. They were so quick, those demons who decided to try and hunt the creatures had an enormous amount of trouble chasing them down.

The demons rushed to the lord of the city, a powerful tier seven Idle demon, an evolved Sloth demon, and questioned if something should be done.

In typical fashion, the city lord waved a hand and declared he couldn't be bothered dealing with it before he rolled over and went back to sleep.

Which meant that as the denizens of the city looked up to see the trickle of ants turn into a flood, they were woefully unprepared. Before the lord could even be woken again, the city became buried under a tidal wave of ant aggression.

The Colony swept through, annihilating any who were foolish enough to impede them. They rushed to the edge of the city, ran underneath and back onto the pillar to continue their descent.

Leading the charge, by quite a way, were Vibrant and her followers, racing down the pillar at a breakneck pace (despite the lack of necks), laughing all the way.

"Gogogogogogo!" Vibrant cheered, urging her followers on to greater speeds.

She herself was slightly too heavy to unleash her full speed on a vertical surface, so it was with great joy that she reached the plains and was finally able to let loose, her legs flickering, followed by her body blurring into obscurity as she *dashed* with all her might. Larval demons flew in every direction, blasted into the air by the rocketing Soldier, dazed little creatures and the scent of her laughter left in her wake.

It didn't take long for her to follow the trail to its end, the Queen and her protectors looming in the distance.

"Hey-hey!" she called. "Get away from my mother!"

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Chapter 1054: Colliding Waves pt 2

Any conflict against demons within the third stratum is almost certain to end in failure. Not only are the native monsters resistant to, even empowered by, the conditions which are draining to almost all other life-forms, but the nature of the demon life cycle ensures that any long-term conflict will turn into a grind that cannot be won.

Over time, the larvae will mature and the demons will become the beneficiaries of a bottomless pool of fresh troops.

Even more difficult, is the disturbing nature of the third stratum in regards to warfare. This layer of Dungeon, more than any other, seems to thrive on chaos. The more fighting, the more carnage, the more it seethes. The mana thickens, the rate of larval spawn and development skyrockets. It's as if the third stratum itself were a living thing, a beast that became invigorated by death.

Madness begets madness in the third. Leave the demons to their battles, it never pays to get involved.

- Excerpt from "Demonology" by Xinci.

Vibrant's fighting style hadn't so much evolved over time, as accelerated. As her Skills improved, primarily her "Dash", "Charge", "Lunge" and "Quick Chomp", she'd been able to perfect her hit and run tactics to the point most enemies never got the chance to hit her back.

She ran forward, flickering over the landscape, mandibles flashing out to bite into the enemy, and then be gone, dozens of metres away by the time they recovered. A particular evolution in the approach that she loved was the latest leg mutation. Rather than simply increasing her speed, which had been her go-to approach so far, she'd decided to take an option that made the muscles and tendons inside the leg more durable to tension, effectively increasing her turn speed.

Now she could zip and zag to her heart's content, moving so quickly that no enemy could possibly hope to track her through the battlefield. It was an incredibly fun way to fight, and she loved it.

"Hi-hi!" she called to her family as she raced forward, antennae wagging with joy.

The situation didn't look great for the ants, they were being heavily pressured by the demons who continued to emerge from the tunnels below in a steady stream of flame, blades and teeth.

It didn't rattle her confidence, though. As far as Vibrant was concerned, the Colony was invincible; a fight they were yet to win was simply a fight that needed more ants to turn up.

And now she was here, so this battle was basically over.

Her body thrummed with energy and she snapped her mandibles happily as she kicked things into high gear. To the observers, she simply vanished, one moment rushing toward the mob of demons that surrounded the ant formation, the next, she was gone.

CRUNCH!

The sound came first, a mighty snap that resounded like a thunderclap. A split-second later Vibrant reappeared, already a dozen metres away and turning back for another pass, her claws kicking up dirt and larval demons as she shifted her momentum.

Only then did the demons seem to realise what had happened. A powerful-looking blade demon reared back, bellowing with rage as a leg collapsed under his weight. Others reacted, turning back, faces twisted in anger, only to see the large soldier was already upon them.

FLASH!

She vanished.

CRUNCH!

She reappeared, antennae blown back against her carapace by the force of the wind. Another demon fell. Vibrant laughed.

Several demons rushed out after her and she felt a thrill in her heart.

“You want to chase-chase? With *me*?! Come along!” she chortled.

She slowed down a little, just to draw them a little further from the pack. The moment they were close enough to try and strike....

BANG!

She accelerated, blasting back to full speed in an instant, leaving the enemy choking in her dust. They roared in anger, but it was a waste of precious time. Before they realised what had happened, she'd turned and was upon them again.

Mandibles flashed, too quick to see. A streak of light blasted by them, so fast they may have imagined it. But then came the sound.

CRUNCH!

Some of the demons were smart enough to appreciate what had happened, what would continue to happen if they tried to chase down this creature. Those unfortunates felt a chill. The ant was simply too fast, they would never touch her. If they remained in the open field, nothing awaited them but death.

So they turned and rushed back towards the pack, dragging their less intelligent comrades along. Fear, powerful enough to cut through their bloodlust, took root in them, the vision of being struck down by a blow that they couldn't see loomed large in their minds.

Vibrant saw them turn, saw them run. She sighed. Nobody ever wanted to chase her for long. Such a shame. Then she regained her energy.

If they didn't want to chase her, then she was able to chase them! That was almost as fun.

Legs dug hard into the stone plains, shards of rock flew in a wide spray, then she was off.

Almost instantly, she fell upon her prey. With their backs to her, they had no chance of avoiding her, no hope of ever seeing her approach.

CRUNCH!

CRUNCH!

CRUNCH!

CRUNCH!

Those piercing, reverberating snaps sounded out in rapid succession and the demons fell one after another. Soon enough, Vibrant stood alone in the plain as she turned this way and that, looking for someone else to chase. Seeing none, she returned her attention to the pack around the Queen. There were plenty more there to play with, surely a few of them at least would be interested in running after her.

Time to find out!

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Chapter 1055: Crashing Waves pt 3

The Queen looked down on her children and felt joy swell in her heart. It always did when they thronged around her, looking busy and enjoying their lives. No matter what they did, the Colony threw their whole selves into the task, as an ant should, and she took great pride in the achievements of her children.

Even if that task happened to be fighting.

The number of her children throwing themselves into the battle continued to swell, and they fought with furious efficiency. Every caste, ants of all shapes and sizes, fighting against the demons as if they were possessed of a spirit of cold, insectile rage.

She wasn't sure what had them so riled up, but it was pleasing to see nonetheless. The next time she enjoyed tea with the human, Enid, she would have to remember this moment and share it.

Another wave of healing light burst from her antennae, washing over the gathered ants, and they responded by redoubling their efforts against the surging demons.

The number of monsters that rose from the tunnels below had continued to rise all this time; it seemed that the only real limiting factor was the width of the opening they had to climb through. The size and strength of the demons was also climbing. Stronger tier six creatures emerged one after another, with even the odd tier seven mixed in. Only a constant barrage of acid and magic from the ever increasing

ranks of mages and scouts kept them from barreling into the melee and cutting apart the less powerful frontline ants.

Despite the fearsome third stratum monsters gaining in strength, the fight was turning the other way. After Vibrant arrived, followed by her followers racing into the conflict, the trickle of ant reinforcements turned into a flood.

Thousands more arrived every minute, throwing themselves forward relentlessly.

“Mother, it’s time to leave!” Wills called up to her.

“I won’t leave while my children are fighting,” she replied, stubborn to the end.

Wills flicked her antennae, exasperated.

“Your children are fighting all the time, all over the Dungeon. You can’t always be there for us.”

The Queen turned to focus a disapproving glare on the scout, one of her large antennae twitching, a thwacking growing more imminent.

“They are not always fighting right in front of me,” she said flatly. “I will protect the members of my family who are within my reach.”

“The situation isn’t stable!” Wills insisted. “There’s tier eight demons causing havoc down there. This whole level of the Dungeon is going crazy. It’s not that it’s become too dangerous for you here, it’s become too dangerous for all of us! We *all* need to leave!”

Well, *that* was certainly different. The Queen knew that her children wouldn’t leave until she did, so if she wanted to remove them from this danger, then she had to leave.

“Tier eight demons? Across the whole stratum? What is happening here?” she asked.

A tiny part of her was suspicious she was being misled in order to get her back to the nest. She didn’t believe that Wills would lie to her, in fact, she didn’t know what a lie *was*, but she knew that her children would go to absurd lengths to protect her, including withholding information.

“Right in the bottom of the third, some powerful demons have become active, stirring up some sort of madness. The demons who follow them are attacking *everyone*. The only reason these nutters are trying to kill us is because we happen to be the first things they see. If we leave, they’ll fight something else and we can organise a proper defence.”

The Queen processed this for a moment before she nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “Organise a fighting retreat. I will withdraw along with the soldiers.”

Wills wanted to try and persuade her further, since the soldiers would be the last to leave and take the brunt of the damage, but the Queen knew that already, it was precisely why she wanted to be there.

“Got it,” she said instead before she turned and raced away.

“Fighting retreat!” she announced to the generals as she found them. “Form a front line of soldiers, keep the artillery firing from range, stagger the lines one hundred metres apart. I want us back at the pillar in thirty minutes.”

“Got it!” they saluted and then rushed to follow the orders, organising their teams, spreading the word.

It wasn't easy to reorganise the ranks in the middle of a frenetic battle, but the ants were disciplined to the point of absurdity, and well drilled. Reform the line right in the face of the enemy? Of course! How many times?

In short order, they'd shifted their formation into a dense half circle, the Queen positioned in the centre surrounded by the strongest soldiers and generals buffing them up, a concentration of healers right behind them.

In wide lines at hundred metre intervals heading back toward the pillar, large gatherings of mages and scouts formed up, unleashing their devastating ranged firepower on the demons who continued to pour forth from the tunnels.

“Back we go!” Wills hollered. “Let's get the heck out of here.”

In perfect sync, the ants began to retreat, steadily stepping backward even as the demons continued to come at them.

After five minutes, they'd made good time, getting further and further away from the hole through which their opponents had emerged. The demons continued to rush at them and the fighting was still fierce, but with every step, the Colony got closer to extricating themselves. Further reinforcements slotted into the formation seamlessly, strengthening the ant position.

Then something changed.

A burst of fire erupted in the distance, roaring a hundred metres into the air from the tunnels.

The Queen felt a wash of intense heat roll over her, drying her eyes and blowing back her antennae.

An enormous demon rose from below, burning with the fury of a thousand forges. She felt a chill as that monstrous form turned towards her, and grinned.

You want my children? Come and try it....

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Chapter 1056: Fame and Fortune pt 3

We will be one

Within, within

Surrender the self

To him, to him

The darkest night

Will end, will end

The cage of our flesh

Will break, will break

But we will live

Forever and ever.

In him

Prayer and refrain from the “Lamentations: Spirit of the Great One”, written by Priest Beyn.

The mercenary city of Gliax was anything but efficient. Positioned on the southern shores of the golden mountain, it was a prosperous trading hub, a raucous tourist destination and the seat of power for the Guild in the fourth stratum.

Rillik stepped through the portal and into the gate district, momentarily disoriented. The handlers grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him out of the way as the next group came through behind him. He stumbled a little, caught himself, and then walked down the ramp and into the plaza, Drake, Elly and Lacos following along behind him.

It didn't take long for the four of them to find their way to the Guild registry where they confirmed their applications, found their way to the dock and boarded the vessel after paying their fees.

The ship was a hive of activity. Various crews getting their gear stowed away, catching up with old friends, alongside the usual brainless flexing that went on whenever more than one merc could be found in the same place.

Lacos, Elly and Drake were wide-eyed, looking at the hubbub and soaking in the atmosphere.

“You look like tourists,” Rillik said over his shoulder. “Just because it's your first time on a big expedition, that doesn't mean you need to announce it to the world. At least try to act like you belong here.”

All three winced, chastened at his words, before they straightened, attempting to affect an air of nonchalance. It was so patently transparent that he couldn't help but bark out a laugh, drawing more eyes to their group.

It didn't take long for them to find their bunks and pack away their belongings. While he had them together, Rillik decided to impart some advice.

“This is the first time you've been on a big expedition, and I think this is going to be even bigger than we expected. The Path must have posted this job in quite a few cities; mercs are pouring into Gliax from all over the place, and I hear a second ship is scheduled to leave not even an hour after this one.”

The three younger mercenaries nodded, trying to contain their excitement, and he smiled. Their attitude was infectious, but he'd been here too many times to get swept up in the mood.

“Don't let it get to your head. There's going to be powerful, experienced mercs out there boasting, daring each other, making bets and generally acting like pirates. Don't be fooled. When the time comes, they'll forget all of that nonsense and get down to business. Mercs who aren't careful don't live long.”

He eyed each of his crew in turn. Drake was listening, but looked impatient, as if he'd heard this a hundred times before, which he had, to be fair. Elly was nodding, hanging on his every word as she always did, while Lacos' scaled face was as unreadable as always.

Rillik reached out and poked the young man in the chest.

"Don't forget why we came here. Kill monsters, square away a tidy profit, and get out. More mercs on the job is good for us, we can operate on the fringes and avoid attention. I won't accept anyone risking the crew because they couldn't be patient."

Drake rubbed at the spot he'd been poked and scowled.

"I know, I know. I'm excited, all right? Give me a break."

Rillik grunted.

"Last thing before I let you go. It's a guarantee that some big shot is going to try and recruit crews and lone morons into an attempt to kill the mythic. When they approach you, look them in the eye and very politely tell them to jump overboard. I don't care if they promise you world-diamond underpants as a down payment, it's not happening. As long as I'm in charge of this crew, we aren't signing up to suicide missions. Clear?"

"Crystal," they chorused.

"Get the hell out of here," he told them. "Go and get drunk."

"What about you, Rillik?" Lacos asked as the other two scrambled out the door, ready to get a taste of adventure. "You aren't coming?"

The older mercenary waved him off as he kicked off his boots and pulled on his jacket.

"Hell no. I'm too old for that rubbish. You go and enjoy yourself, I'm going to grab a nap."

Lacos looked at him oddly.

"Rillik, you aren't even forty."

"May as well be a hundred and ten in the merc world. Keep an eye on the others, Lacos. I'd like all of you to reach my age at least."

The enchanted ship sped through the ocean at a ridiculous pace. With so many mercs paying, the Guild had sprung for a decent transport and they made excellent time.

After a day, they could see the branches of the Mother Tree scraping the horizon. After two, the colossal monster dominated their view.

More than a few mercenaries stared at the offending plant with naked greed in their eyes. A few made a half-hearted attempt to recruit others for a run at the tree, but there were no takers. If the Legion could chop the thing down and still not kill it, there was no way in hell a shipful of mercs stood a chance. Instead, they turned their eyes to the purpose of their mission.

Staying as far from the tree as possible, the ship glided through the water, maintaining a healthy distance from the target. At this distance, the mountain looked inoffensive, certainly not as if a mythic monster lay sleeping within.

As predicted, the earlier joviality was gone, crews gathered around their leaders who exuded the easy confidence that came with high Levels and experience.

Rillik pulled his crude sensing array from his pack and slapped it a few times until it blinked into life.

He blinked. Drake whistled. Elly goggled.

The entire mountain was *alive* with monsters.

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Chapter 1057: Fame and Fortune pt 4

The ant stared at them. Rillik, Elly, Drake and Lacos stared back.

A pause.

Rillik swore viciously, then began to turn the boat around, not bothering to hide his frustration.

“Let’s just kill it and get on the mountain,” Drake said. “There’s only one.”

Rillik didn’t bother answering, still openly cursing.

“There is never just one,” Lacos quoted the advice their leader had imparted earlier in the day, then he pointed over the monster.

Drake turned to see where his friend was pointing, it took a moment, but he eventually noticed several sets of antennae poking from behind trees or around the edge of a bush. It was like the ants were hidden, but not so well that they wouldn’t be found if you actually tried to find them.

The ant in front of them clacked its mandibles several times, the sharp, percussive noise ringing out in a rhythm that felt distinctly like mocking laughter.

“Ah, shut up you damn monster,” Rillik growled as he hauled on the oars.

The rest of the crew slumped in the boat.

“That’s the fourth time we’ve tried to land today,” Elly groaned. “How are they always waiting for us when we get there?”

“I still think we could force a landing,” Drake grumbled. “They’re only ants.”

Lacos held his chin in one webbed hand, pondering.

“Dozens of groups have made landfall already, maybe hundreds. The ants should have their... jaws? Do they have jaws? Their jaws full dealing with those mercenary groups, but still, we are met by a large number whenever we approach.”

Rillik finally stopped cursing and laid off the oars for a moment, staring back at the ant still standing in the open, watching them.

“This is why I never trust jobs without enough information,” he spat over the side, “and why we play it as cautious as we can until we learn more.”

“We’re just wasting time,” Drake said, “other groups are out there earning money and we’re just getting laughed at by an oversized insect.”

The young man fumed in his seat, glaring at the mountain as he clutched the hilt of his sword. Rillik sighed.

“Patience. Where is your patience? Do you have debts I don’t know about, Drake? If this is about money, talk to the group, we can help you out.”

A little anger bled out of the man, but he still simmered as he turned around.

“No,” he said quickly, “nothing like that.”

“Then sit down, shut up, and be *patient*. By the Path, how many times do I need to show you the folly of rushing in blind before the message starts to sink into your thick head? Are other groups on the mountain? Yes. Are they making money? Yes. Will they all make it back? Not even close. Every group is going to take heavy losses today, you mark my words.”

“What do you mean?” Elly asked. “I get that we didn’t expect it to be ants, but isn’t that a good thing? They’re first stratum monsters, not fourth, and they have strong cores. This should be easy, right?”

Rillik just shook his head.

“Don’t be stupid. Stop and think for a minute, would you? You see a monster from the first stratum laughing it up on the fourth and you think you’ve found a free buffet? Don’t be daft. And look at the way they behave. I’ve taught you to analyse monsters, what do you think we are actually seeing here?”

The three younger mercenaries considered the evidence they’d gathered from a morning of trying to reach the shore without being detected.

“They’re organised,” Elly said after a moment. “There’s a watch on the shoreline, there has to be. Except that doesn’t make sense... don’t they have bad eyesight?”

“They aren’t showing normal signs of monstrous aggression. Baiting tactics, laying traps, even openly taunting us. All signs of intelligent behaviour,” Lacos stated thoughtfully.

“There’s no doubt they’ve been monitoring us somehow,” Drake said. “It’s possible they even have some sort of primitive tracking device like we use.”

The others looked at him as if he were insane, but Rillik only nodded.

“Ants. *Smart* ants. What will the Dungeon think of next?” he grouched. “There’s thousands and thousands of the little buggers lighting up that mountain like a maypole, an ocean of gold to mercs like us, but it’ll be incredibly dangerous to try and take it.”

They sat in silence for a long while until Rillik finally sighed.

“What’s more, you haven’t realised exactly what they’re doing. Why are the ants hidden, but not hidden well? They could tuck themselves underground and you’d never know they were there, but instead

they're *almost* out of sight. They *want* us to see them, they don't want to fight. If a crew is too stupid to look, or underestimates the danger, they'll blunder in and get chomped, but someone with eyes to see will notice and back off."

"Why would they do that?" Elly asked.

"They're just buying time until the big bug wakes up. The whole lot of them are playing defence. If we landed in force, they'd probably just go underground and force us to go down there and fight them. I *hate* this."

The group fell silent as they absorbed what their leader was saying. A gloom fell over them as it began to look as if this had been a wasted trip after all.

"There has to be a way," Drake said, "we can't come out here and go back with nothing. They're just ants. We can bait one out, fight them on the water, or flood their tunnels. We still have options. All we need is a few cores to pay for our trip."

He did his best to sound reasonable, but beneath the surface was an undercurrent of tension that was obvious to the others.

"Drake," Rillik said seriously, "this is your last chance to come clean. Why are you so desperate for money right now? Cough it up."

For a moment, it seemed as if he might say something, but then his face closed over, his expression growing stony.

"It's nothing. I just don't want to have wasted all this time."

Rillik sighed.

"Look, we may still be able to salvage something, but it's going to depend on what everyone else is going to do. Damn it all. It's so much easier when the monsters are stupid."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1058: Fame and Fortune pt 5

Rillik watched as the dense pack of mercs floated over the water on a shield toward land. He shook his head.

"Do you think they'll be alright?" Elly asked, uncharacteristically soft-spoken.

"No," the golgari said, his voice flat.

"I find their tactic questionable," Lacos noted, a hint of curiosity in his tone. "If they did not find success yesterday when attacking in numbers, why try again with an even larger group?"

The leader of the crew unclenched his hands from the railing at the edge of the the deck and rolled his shoulders, trying to ease the tension there.

"Let's head down into the boat. We can talk on the way."

The other two nodded, and together they checked their gear before climbing down the rope ladder into the waiting dinghy. Once they settled in their seats, Rillik picked up the oars, pushed off the ship and resumed his speech.

“There’s two schools of thought when it comes to tackling weak monsters in large numbers. One way is to split wide and pick at them from the edges. If they try to swarm you, there’s space to just pull back to prevent getting surrounded. It’s slower, but much, much safer.”

“And the other way?”

Rillik grunted.

“Go all in. Ball up in numbers and dive into the middle. The theory goes that the number of enemies doesn’t really matter beyond a certain point. With enough people, you can layer shields, support and firepower to the point where the weak monsters can’t touch you. It can work well enough under normal circumstances.”

“Normal circumstances?” Lacos asked.

“The monsters are dumb and unorganised. It’s possible that people have run into intelligent swarm monsters before, but I’ve never heard of it. The group up strategy is just not going to work.”

“They obviously disagree.”

“They’re too greedy. They got a few kills yesterday and the cores were better than they expected.”

He shook his head.

“The potential haul is so huge they aren’t thinking about what it costs to get the little they got.”

The meeting of crew leaders had been a disaster. Most crews had been cautious, as he had, poking and prodding to assess the monsters before they went in, standard delve tactics. A smaller number had been more reckless, diving in headfirst against the ‘weak’ ants. Those crews had lost people and gotten little in return, but what they had recovered had turned heads.

Greed was the leading cause of death amongst mercs, Rillik was sure of it.

“I think they’re all dead,” he said quietly, “unless they retreat early. The moment they go underground, I think that none of them will come back alive.”

Elly’s eyes teared up and Lacos nodded soberly. Rillik felt his frustration rise but he tried to let it go. He’d said his piece in the morning, Drake was a grown man, he could make his own decisions.

Even if they got him killed.

“Look lively there, lad!” a voice bellowed.

“Y-yes, sir!” Drake replied as he raised his blade and sent another slash streaking through the air.

The ants nimbly dodged to the side, allowing the blade light to scatter across the terrain. He grit his teeth as they clacked their mandibles, sure they were mocking him.

“Damn monsters,” he grated.

They were money waiting to fall into his pockets, nothing more. Even so, the sight of so many closing in around them was unnerving. The ants were huge. Heavily armoured beasts, the frontline insects were durable beyond the mercenaries’ expectations, shrugging off a lot of punishment and retreating when they took serious wounds.

“It’s fine!” Hartos shouted. “Ball up, stay together, and we’ll be fine!”

There were almost a thousand mercenaries in the group, using their Skills and magic to push back the waves of ants, who blasted them with acid and spells of their own.

“They don’t want to commit,” Hartos observed, clapping Drake on the shoulder, “scared of our numbers. Notice that we haven’t been surrounded yet? If they get in front of us, they know we’ll fight through them, so they don’t.”

“Are they trying to invite us deeper?” Drake asked, a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

Hartos grinned savagely.

“If that’s what they want, then more fool them. We’ll smash them to bits and grab the rewards on the way out.”

The large crew leader turned to roar over the din of the battle.

“Earth manipulators! Get to the front! We’re going in!”

It took a few minutes to gather the spellcasters required as the mercenaries continued to exchange fire with an ever growing number of ants. The monsters never pushed too hard against them, preferring to stay back and hurl attacks from range. Every now and again, a surge of insects would rush forward, chomp on the shields and then fall back.

They may not have done much damage, but every charge sent Drake’s heart pounding. Soon, the mages had opened up the side of the mountain, revealing a warren of tunnels and pockets within.

The mercenaries charged forward with a shout. Inside this mountain hid enough monster cores to make each and every one of them rich beyond their wildest dreams.

With a little luck, they might even uncover the mythic. If they returned with that core, and the carcass of the beast, they could add a king’s ransom on top of the fortune.

They pushed forward, and the ants closed in behind them, scurrying over the walls and roof, skittering over each other in a constant wave of motion that was dizzying to the eye.

Drake cursed low under his breath as he tried to watch in every direction at once. Mages lofted balls of fire into the air as the environment grew darker the deeper they went. Mandibles flashed in the dark, bursts of light stabbing out of the rock to bite deep into the shields. Drake stabbed and slashed whenever he saw a clear line to a monster, but his opportunities grew fewer. Packed in underground, there was little room to move and the mercenaries didn’t have much space between them.

“Hold the formation!” Hartos bellowed. “Don’t spend your money before it's in your pocket! Focus, damn your hides!”

It was good advice, and Drake heeded it. He brushed the sweat from his forehead and blinked to clear his vision. It was hotter in the tunnels, and the fighting was growing more intense.

CRACK!

A piercing sound rang out from beneath his feet and Drake leapt to the side, pulse hammering in his temples. Directly beneath where he’d stood, an ant’s mandibles gnashed against the bottom of the shield, scraping like a blade across glass. A few seconds later, those terrifying mandibles disappeared, shrinking back into the darkness.

If the shield hadn’t been extended beneath his feet....

Suddenly, despite the hundreds and hundreds of mercenaries here with him, Drake no longer felt safe.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1059: Fame and Fortune pt 6

Hartos looked around and was satisfied with what he saw. The mercenaries had managed to penetrate the mountain in good order, and despite the intensifying attacks from the ants, they had maintained their formation.

He couldn’t help but sneer. Those fools who’d refused to join him would be crying bloody tears when they saw the haul he returned with. Thousands and thousands of ants surrounded them already, and soon enough they’d be dead, just waiting for their cores to be extracted.

But it didn’t hurt to be careful.

“Artis!” he barked.

“What?” his long-time crewmember replied, sounding harried.

“I need you for a second.”

“Make it quick,” she snapped, “this shield doesn’t maintain itself.”

He frowned, both at her tone and the implication of her words.

“Are we really being pressured that hard?”

The mage glared at him.

“Of course we are! Look around you, the bugs are endless! No matter how much firepower we pump out, they keep coming.”

“But you can hold?”

“Yes, we can hold. It’s just very difficult work!”

He nodded.

“Good. I want you to check and make sure the mythic is still asleep. We don’t want to be in here when the damn thing wakes up.”

“That’s the truth,” the mage muttered.

She fumbled about in her robes and removed the array from one of her dozens of pockets. She stared at it intensely for a few moments.

“Well?” Hartos demanded.

“There’s tens of thousands of monsters in this mountain, wait a damned second.”

He turned his eyes back to the struggle along the perimeter as the mage continued to study the device.

“No,” she said finally. “It’s still asleep.”

“You’re sure.”

“It’s hard to get clear readings with so many cores between the mythic and us, but a signal that strong is hard to miss. I’m sure. Now can I get back to work?”

“Go for it.”

Satisfied the worst case scenario could be avoided, the leader let his mind dwell on the best case scenario. If they managed to dig in deep enough and snag that mythic core....

“Push harder!” he roared to the surrounding mercs. “We get a little deeper and we can set up a perimeter. Then we can start getting paid!”

The mercenaries roared back as they redoubled their efforts. The fighting was thick along the edge of the shields as the insects continued to press in on them from all sides, but so long as the mages held the barriers in place, they would hold the advantage.

As long as the ants couldn’t use the full weight of their numbers, it didn’t matter where they fought them, on the surface or in the heart of the nest. In fact, the nest was better, since that’s where most of them were.

The young lad Drake was nearby, still doing what he could to support the more experienced fighters closer to the edge. Hartos walked forward and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Ready to make a fortune?” he said.

When Drake turned around, he noted how tense he looked. The pressure was clearly getting to him.

“Y-yeah. I’m ready,” he said.

The older mercenary steadied him with a firm grip on his shoulder.

“Relax. The mythic is still sleeping and we’re holding off the insects just fine. We’ll start pulling them into the shield and harvesting cores. You’ll be drowning in them soon enough.”

Drake’s gaze firmed and he took a deep breath to settle his nerves.

“Looking forward to it,” he grinned.

“That’s the spirit, lad!” Hartos roared. “Another ten metres and we’ll start! Listen to your crew leaders and keep your eyes on the prize! Efficient killing and harvesting is what we’re here for. No screw ups!”

His words lifted the spirits of many mercenaries who were flagging under the intense pressure the insects put out. Twice the size of a human, the giant soldiers were intimidating beasts, especially when they came in large numbers. They were everywhere, climbing over the roof, on the walls, even walking on the shield itself or lunging up from beneath. Along with the rising heat the deeper they went, it was an oppressive, suffocating way to fight. It was a good thing nobody became a mercenary for an easy day’s wage.

“Why aren’t they coming with more?” Drake asked as he flung another slash through the shield. “They could hit us with ten times this many. Why don’t they?”

Hartos chuckled.

“Don’t try to understand a monster’s mind. These ants may be smarter than the average, but that doesn’t make them as clever as you and me. Perhaps they’re protecting something and don’t want to leave their posts, or they’re fighting other monsters, or a hundred other reasons. Besides, even if more came, it wouldn’t make a difference, we haven’t shown them half of what we can do yet.”

“This is the mark!” Artis called from amongst a cluster of mages.

“Time to get to work then,” Hartos said.

He drew a breath to bellow his orders to the hundreds of gathered mercenaries, but before he said a word, the world turned upside down.

Drake felt the floor shake, then it vanished, like a magic trick. He didn’t have time to be afraid, the only thing in his mind was confusion as the ground beneath his feet simply disappeared and he began to fall into the dark.

An image flashed through his thoughts of mandibles scraping and scratching at the shield below him.

“No!” he cried as he flailed wildly with his arms, trying to grab hold of something, anything.

Similar screams and cries rang out around him as the entire expedition plunged downwards. What had happened?

No sooner had it started than it finished, the mercenaries thudding to the ground heavily. Drake crashed into the stone floor, landing on his side. He managed to brace himself and prevent his head from smacking into the rock just in time, a trick Rillik had taught him.

“What in the name of the Path was that?” Hartos bellowed from somewhere nearby. “Sound off! Get the shields up! Are you trying to get us killed? Artis!”

Voices rang out, harsh and authoritative, but with an undercurrent of tension that sent a chill through the young mercenary. Something had gone terribly wrong.

“Where is the light?!” Hartos demanded.

A second later, a dozen bright fires flared into existence, casting their surroundings into stark relief. Drake almost sagged back to the ground in relief when he didn't see any ants nearby. His mind had conjured a thousand ravenous mouths ready to descend on him and the other members of the crew.

A moment later, he realised how strange that was. Where were they? They'd been everywhere around them only a moment ago, so what had happened, did they retreat?

Something shifted behind him.

"Oh no," he heard someone groan.

He turned and looked up at the largest ant, the largest monster, he had ever seen. The almost black carapace shimmered with a deep purple glow that ran up and down that enormous chitin frame. Its jaws were horrific, each as long as a full grown man and barbed, connected to a large, wide head that sported two spherical, unreadable eyes.

The antennae drifted slowly through the air, as if utterly unperturbed by the hundreds of deadly, experienced monster hunters in front of it. Each ten metres long, they glittered like threaded gemstones as they caught the light from the fire.

"It's supposed to be asleep," Hartos mumbled, and Drake's heart sank.

He'd known it the moment he'd seen it, but to have it confirmed. A mythic rank monster. Right in front of him. His eyes widened in terror.

Those massive jaws flexed and a dozen men leapt back, brandishing their weapons in shaking hands.

"It was a trap," Artis, the mage, said. "The ants weren't trying to kill us, or stop us, they wanted to *feed us to that thing!*"

"It's supposed to be asleep!" Hartos bellowed at her.

"They tricked the detector!"

"Isn't that impossible?"

"Apparently not!" she shrieked back, near hysterical.

The ant barely reacted as they yelled back and forth, merely watching, patiently. Then it stepped forward.

Several hundred mercenaries leapt back.

[This wasn't my idea,] a voice stabbed into Drake's mind, pressing down on his consciousness with its size and power. [They do things like this without asking.]

"Where are the wards, damnit all?" Hartos shouted, but no one was listening, all eyes were fixed on the creature.

It stared back at them with those cold, alien eyes.

[To be honest, I would have let you go. But... you should never have killed my sisters. That is the one thing I can never allow.]

The purple light shifting across the monster's carapace flared, then exploded outward. Drake turned to dash away, his feet dug into the hard stone beneath his feet, except they didn't.

He looked down in shock to see he had risen from the ground, his feet scrabbling through nothing but air. He rose higher, along with every other mercenary in the room.

[Sorry about this. I haven't worked out how to control it yet. In fact, why am I even apologising? Actually, the apology is fine, gotta keep it classy, Anthony. Anyway, better luck next time.]

Drake's heart dropped. Then his ascent stopped. He dangled there, along with hundreds of others, for one terrifying beat.

Then they fell. Fast.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1060: Fame and Fortune Final

"Finally," Rillik grunted.

"This was far more effort than I expected," Lacos agreed, fatigue breaking through his normally indefatigable visage.

"If you don't mind," Elly said through gritted teeth, "would you hurry up and finish the job? I'm the one who has to bind them."

"Right, sorry."

The crew leader stepped forward, blade in hand, and sized up the two ants they had, after much difficulty, managed to separate from the pack and capture. Restrained for the moment, they thrashed and struggled under the influence of Elly's magic as he tried to find the best angle to approach for a clean kill.

The gaps in the carapace were the best approach, but the damn creatures were intelligent and shifted themselves every time he approached.

"Elly, can you bind them a little tighter? I don't want to ruin the carapace if I can help it."

It looked heavily mutated and might be worth as much as the core if they could bring it all back.

"No, I can't," she ground out, "they're tougher than they look. Get it done quick, I can't hold them forever."

Hunting intelligent monsters was always such a pain. Rillik much preferred stronger, stupid targets than creatures like these. They'd had to rely heavily on Lacos' powers of diversion and illusion to lure these two away from the rest, but they wouldn't have long until they were swarmed.

"Fine, I'll just grab the cores," he said.

Such a waste, but circumstances were what they were. Better to get out with something than nothing at all. These two cores would almost cover the cost of the trip, though not for recruiting and training up a new member.

That idiot, Drake. Why is it so hard to find people who are patient?

He pulled back his arm and the blade began to shine, but then something happened that stilled his hand. First, the ants went still, no longer trying to break free. Instead, they turned to look behind them. Second, he felt a vast presence at the edge of his awareness suddenly reveal itself.

“What’s wrong?” Elly demanded. “Hurry up and get it done!”

Rillik’s hand fell to his side and he sighed heavily.

“Let them go,” he said.

“WHAT? Are you out of your mind?!”

The big golgari turned to look at her, letting the fear in his eyes convince her.

“It’s our only hope,” he said quietly. “Let them go.”

A moment later, she sensed it for herself, going pale as a ghost when that powerful aura washed over her senses. As quickly as she could, she unwove the nets that bound the ants to the ground, and the monsters stood, but didn’t move. They knew they were perfectly safe.

“Can we run?” Lacos asked, his voice tight with tension. “I can swim deep, try and get help from my people.”

“Don’t bother,” Rillik said, and he sat down, placing his blade flat on the ground by his side. “This is a mythic monster, there’s nowhere we can run. If we had an hour, we still couldn’t get away.”

He was proud that his voice didn’t tremble as he spoke, despite the unsettling terror that he felt and his own imminent demise. The formerly captured ants hadn’t leapt on them and chewed them to bits, which was a good sign. There was no reason for the creature to spare them, but he had to seize whatever chance he could, for the sake of his crew.

Or what was left of it. With the monster awake, the chance of Drake surviving had gone to zero.

After a moment, Elly and Lacos sat down next to him to await their fate. It was almost surreal, sitting alongside two monsters, waiting to see if another would spare them.

“Sorry I led you into this,” Rillik said. “I knew it was a risk, but I decided to come anyway.”

“This has always been a possibility,” Lacos said. “I do not blame you in the slightest.”

“We knew what we were getting into, boss,” Elly agreed. “It was us that brought the job to you.”

They settled into silence, each waiting with their hearts pounding in their chests as that oppressive presence drew closer and closer.

When it finally came into view, Rillik couldn’t help but sigh in awe. It was the first time he had laid eyes on a mythic monster, and it did not disappoint.

Huge, the ant was a dominating physical presence. Fifteen metres long, at least, it towered over them, its eyes sitting five metres off the ground. The weight of its aura was suffocating, pressing down on them to the point it became hard to breathe.

Covered in a dark carapace that glittered with purple light, the ant looked magical, mysterious, and deadly. It would have been an incredible prize to bring home had someone managed it, but hunting monsters of this calibre was nothing but a dream to Rillik. Only the most elite delvers would attempt such a feat, and even they would likely avoid it if their target was surrounded by a hundred thousand support monsters.

Only the Legion, or a powerful nation, would be able to take this monster down.

The creature gazed down at them sitting on the ground as it approached. It was unreadable, giving Rillik no clue as to what it would do to them. Depending on mercy from a monster was the last resort for any delver, and also their final one. Monsters weren't known for their mercy. Not that he blamed them, he hunted and killed them for a living, so why would he expect them to show him something he had never shown them?

He drew a long shuddering breath, then raised his hands in the air. Even if it was hypocrisy, he would do anything to give Elly and Lacos a chance to survive.

"We surrender," he said.

The antennae swayed slowly in front of him before a thought pushed its way into his mind.

[If you want to communicate with monsters, use mind magic. I mean, what do you want me to do, chat back with my mouth?]

The ant lifted its head to reveal its horrific mouth set underneath the spot its mandibles joined its head. Thankfully, it lowered its head back down to hide them.

[Can't exactly say that ants have the gift of the gab, you know what I mean?]

Rillik stared up at the majestic creature as its voice rang in his mind. Despite everything, the monster sounded... surprisingly young. Not at all what he'd expected.

[Ah. It's generally considered dangerous to engage in mind magic with monsters unless you have specific training and protections. The mind of a monster is... alien, and hazardous.]

The giant ant clacked its mandibles thoughtfully.

[That makes sense, actually. Garralosh's mind was... holy moly, where do I even start? No need to panic, I'm not going to bite your head off or drive you insane or anything.]

A pause as if the ant was listening to something else. Rillik thought he saw something extend from the shadow beneath the giant monster, then retreat back into the ground.

[... And nobody *else* is going to drive you insane, either,] the monster clarified, worryingly. Then it gazed at them for a moment.

[You're going to be fine,] it said finally, and Rillik's heart froze in his chest as hope almost choked him. This meeting hadn't gone anything like what he'd expected, but the monster was going to spare them. [It was close, but you didn't harm any members of the family, so we can let you go. I don't know if that means you're worse at your job, or smarter than the others, but hey, it worked out for you.]

Smarter. *Definitely* smarter.

[Anyways, you guys are professional monster hunters, right? You delve into the Dungeon to hunt and kill creatures?]

The golgari warrior hesitated a moment before he nodded. There was no point denying what he was at this point. Oddly, the ant seemed pleased.

[Great, that's just what we need. Look, I can't stay here long, I've got places to be, but I wanted to give you some work real quick.]

Another ant stepped forward and dropped a glittering monster corpse on the ground. Rillik, Elly and Lacos stared down at it.

[This... is a diamond centipede,] the ant said with clear distaste. [For every one you kill and bring to the Colony, we'll pay double the value in cores.]

... It wanted... to give them a job?

[You want us to hunt these things?] Rillik asked carefully. [And you'll pay us?]

[Absolutely,] the mythic monster confirmed, its aura boiling and stirring the blood in the golgari's chest. [There's no limit on this request. I don't care if they get hunted to extinction. In fact, that's the point. Just don't go hunting in the Colony's territory, we can handle that part. Good luck. I gotta go.]

With that, a smaller ant flickered into existence, landed on the giant monster's back, then they both flickered and disappeared, leaving a gobsmacked Rillik and crew staring up at where it had been.

"Am I dreaming?" he mumbled.