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Chapter 551: Tickles denied

As if the first gate wasn't impressive enough, the second one is even larger, thicker and more heavily enchanted than the first. Not to mention it positively bristles with ants in defended lookout posts. How anyone could possibly break through, I've no idea. If another wave happened, we'd be laughing at the monsters on the outside. Unless a battering ram made from living metal happens to spawn nearby, I don't think anything will get through.

That's not a challenge, Gandalf! Don't you dare create that frickin' creature just to spite me!

After passing through the second gate, the procession began to break up. Sarah and Jim are led to a nearby chamber to rest as the scouts, soldiers and generals break away to find their own chambers to enjoy their rest. As they march past me I don't see the grateful ants I thought I would, but tense and somewhat resentful ones. You hate rest that much?! For a brief moment I contemplate increasing their enforced break to twenty four hours, but managed to contain myself.

"I told you they wouldn't like it."

"Sloan? Bah! Who cares if they don't like it? Rest is important and we're all extremely fatigued. They need it."

She shrugs.

"You may be right about that. I know *I'm* exhausted."

I look at her appraisingly.

"That's not something I hear many members of the council admit to, Sloan. Is this indicative of growth?"

"Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps I've just been working harder."

"You're tier four now, so you should be."

"True."

With the soldier caste gone, the workers and crafters also peel away to find their own places to rest, making sure to give me the stink eye as they leave. I make it a point to stare them down, waving them away with my antennae. Yeah, you go rest and you freakin' like it.

Without any destination in mind, I start to wander down a branching tunnel, just taking in the design with my pets in tow. The further I go, the more of my siblings begin to cover the surface of the tunnel and I notice something different. The way the tunnel has been shaped is off. Only when I pause, causing a few hurried ants to crawl over me since I'm holding up traffic, do I realise the difference. In the first nest, tunnels were usually round and fairly narrow. Like you would imagine the inside of an ant nest to be back on Earth. Cramped, little tunnels that connect similarly cramped chambers together.

This is different. The tunnel is wide, with enough overhead space to allow 'two lanes' of traffic to exist, one on the floor and one on the ceiling. More than that, the shape of the floor and ceiling aren't flat, but

rather folded into waves, like the letter 'w'. By watching the ants travelling around me, I realise that this increases the surface area that can be gripped, allowing more ants to move through at the same time. The ceiling is shaped the same way, but with the dips and valleys opposite to the floor, so the same distance is maintained from the ground and the roof at all times. It's a little thing, but it's super clever! They've really been putting those brains I gave them to good use! Chuffed, I keep moving down the tunnel, taking in the sights.

After a few dozen metres, I notice something that I haven't seen before embedded in one of the walls. Curious, I skitter over to it so I can make a more thorough inspection. It looks like a metal plate, indented with numerous grooves that form a strange pattern. I look at the thing with interest, unable to work out what it's for. Have the Carvers decided to engage in some sort of modern art project? I wouldn't call the thing objectively beautiful, but it certainly is different. Then all of a sudden the metal plate speaks at me.

"Remember, daily rest is mandatory!"

"Gah!"

I leap back in surprise when my antennae register the ant pheromones emitting from the thing. What the heck was that?! It speaks? Obviously I know that it isn't speaking as an ant would, of its own volition. This is clearly a clever invention that can store pheromonal messages and 'play' them like a recording! Astounding!

I approach it once more and start tippy tapping it with my antennae, in the hopes of detecting exactly what is happening. I can't sense a damn thing though. Once it had spread its message, all sign of pheromones have vanished without a trace. Are they magically developed? That would be nuts. Curiosity fulfilled, I continued to make my way within the nest.

When we come across a chamber, the first thing I notice is its unusual size. Much like the tunnels, it's been built wider, with a higher ceiling and the surfaces are all constructed with that same wavy rise and fall, dotted with side tunnels. My antennae tingle with a constant stream of ant communication and the persistent trails that advertise where each tunnel leads. Rather disturbingly, in the centre of the chamber, a rather elaborate looking stone statue of what appears to be me stands proudly, pointing into the distance with one leg as the antennae slope forward at a noble and confident angle. An angle you would never find my own antennae at, by the way.

These damn ants with their carvings and statues! Why? Why would ants like statues?! It makes no sense! I feel a bubbling rage building up in my carapace and for a moment I'm tempted to go down there and smack the thing down, but rather quickly I start to get noticed. Which isn't hard when Tiny, Crinis and Invidia are trailing along behind me.

It isn't much, but the ants slow down a touch when they see me, some of them muttering or whispering to each other as they rush past.

[You guys probably need a bit of rest. Find yourselves a comfortable chamber and get some sleep. We'll go out hunting tomorrow before we make any long term plans.]

[Hmm. Slip.]

[Understood, Master. You won't go far, will you?]

[No...]

[Fine.]

[Preciousssss sssleep. I wantsss it!]

The three of them wander off and I'm confident it won't be long until a helpful ant leads them to a quiet spot. For myself, I want to try and find somewhere a little less crowded. Maybe I'll go play with the brood. Those little grubs are always in need of a good tickling! Putting my antennae down I start to follow the trails to the brood chambers, joining into the winding trails that flow this way and that throughout the nest. Before long I tumble into a soothing chamber filled with wiggling larvae, lovingly tended by the ever watchful brood tenders.

"Hey all," I say, "just looking for a quiet spot. Mind if I hang out here for a while?"

These grubs look criminally under-tickled! I have much work to do. Waiting for a response, I check on the ants and notice that they don't seem to be looking at me. This is something that's hard to tell amongst us members of the Colony, since we see pretty close to omni-directionally, but it's a skill I've been developing. They're watching something behind me, right in my blind spot. I have a bad feeling about this.

"Hello Mothe-"

THWACK!

Dammit! She could never have snuck up on me if I wasn't distracted by the grubs!

"Welcome home, child. It's been some time since I saw you."

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Chapter 552: Words with Mother

"Oh! Hello there Mother... I, uh, didn't expect to see you here!"

"In the brood chambers, child? Where else would I be?"

I can almost sense another thwack coming... The first one really hurt! She's had a serious increase to her physical stats since her evolution. I rub the top of my head with an antenna as I quickly ponder my response.

"Wherever you want to be, Mother?"

THWACK!

Ouch!

"You wouldn't be suggesting I would skip out on my duty to the Colony, would you?"

"Of course not! Who would ever think of such a thing?!"

Dangit, Mother! My poor head! What did I even do? Turning around to face my overbearing parent, I take a chance to see how she's been faring. She looks fine, no wounds or scarring to mar her carapace. That ever-present twinkle in her eye is still apparent, as is the unusual level of force she's able to generate with her antennae. There must be a 'mother' perk buried in the system somewhere that grants bonus damage when disciplining children, otherwise it just doesn't make sense.

"If you're mad at me, Mother, then please just tell me what I've done," I capitulate.

I don't have the heart to try and get out of my well-earned 'thwacks'. I've once again evaded my responsibilities and brought danger down on the Colony. A few knocks on the head are the least of what I deserve. Instead, the Queen just looks down at me, curious.

"I am not mad at you, child. I am pleased to see you."

"Got a funny way of showing it..." I mutter.

"What was that? I didn't quite catch the scent."

"Ah, nothing! Well, uh. It's nice to see you in such good health! Managing to get out much?"

"Why yes. I leave the Colony for a daily hunt in order to secure my own Biomass. The prey in the nearby tunnels is becoming rather thin, however. I may need to start ranging further..."

They actually let the Queen out for *hunts*? Not that they could stop her, I suppose, but yikes. I'd love to have seen the council members' faces when they realised the Queen was going to leave their fortress of a nest and run around in the tunnels.

"I'm going to assume you have an escort?"

The Queen sighs.

"Yes. They insist and I don't really want to say no, even if I do think it's a bit of a waste. Those children could all be contributing in a more meaningful way. I feel bad for them."

She shouldn't.

"Mother, I think if you were to ask, you'd find that every member of your escort is more than happy to be there. I'm sure of it, in fact."

The honour of guarding the Queen? Almost every ant in the Colony would be delighted to have the chance. I've no doubt that every member of her guards was carefully chosen to be the best at what they do. No way the council would leave the health of their Mother to chance.

This chamber really is packed with brood. Dozens of brood tenders pick amongst the little grubs, ensuring that each is fed and cleaned, ready to take on the next step in their lifecycle and become a pupa. Pretty clear that the Queens have been busy down here.

"Looks like the rate of growth has exploded," I tip an antenna at the young, "are we still making sure each hatchling is educated properly?"

"Yes," she assures me. "Although the majority of the brood are born in this nest, they are transported to the first nest during the pupal stage. When they emerge they are taken through the training program

before they enter service. I try to keep up with what is being done with the new children, just so I know they're being taken care of."

"Well, that's good. I was a bit worried that they'd get slack once the population started to explode. Must be hard for them to rustle up enough Biomass and XP for this many hatchlings though..."

There really are a lot. I don't even know how many eggs are being laid each day right now, could it be as many as a thousand a day?! That would be insane...

"This was mentioned to me once," the Queen informs me, "I believe that the creation of two new nests is being planned in order to extend the hunting grounds."

TWO more nests? Already?! When I left, this one hadn't even been started?! Things are really accelerating now... Things will spiral out of control pretty darn fast soon. I don't want to pretend I'll be able to manage this Colony once the population hits the millions. If we keep expanding at this rate, that'll be sooner rather than later. And what sort of effect will the Vestibule have on me with that many little voices whispering in the back of my mind? They're already so insistent, I can feel them tugging at my awareness, nudging me in different directions than I would otherwise take. The Collective Will Vestibule does exactly what it says on the tin, it feeds me the Will of all of the ants within range, telling me what they want, driving me to act as the agent of that super-mind.

And they are implacable. They want me to hunt, to battle, to dig, to build, to seek and destroy our enemies and tend the young. They want all of those with an intensity that is beyond anything a human could achieve. Even as familiar with ants as I am, even I'm a little shocked that I never seem to detect the slightest ripple of selfish desire. Always the collective, putting the Colony above themselves, never a solitary thought of indulgence or relaxation. At this point, I don't even know what I would do if one did start to think that way. Punish them? Celebrate them? Perhaps as we expand, it's only inevitable that such an individual will be born.

As I ponder the inevitable future of the Colony, the Queen looks down on me patiently.

"What are you pondering, child? Don't you have important work to be about? I know that many are waiting to speak with you."

Her words shake me out of my contemplation. I have a massive list of jobs to get done. I need to share the things I've learned about spell casting with the Mages, I have to talk to the Core Shapers and pass on the techniques and strategies I learned from the Sophos. Then I should meet with the council about our planning in regards to the coming conflict. Not to mention the expansion of our territory and how I might help with that. I should probably pay a visit to the surface (if I even can) and check in with the humans and the upper nest, just to make sure things are still peaceful up there. So much to do!

"Yes that's true," I nod my antennae, "there's a huge list of things I have to get done. Thanks for the reminder."

I turn and march toward the nearest grub.

"What are you doing, child?" The Queen asks, confused.

"I decided to start with the most important job first. Grub tickling!"

THWACK!

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Chapter 553: A busy day in the antborough

Despite receiving the justice of my mother, I stoically endured her disapproving gaze for as long as I could manage in order to tickle grubs. Their joyful wiggles warmed my heart even as I quailed inside, anticipating another THWACK at any moment. In the end, I could only hold out for ten minutes before I slunk from the chamber, only to find myself in even more sacred territory, the egg laying room!

Victoriant and Antionette look up at me in surprise as I crawl down through a gap in the ceiling.

"Eldest! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know me. Just checking in on everyone and seeing how things are going."

"He's avoiding work," the Queen calls out as she enters the chamber after me.

The two younger Queens give each other a brief look.

"The Eldest? Avoiding work? Surely you jest Mother!"

"Such a thing is impossible!"

The two of them laugh together and I hasten to cut Mother off before she can destroy my reputation. What can I use to distract her?!

"Ah! Is that Aphy the aphid Queen I see? She's gotten big!"

It's true, in one corner of the egg laying chamber, a much larger than before aphid Queen is nibbling on some Biomass next to her own little pile of eggs, looking very pleased with herself.

"Yes, she evolved not that long ago," the Queen can't help but rush over to dote on her pet with pats and scritches. "I wasn't sure about bringing her down to this Strata, but in the end I felt a lot more comfortable when she's somewhere I can keep an eye on her. You do like to get up to mischief, don't you Aphy?"

"Chirrup!"

The much smaller bug monster makes a noise of delight as it leans into the Queen's antenna like some sort of cat.

"The brood tenders take care of the aphid young as well?" I ask.

"Of course!" Victoriant chips in, "they seem to get the bonus stats from their care just as well as the hatchlings do, and each aphid will pay the colony back far more Biomass that we spend on Aphy to get them hatched."

"So the feeding is going well in the marsh expanse?"

"Aphy's children are far more useful than that," the Queen tells me warmly, still radiating affection towards her pet, "they've been spread to four separate expanses in the first Strata now."

FOUR!?

"Since when did we own that much territory?" I ask, flabbergasted.

"After you left, the expansion happened pretty quickly," Antionette muses. "The Generals, Soldiers and Scouts were super excited about it. They were all fired up every time they found a new expanse. I think they sent a thousand Soldiers into the Red Woods Expanse on the first day they found it."

A thousand?! But why?!

"I heard the same," Victoriant confirms, "I think they conquered the whole thing in two hours."

Yeesh, they really were getting carried away.

"How many members of the Colony *are* there, right now?" I ask. "The number can't be that high, can it?"

There's a moment of reflective silence as the three gathered Queens ponder for a moment.

"You know, child, I'm not exactly sure," Mother answers me. "I haven't been keeping count... perhaps the brood tenders on the council might know?"

The two younger Queens both echo the sentiment, they've no idea. I can get a rough sense of how many are in range of the Vestibule, but I can't actually count them precisely.

"I'll ask as I move around the nest, someone must be keeping a count."

Ah well, can't put it off any longer. I limber up my legs and make my way up the wall.

"Heading out, child?" The Queen asks, barely concealed amusement peppering her scent.

"Yes, Mother. The work never ends, as well you know."

"An end to work? What a terrible thought," she muses before turning back to pat Aphy some more.

Hah. I've only just gotten back and already a vacation is starting to sound nice. No! Bad Anthony! Stay firm! Alright then, time to head over to the core shapers, then I'll check in with the mages and teach them a few things. I need to catch up with the carvers, talk about their plans. Maybe there's some engineering or building knowledge tucked away in my head somewhere... Unlikely, but maybe I can describe a few cool buildings and see if it inspires them?

I need to find who's making all these carvings of me as well. And the statues! Enough is enough already!

After that... council I suppose, then surface. Yeesh, so much to do. I might need to try and slip some torpor in there somewhere, just in case I need a mental break. Full of determination, I follow the scent trails to the core shaper workshop and find both Bella and Ellie hard at work. It takes a few hours but I'm able to demonstrate the new techniques I've learned and share all the knowledge of monster builds that I picked up from the Shapers. The two council members seem giddy with delight at these gifts and declare that they must be committed to the library immediately!

"Library?" I ask, puzzled.

"Of course!" Ellie proclaims, "we need to preserve this information for further study."

"Yeah, but how? Since when do you have a library?"

"Oh! You haven't seen one yet? The carvers got the idea from the humans, I think. A way to store information. Check it out!"

She rushes over the one side of the busy chamber and returns with a metal plate grasped gently in her mandibles.

She places it on the table and I peer at the thing closely. It looks like a page, but instead of lines of text, it has grooves filled with a clear, gel like substance. I'm a little nervous that it's going to shout something at me like the one I found in the tunnel, but I bring an antenna down to smell it.

"Core experiment #424. Attempting to make something useful out of the centipede variety of monster has proven to be impossible. A more hopeless, failed concept of a monster is yet to be -."

"You've found a way to preserve pheromones?!"

"Indeed! It's very useful being able to 'read'. Saves a lot of time around here, let me tell you." Ellie assures me.

"Efficiency is way up," Bella confirms.

The rate these ants are developing is out of control.

"Well, good luck with what I told you. I hope it helps out a bit."

I make a hasty farewell and totter off to my next meeting. Books? Ants with books. I guess it makes sense in a way, I just didn't think they'd get going this fast. How long until they put an ant on the moon? Neil Antstrong may be just a few generations away!

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Chapter 554: Upturning the applecart

After my visit to the core shapers and taking in their own advancements, I hustle off to find Propellant and Coolant. I track down the two mages busily training their own Skills and overseeing the progress of their fellow caste members in the 'mage training area'. Appropriate, I suppose. A rather large, enclosed place that puts me somewhat in mind of a bowling alley. Long, straight lanes to the left and right on both the floor and the ceiling, each ending in a carved, enchanted target which the ants hurl spells at.

The noise is deafening. Roaring flames, shattering ice, splashing water, crunching stone and rushing air are all around, the sounds mingling into a shattering din. Luckily, hearing has nothing to do with being able to talk when you're an ant, so I manage to find who I'm looking for by asking around.

"Hello, Eldest," Coolant welcomes me, "how do you like our new training facility?"

"It's looking good!" I congratulate the two of them, "presumably you're seeing some good results from it?"

She flicks an antenna with authority.

"At the moment we have three separate training areas that are being assessed. All of these mages report daily on their MP used, number of spells cast and Skill gains. Hopefully, we'll have some hard data soon and can adjust our training to be more optimised."

Already conducting experiments and trying to optimise the training time? They grow up so fast... Also, *three* separate locations? Looking around, there must be at least a hundred mages in here! I keep forgetting how many of us there are now. Focusing on why I've come, I tell the two council members all about my experience with the Golgari Shapers, the ways of training, different levels of magic, the various elements and combinations thereof, and the extraordinary power of mind magic when combined with high stats.

It's a lot for the two of them to digest and I leave them to it after letting them know I'll be hosting a council meeting later on. With that job ticked off, it's time to chase down the carvers, Tungstant and Cobalt. The two of them are much harder to find, neither of them are working in the forges, enchanting chambers or even in the statuary.

Yes. A *statuary*. I know I wanted to let the ants do whatever they felt called to them, let them find their own way in life... I just didn't expect *statues*!

Sigh.

Just let it go. It makes them happy, what's the harm in it? I'll just move on. Before I leave that particular chamber I just ask very politely if they would consider other subjects for their works. I'm not sure how well they listen to that suggestion, most of them appeared to be taking my measurements with their antennae whilst I was talking.

I gladly hustle my way out of there and eventually track down the two I'm looking for in a 'design sketching chamber'. As I enter, I don't see the two of them drawing anything, but rather talking to each other as they fuss over an intricate 3D model of carved stone.

"Looks good!" I say as I approach. "Is that the layout of this nest?"

They startle a little as I approach, so engrossed in their discussion that they don't notice me squeeze into the room.

"Oh, Eldest!" Cobalt greets me. "No, not at all. This is the proposed design for the *third* nest."

"What do you mean, proposed? I thought this was accepted!" Tungstant protests.

"With this tunnel layout? *Please*."

"You have to compromise somewhere, Cobalt!" The other carver fumes. "The stone in the third quadrant is too soft! Proper design has to be shaped to suite the environment, not *forced* on it!"

"You call this suiting the environment? This is a hack! Difficult problems require elegant solutions!"

"What's Ellie got to do with this?"

"Whoa there, you two. Chill out a little."

I interrupt them before they launch into what feels like a well-worn argument and they remain silent as I inspect the model. It really is a fantastic piece of work. Every chamber is perfectly shaped to the desired dimensions, not to mention they are 'open' on one side to show the intricately formed interior of every space. Some of the connections between pieces are spiderweb thin, appearing as delicate as blown glass.

"How the heck do you make something like this?" I ask them in wonder.

"Oh, it's something we figured out. Certain types of rock can hold mana which makes them more durable," Tungstant informs me.

I'm impressed as heck! What an incredible display of skill! I cast my eyes over the intricate connection of chambers, tunnels, with their elaborate defences. In the heart of the nest design lies the egg laying and brood chambers, as one would expect, complete with tiny stone grub carvings.

"Do we even have Queens to populate this nest?" I ask. "I thought there were only the three here and then another group in the first nest?"

Cobalt answers me.

"Another six Queens have begun being raised as soon as this nest was completed," she says, "according to our timetable, we should have the new nests in a solid, defensible state by the time they are ready to move down."

Six more Queen's? Almost doubling the rate of egg laying we currently have... yikes. I shake off my shock and spend a little time talking to the two of them about whatever I can recall from Earth that pertained to construction. Some of it is just words, like "superstructure", or "load bearing walls", but perhaps more useful are the descriptions of famous buildings that I could still picture. The Pyramids, the Eiffel tower, the statue of liberty, stadiums, hospitals, skyscrapers. Basically, I dump everything I think of on them and leave it for them to sort out. Hopefully, they'll be able to pull at least a little workable information from the mess I just handed over.

"Ah! Don't forget about the council meeting. Two hours!" I call back to them as I leave their chamber.

The two of them are standing in silent contemplation and don't respond to me before I'm gone. I'm sure they caught my scent, it'll be fine. With two hours to kill before the meeting begins, I have a little time on my claws. What to do?

[Master Mind Magic Affinity (IV) has reached Level 8.]

Oh! Nice! Ever since my gruelling training with Torriona, I've been in the habit of constantly working my sub-brains, always handling one type of construct or another. Right now, all three brains are grinding away on Mind Magic, trying to push closer to that rank five threshold. With my feet planted firmly in the mana rich walls of the Dungeon, I don't have any issue with mana and thanks to my Vestibule, mental fatigue isn't as much of an issue, meaning the training has been more effective than ever!

I'd really rather not, but I suppose I may as well head over to that mage training area and work on my spells. Still a long way to go before I hit that elemental fusion I'm after. I wonder what sort of Skill I'll get when I finally manage to complete it? Well, I just hope it doesn't suck.

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Chapter 555: Council meeting

"Was it really necessary to construct a council meeting chamber? We hardly ever have a meeting..."

It's quite nice too. They even have what appear to be ant specific chairs. They look like a padded bench in three sections, one for each of our body segments, joined together at the right angle for us to rest on them. Interestingly, this means that there's a specific chair for each of us due to the polymorphic nature of our colony. One size doesn't fit all when it comes to us. The chairs are arranged in a wide circle with a low round table carved from pure rock in the centre. Atop the table sits a flattened map of the dungeon engraved on the surface in perfect detail.

"I can't help but feel like this is more effort than was needed."

Since we entered from the roof, the walls are free from openings and host an incredible panoramic carving of the twenty, with myself featuring prominently, because of course. It's nice to see Grant is also given pride of place, her sacrifice remembered with a wonderful mural of her service to our family. Her death still weighs on me heavily, perhaps that's a large part of why I needed to get away from the colony after the battle. Don't worry Grant, I won't run away anymore...

"It's fine, isn't it Eldest? These meetings are usually important, right? Seems like we should hold them in an important looking place," Wills gives her thoughts.

"I can see what the Eldest is saying," Tungstant muses, "this space is close to the centre of the nest and could have been used for all sorts of things."

"Right? We can hold these meetings in any tunnel, no need to get fancy," I press.

"Well, I think it's nice," says Antionette as she settles onto her chair. "We need to be worthy of the space our family has prepared for us."

That's a good sentiment. A little hesitant, I crawl over my own seat and gradually lower myself down into it, allowing my not insignificant weight to fall on it. It's surprisingly comfy, allowing my legs to just hang loose, without any need to support the rest of me.

"I think it's important that we clearly assess our current situation," Victor leads off, "what are our threats? Where is the enemy?"

"It may be more valuable to understand where the colony stands as a whole, as opposed to focusing on our foes," Sloan disagrees.

"I'm more interested in that, to start with," I say, "There's so much happening right now that I don't know about. The development of our knowledge, techniques and craftsmanship is way beyond what I expected at this point."

Each of the council members shifts and wiggles their antennae with glee, pleased with this compliment, especially the carvers.

"We only did as you asked of us, Eldest," Mendant answers me, "we tried to draw every ounce of information from the humans that we could and adapt it to our needs."

"I'm just surprised at what you picked up. Like, the magnificent carvings and artworks," I gesture to the walls with one antenna, "not exactly the sort of thing I expected the colony to prioritise."

The rest of the council shift slightly to take in the walls a little better.

"Well, to be honest, most of us didn't really see the point of it," Cobalt admits.

"It was really only a small group of carvers who decided to pick it up in earnest," Tungstant says.

"Any idea why?" I'm curious.

"I'm not sure, you might have to ask them yourself. The rest of the carvers who specialise in construction have picked up the Skill to one degree or another. Once the bar for aesthetics had been set, we were determined that it would uniform. Since it doesn't detract from the function of the spaces, there's not really any harm," Cobalt says.

"Fine. I just want it put on the record that I'm uncomfortable with having so many images of myself hung up everywhere."

"Uh... What's the 'record'," Coolant asks.

"Like, a written record of our meeting."

"Ooh" they chorus.

"Let's do that," Mendant says.

"No problem, I'll write it all down later and we can publish it in one of the central tunnels. That way anyone can read it," Bella declares.

"Alright, fine! Now what the heck is going on with the colony?"

"I'll start!" Vibrant throws an antenna into the air. "You all talk too much! So, after you left we took a whole bunch of new territory and expanse', you can see them here, here and over there." She raises up a leg to point at the map. "We got a whole bunch of food and experience. New nest is here, new nests going over there and around here somewhere. We think there's an underground city around here somewhere and -"

"Wait, what?!" I shout.

"A city, or something like it. The signs are there, at least. Shaped passages, footprints, noises... So, anyway -"

"We need to seize that city."

Silence falls at the table, no scent hanging in the air.

"That's... unusual, coming from you, Eldest," Advant observes.

"Portals. I explained this to Coolant and Propellant already, but our foes can move vast distances in an instant with this magic. If there are portals in that city..."

"They'll appear right next to us?" Sloan asks slowly.

"Right. This blank zone which might have a city in it... that's right between this nest and the proposed third. If an army were to suddenly appear there, we'll have a difficult fight on our claws."

"The Eldest is right," Victor says, "we need to strike first to neutralise this threat. We can mobilise a force in two hours."

"We can't move that quickly!" Advant protests. "We have no idea what we're going into. We cannot afford to throw lives away before this conflict even begins!"

Another moment of contemplation.

"I agree with Advant. We should still have a little time, they still don't know exactly where we are. A few days. Scout it out, push deeper and get a clearer picture. We need to act fast."

"Great!" Vibrant cheers.

"I'll head to the village and talk to them about this. There may be a way they can help. I want Cobalt and Mendant to come with me. I have a few things to discuss with you two. We'll come back to this meeting in a day, when we know more. And can someone *please* get me a count of how many ants there are!"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 556: What's going on up here?

The council meeting was cut brutally short, the revelation of a possible city underground, so close to where the Colony is operating, warranted immediate investigation. If an enormous pile of Golgari pop out of a city, right on our doorstep, our home ground advantage will go for nothing. Not to mention they could flank us horrifically. I also need to be wary of the possible reinforcements that they call in. We need to move fast, uncomfortably fast.

To this end, I hurry to gather up my entourage for this whirlwind trip to the surface. I pick up Torrina and Corun before gathering my pets. Rather than bring them with me, I decide to send them in support of the scouting efforts. They'll be more useful there. If something does end up going south, they'll be able to help the ants escape with lives. There's only one problem with this plan.

[Nooooooooo, I won't leave you, Master!]

[Crisis! I'm only going to the surface, I'll be back in less than a day! Will you get off me!?!]

[I won't!]

[Don't make me order you!]

[Don't do it, Master! You'll get sucked through a portal, or challenged by a mega-monster, or slip and fall down a pit and land in the fifth strata, or an ancient will rise from the depths and swallow you, forcing you to live as a parasite in its gullet, or a great confluence of stars will smite you down the moment you set foot out of the tunnels! Take me with you!]

... All of those things sound completely ridiculous, but why is it I can't seem to say that none of them will happen? I *have* managed to put my claws in some unlikely, bad situations during my stay on Pangera.

[Alright, fine! You come with me. Tiny and Invidia, you guys go with Sloan to check out this underground city.]

[Yes!]

[I shalIII peel away their secretssss.]

Crinis nearly cracks my carapace with her grip as she wriggles with joy at my concession. I suppose it *does* make sense to take a bodyguard with me wherever I go. It's certainly not likely that I run into trouble on the surface, but I'm starting to become allergic to taking chances. With that done, I depart on a brisk journey upwards to the surface nest. Corun and Torrina do an admirable job keeping up with my monstrous stamina but we do end up having to take a few breaks. It's during one of these that I notice something strange.

My Vestibule is still ablaze with energy from the plethora of ants that pick their way through the tunnels around me. Scouting, hunting, hatchlings on training expeditions, there's no shortage of reasons for the Colony to be active in this area. Yet I feel there's something else, something... slippery. A tiny presence that somehow slips out of my awareness when I'm not paying attention to it. A small cluster of muted lights that seem to hover nearby, fading in and out of existence. Since they turn up in the Vestibule, I have to assume they're related to the Colony in some way, but nonetheless, I'm put on edge by their strange elusiveness. For the rest of the journey, I try to identify or see whatever is causing this phenomenon, but I can't seem to get a grip on them.

Besides that, we reach the surface nest without incident. It's interesting to be surrounded by so many hatchlings in the tunnels. They're so tiny! It's hard to believe I was once so small and weak. I'm almost tall enough for them to crawl beneath me without having to lift myself up! As one would expect, there are more Brood Tenders here than anything else, supervising the pupae and guiding the hatchlings once they've emerged. It's nice to see that a sizeable garrison of more combat-oriented castes still maintain a very visible presence in order to protect the precious future of the Colony. Not to mention the huge number of carvers bustling about, carting materials, and working in the huge forging chambers we pass.

There's something weird about watching ants work a smithy...

As we pass one such chamber, I see a carver, amongst the smallest of all the castes, taking a blinding hot rod of metal out of a circular forge with her bare mandibles, before placing it down on a low built anvil. Moving quickly, she skitters off to one side and triggers a mechanism that brings a heavy weight down from above onto the metal with a resounding clang! Sparks fly and she resets the mechanism, the weight rising slowly as she repositions the metal with her mandibles before triggering it again.

I was wondering how they were hoping to work metal without the capacity to use a hammer... although with another evolution they could probably work to build up the strength in their front arms. They could grip a hammer just fine, but the leg strength isn't there at tier three.

We rush past all manner of interesting chambers until we breach the surface. I step into the glare of the bright, surface light and immediately feel my core shudder in pain. Here on the surface, the mana concentration takes a massive dip and the drain that was already in effect the moment I crossed from the second strata to the first suddenly kicks into overdrive. My days of leisurely wandering about up here are long gone, my friends. It's the tunnels for me.

As I did in the past, I reach out with my external mana control and drag every scrap of energy I can reach into my core to stave off the drain, but even with my increased Skills, I can't cover for my loss as effectively as I could before my last evolution. The increased need for mana appears to grow exponentially at each tier. After one more evolution, I won't even make it half a day on the surface before my core runs dry.

The town has come a long way since we began. Even standing atop the even larger and more heavily defended ant hill, I can see new buildings have arisen, and the beginnings of a town wall going up, ants mixed with the human workers, helping to clear land and shape stones. As I crawl from the hill, I'm a little shocked to see a small open-air building, almost like the tiered seating you'd see in a sports stadium, but much more modest. Every row is filled to capacity with humans wearing strange brown robes, with weird pointy things sticking out the top.

Come to think of it, they kind of look like antennae...

The moment I come within their sight, every single one of them throws their hands in the air and cries out with an ecstatic voice.

"PRAISE THE GREAT ONE! PRAISE HIS SHINYNESS. MAY THE SHADOWS FLEE FROM HIS CARAPACE, AND HIS MANDIBLES PIERCE THE HIDE OF EVIL!"

What in the hell...

I try to skirt around and avoid them, but the moment I try, they leap from the platforms and rush to greet me. Just when I think I'm going to be buried under a pile of human bodies, they stop and form a loose circle around me, with their hands clasped in front of their chests, facing outwards. When I move, they move with me, forming a living barrier of devoutness that goes where I go. When I pick up the pace, they try and run with me, but it's clear that they can't all keep up. I sigh and slow down, allowing them to do what they want...

This feels really weird.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 557: Would you go to war for some insects?

With my circle around me, I eventually find my way into town. It's a shocking transformation that's taken place. Cobbled roads with drainage ditches, a smattering of proper, stone buildings, way more people than I remember and a plethora of other indicators of a thriving, happy community. To think that mere months ago this place didn't have one brick on top of another. There's still quite a few ants about the place, watching the humans go about their business, helping out here and there. Most of them are mages, of course, but every now and again a carver pops up with a mage escort to perform the mind magic for them.

The Colony really has taken my instructions to learn from the humans very seriously. It seems as though they won't be satisfied until they extract every little piece of information they can get their mandibles on. Considering the rate of improvement that they've shown, it's working like a charm.

Corun and Torrina draw a lot of strange looks as they accompany me into the town. Being Golgari, they stand head and shoulders above even the tallest human in town, not to mention their glittering stone

skin and general lack of clothing. But even they, as strange and new to these people as they are, don't seem to be enough to distract from the spectacle of forty robed 'ant-people' escorting me through the streets. Having them just be there is one thing, but the shouting adds a whole new layer of awkwardness.

"MAKE WAY FOR THE GREAT ONE!"

"DO NOT SULLY THE SHINE OF HOLINESS!"

"PAY PROPER RESPECT! MAKE WAY FOR THE MANDIBLES OF JUSTICE!"

The WHAT?!

I thought I was the only one who called them that... Regardless, this public display of devotion receives something of a mixed response from the gathering crowd of onlookers. Some people, presumably those who've seen me before, possibly during the battle against Garralosh, cheer and wave as they see me, or clasp their hands and join the shouting, which is less great. Others appear more curious than elated, likely those who haven't seen an ant of this sort of size or apparent importance wandering around. Then there's others who seem less delighted to have a giant monster in quite such close proximity to themselves.

I should have waited outside of town. I just got a little enthused and wanted to see all of the changes that had taken place. They've worked hard, these people. Can't help if I wanted to have a bit of a sticky-beak.

[You seem popular up here,] Corun laughs over a mind bridge.

[When you save people's lives from a horrible death by monster, they tend to be grateful, even if you *are* a monster.]

[Even so, some of this feels a little... *religious*, don't you think?]

[I'm not sure I get what you mean...]

[The robes, the singing of praises and such. Granin might be on the right track with you, you've already managed to create your own cult!]

[Antenna Cult?] Torrina says.

[I was thinking 'Carapace Cult'.]

[Whoa there, hold on. First off, I do *not* have a cult. Second of all, you're cult is the 'Cult of the Worm'. Before you try and start making fun of other people's cults, not that I have one, you might want to examine your own situation first.]

[It's nice to finally see some humans treat Master with the respect he deserves!] Crinis remarks, snippily.

[They are slowing me down though,] I sigh, [being up here can't be any more comfortable for you than it is for me, Crinis.]

[I'm fine!]

[No you aren't, but not to worry, we're nearly done.]

Despite the ever increasing crowd of onlookers, we do eventually push our way through to the newly constructed town hall, a two story building of simple stone construction that is nevertheless very impressive considering how quick they whipped it up. It's nothing compared to what the carvers are building underground, but hey, they're only human.

I use my mana sense and reach out with a mind bridge once I find the person I need.

[Enid! You can't possibly tell me that you didn't know I was coming. Half the town is out here gabbing.]

[Oh, I know,] she sounds equal parts irritated and weary, [but I've been stuck in here listening to people natter on about their issues which apparently can't be put aside for the sake of a monster.]

[Are they lacking gratitude to that extent?] I'm incredulous, [I hate to interrupt, you but I can't stay up here for long. One more evolution and you'll probably never see me on the surface again! Any chance I can break up the meeting? We've got some big stuff going on down there.]

[By all means. It's hard to focus on mental communication when people won't stop talking to you.]

Not if you had better mental stats. Enid needs a few more levels if you ask me. Although, she may be a *touch* too old for Dungeon delving. I turn to one of my ant-headed bodyguards and whipped together a quick connection.

[Hey there, it's me, the giant ant standing next to you.]

The fellow I'm talking to, a middle aged looking chap with a weather beaten face, leaps a metre into the air before turning to look at me with a panic stricken face.

[Hey, buddy, just breathe, alright? Stay cool. I just need you to grab some of your people, go in there, and make sure Enid can come out and talk to me. Okay? Keep it simple.]

Seemingly unable to form a coherent response, he nods jerkily, and then thinks better of it and bows deeply. After a moment to collect himself, he grabs two others and drags them into the building, whispering furiously to them as they go. The chap looks a touch glassy eyed, I hope he's alright. It's better than having that one armed priest Beyn around, goodness knows what would happen if he were here.

Not long after they went in, the three ant-robed people bring out a rather startled looking Enid being carried in their arms. She knew that something was going to happen, but I'm not sure that she expected *this*.

[Hey, Enid,] I greet her with a friendly wave of an antenna, [been a little while.]

[It certainly has. Have you changed colour?]

[What? Ah, no. That's Crinis. Say hello, Crinis.]

A section of gloop detaches from my carapace and forms a barbed tentacle, much to the horror of most people watching. Crinis extends the limb towards Enid and waves it playfully before retracting it back into her main mass.

[She says hi.]

Enid shakes her head slightly, before she brushes her skirts down and shoos away the hovering ant-people.

[Apparently there's something important happening going on down in the Dungeon? Must be big if you've come back up here, it can't be pleasant for you. Does it have something to do with your two Golgari friends?]

[Look, it's not great to be here, and that's no knock on the company. I'm not sure exactly how to phrase this delicately, so I'm just going to come out and say it. I might have *accidentally* started a war with the Golgari which is likely to kick off sometime in the next week. There's also a city under us, apparently? We'll be trying to take control of that over the next few days.]

Enid just stares at me.

[You WHAT? With the Golgari?! Then why are *they* here?] She points an accusatory finger at Torrina and Corun who look back coolly.

[They, uh, just really believe in me? They're on our side... because, reasons.]

[... Right.]

She massages her temples for a moment as she closes her eyes to think.

[What do you need from us?] She says, her eyes calm and steady when she opens them again.

[I really thought you'd be a little more shocked by this.] I admit.

She sighs.

[There's no point, is there? Things move so fast around here that I'm better off just accepting and not thinking about it for too long. I'll need to get the town council together and discuss this, but I'm willing to pledge you our support.]

That takes me back a little.

[Really? I was just going to let you know what was happening, I didn't have any intention of asking you to fight...]

[Anthony, if the Colony is destroyed, we won't last much longer. Anyone who's cooperated with monsters as we have, isn't exactly looked on favourably. For good or for ill, our fates are tied to yours.]

I scratch my head with an antenna.

[Well, sure. I guess we'll take any help we can get. Probably best if you think about what you have to offer, since I have no clue. We'll be able to coordinate more closely after that.]

She nods.

[Alright. The work never ends around here,] she sighs.

[When ants are involved, it tends to get like that,] I laugh.

We exchange pleasantries for a few minutes before I decide to end the conversation. If anything, the surrounding crowd has only grown in size as we've talked and I don't want to deal with the unpleasant feeling of my core bleeding out any longer. Saying farewell to the mayor, I turn and head back toward the nest. I have a core I need to collect in there.

Chrysalis

Chapter 558: Picking up something I'd rather not

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaait!"

I won't. I'm running for it. With a great leap, I fly into the air, over the heads of the ant-robed people and crash back down to the ground. My legs creak under the strain, but I care not, forcing myself to sprint as soon as I can.

"WAIT FOR ME, GREAT OOOOONNNEEE!!!"

It's not happening, you mad priest. I barely talk to you and now people are wearing strange robes and following me around like secret service. A few more conversations and you'll have newborn babies dressed up as larvae, and people will start trying to carry me around on a palanquin or something... Actually the baby thing sounds cute...

No! I'll be strong! DASH!

I kick up a huge cloud of dust and just like that, I leave the humans and Beyn floundering in my wake as I run for the hill. The sweet mana, it calls to me! As do the more reasonable behaviours of my family members. I'd rather talk to Leeroy than exchange words with that nutty priest. My time in the town was certainly interesting, and it's nice to know that the Colony still has a strong ally in Enid, even if some of the more recent arrivals don't look quite as favourably on us. I can't help but feel a little disgruntled about that. Who saved all their lives, bore the brunt of the horde attack, and is even helping them build their town to this very day? Sheesh.

I speed back to the nest with Crinis still attached to my carapace, plunging into the welcome dark the moment I can. The sweet blue light of mana infuses my body and I breathe a sigh of relief as the drain from my core slows significantly. With constant application of external mana manipulation, it's possible for me to slowly replenish my reserves in the first strata, a thought which unwinds the unconscious knot of tension in the back of my head.

Walking around with mana leaking from your core is almost like a human taking a trip down the streets whilst bleeding from an open vein. Your very life energy is slowly dripping out of you as you try and ignore it and concentrate on other things but it's always there, the sense of impending death prodding away at your mind. I'm not a fan. Which is why I was happy enough to come back here in a hurry, even though there's something I have to do now that I've been avoiding for a long time.

Moving much slower now, I make my way through the nest, trying to make space for the many hatchlings and others that I share these more cramped tunnels with. Those tricky flickers in my Vestibule have returned, but I ignore them for the moment. I need to concentrate on this task, she deserves my full attention.

Pushing ever deeper into the nest, I make my way to the brood chambers, where hundreds of pupae line dozens of chambers, each lovingly cared for by their brood tenders. In the centre of these lies the egg chamber, where several immature Queens now reside in what used to be Mother's room.

"Hello, all!" I greet them. "Hope things are going well. I've seen the designs for the new nests and they're absolutely out of control, you'll love them."

"Eldest!" They cry in surprise.

"Just passing through, came to pick something up from my old room."

I can feel Crinis shift on my carapace as I speak, but she chooses to remain silent. She knows why I've come, even if she doesn't understand why I've hesitated until now.

"We didn't expect you, Eldest," one of the Queens steps forward to say, "but we heard you had arrived in the nest. Is there anything we can help with?"

"No, no," I laugh, "you do your best for the Colony and leave this sort of thing for me. You have a very important job to do, much more important than mine. Good luck!"

So saying, I ignore their looks of surprise and crawl down through the gap in the floor and down into what used to be the space reserved for myself, Tiny and Crinis. Just as the nest below ground has expanded, so too has this one. Dozens of extra chambers and tunnels have been carved out, the misplaced dirt and rock added to the towering ant hill above ground. This unadorned little chamber has been left untouched throughout those works.

It's a bit cramped, now. With my larger frame and Crinis glooped on me, I fill the space in a way I never did before. Which brings me uncomfortably close to the object I left here when I left, Garralosh's core.

I still have mixed feelings about that fight, and the eventual death of Garralosh. If she hadn't ended the life of one of my family, Grant the brave, who sacrificed her life for me, then I'm not sure I would have found it in me to finish her off. We made use of her Biomass, though the Colony ate much of it, but her core was something I couldn't bring myself to deal with at the time.

I could reconstitute her. Bring back a brand new Garralosh copy to stomp around on behalf of the Colony, but without her soul. The human who had been reborn on Pangera is gone forever, perhaps to another, even stranger life. Certainly the new Garralosh would be more sane than the last. It's a fairly low bar to jump over, if I'm honest. Still, I don't think that I'll bring back the giant croc. The drain on resources that the Colony would experience trying to keep her up and fighting fit wouldn't be worth it. Not to mention the baggage of all of those that were trying to hunt her down returning to finish the job.

No, I didn't come here for that. This core needs to be absorbed. I wasn't prepared to do it after the battle, and not only because it's so uncomfortably big, but because it represents the struggle of Garralosh, the suffering that she endured, vanishing from this world for good. When this core is gone, there really will be nothing left of her. Nothing except for the profile that was unlocked when I consumed her.

With a sigh, I bring it up using the menu and read through it once more.

[Garralosh. The unique monster known as Garralosh is the reincarnation of Janice Thornton, a human from Earth. The product of a violent household, Janice's view of relationships grew twisted and callous. As she matured, she grew more cruel and manipulative, eventually coming to utilise violence and brutality to get her way. This ever escalating spiral resulted in her descent to madness and two murders before eventually she was cut down. Her soul was selected as a likely candidate for resurrection due to her urge to dominate and confront with violence. It was hoped that her introduction to the Dungeon would allow her to vent her more bloodthirsty urges and develop herself as an apex predator. Instead, she drowned in conflict and descended further into madness. Her desire to dominate, control and gain vengeance eventually led to her isolation and entrapment. Despite reaching a reasonable level of evolution for a first strata monster, Garralosh is yet another failed transplanted soul, leaving little to no mark on the Dungeon and its ecosystem.]

Does the Dungeon have a similar profile ready for me? Bit of a disturbing thought. Gingerly, I grab the core in my mandibles and begin to make my way back down to the second strata.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 559: Strange new surrounds

[I don't know what I was expecting, but it sure wasn't this.]

Jim, the large and ever floppy worm, slithered through the tunnels beside the hulking, menacing form of his friend, Sarah. The two former humans had achieved their goal, a long cherished one for the worm, of escaping from their gilded cage amongst the Golgari. When Anthony had first arrived amongst them, they hadn't known what to make of him, but he'd done it, pulled off the seemingly impossible escape, and brought them back to his home.

And what a home it turned out to be. Vaulted chambers, beautiful carvings, a surprisingly stunning array of statues, most of which were dedicated to Anthony, all lovingly crafted in intricate detail, were just some of the startling features of the ant nest.

[Are you getting more comfortable being around all of these ants?] Sarah asked, sounding concerned.

[It's still a struggle, if I'm being honest,] he admitted, [my coils can't help but shiver whenever they crawl over me. Gyah!]

It just so happened, at that moment a host of ants skittered out of a side tunnel and made their way over the big worm's body. He stilled his body and tried not to writhe too much as their claws pinched his skin. If he reacted badly and actually hurt one of the colony members, who knows what would happen to him. In the outer tunnels of the nest, there was far less traffic, so the two of them had found their way out here in order to stretch their legs and coils, take in some air and try to decide what they should do next.

The heavy traffic found in the inner sections of the nest was noticeably lighter here, but that didn't mean Jim didn't tense up every now and again as their hosts made their way over him as they went about their business.

[We're certainly safe here,] Sarah said, a little hesitantly, [I haven't even seen a monster other than the ants since we got here. And the defences around the nest were certainly impressive.]

Jim wiggled non-committedly.

[Is that really what you want? To hide behind the protection that someone else is willing to offer you? Aren't you just putting yourself back in the cage you escaped from?]

Sarah was silent for a moment and Jim hastened to console her.

[Ah! I'm not judging you or anything, I know that it's hard for you to fight and that you'd rather not. I just don't want to see you go back into your shell and give up your independence, just after you got it back.]

She absorbed that and considered her own feelings before she responded.

[You might be right, Jim. I guess, I still feel scared. I'm relieved to get away from the Golgari after what they forced me to do, but I don't know if I'm ready to go back into the Dungeon...]

[We could do it together,] he encouraged her, [just in little bits. Go out for ten minutes a day, build up immunity to it over time. We could head out with the - GYAHHAH!!]

The ants crawled across him, paying no mind to his sudden freeze.

[I'm not sure if I should be offended by that,] he muttered, [anyway. We could head out with the Queen. I saw her go out a few hours ago with a big escort of ants. I asked around and apparently she goes out hunting every day to get her own food. That'd be a safe way to go about it.]

The giant bear, with its bristled fur and muscle packed frame looked down at the worm, a little surprised.

[You've been talking to the ants? I didn't think you'd want to do that.]

[Because I'm afraid of them?!]

[No. Because you didn't want to rely on them.]

Jim deflated a little as the sudden anger he'd felt drained away.

[Oh. I thought - GYOOO!... I figured we couldn't exactly wait for Anthony to get back before we start working things out. He sort of vanished on us as soon as he got back...]

[He has a lot of things to worry about now that he's back here,] Sarah chided him. [We can't expect him to hang around and wait on us hand and foot.]

[I get it,] Jim huffed, [what with the war coming, he's got a lot on his plate.]

The big worm froze, realising too late what he'd said.

[Jim?] Sarah asked slowly. [What war are you talking about?]

Jim sighed and slapped himself in his mind. He wasn't really keeping it a secret, but he hadn't told her when he'd found out and then hadn't been sure what he should say.

[I spoke to a few of the ants with names, though I wasn't able to get a hold of them for long. Vibrant in particular was... fast. From what I gather, the Colony doesn't expect the Golgari to let them go after what they did, killing their people and stealing their property.]

[You mean ... us?]

[Us and other things. We managed to fight off the force that was pursuing us, but the Colony believes that they can still be followed, so eventually they'll come here in force to exterminate them. That's why things have been so crazy since we came here, the ants are getting themselves ready to fight.]

The two of them continued to make their way down the tunnel as they tried to straighten out their tangled thoughts. Sarah ambled along, her shoulders almost brushing the ceiling as she walked, whilst Jim shuffled along at her side.

[It's not our fight, you know,] Jim burst out, [they might have saved us, but they don't need us for their war. And the Golgari aren't after us. We can take a few days to help you get used to the Dungeon and then we can make our own way. Find somewhere else that's safe.]

[Jim...]

[We could go find the Sophos that you told me about, or we could live, just the two of us. I know you don't want to fight, and nobody has the right to make you, certainly not against any non-monster. We can just leave this behind us...]

[Jim. We can't do that, and you know it,] Sarah cut him off sternly. [They *saved* us. I'm not going to abandon them now that they need help.]

Jim pulled back a little.

[Are you sure about that, Sarah? You know what that means, right? You'll have to fight. You might have to kill Golgari.]

Even the thought of such a conflict was enough to set the great bear to trembling, but she didn't back down.

[You said it, didn't you? Anthony said it as well. We can't just run away forever, right? At some point, I have to fight. The Colony hasn't done anything wrong to me or you, why should they suffer for us? I - I think I'm going to stay. I'll try to fight.]

[You might die, Sarah.]

The bear didn't shrink away at all at those words.

[It's not dying that I'm afraid of, Jim.]

At that moment, a flurry of movement from further up the tunnel caught their attention. From the shadows emerged Anthony, his carapace covered by the ink coloured pet he called Crinis, carrying a gigantic core in his mandibles. When he saw the two of them, his antennae perked up and he rushed forward to greet them.

[Hey there you two! How've things been. Sorry I haven't caught up with you since we got here, things have been a little... hectic.]

[Because of the war, right? I want to help,] Sarah told him firmly.

Anthony twitched and he turned toward Jim a little, as if to ask if she was serious.

[She seems to have made up her mind,] Jim muttered. [I suppose I'll help out as well.]

The massive ant looked at the two of them for a moment before his antennae seemed to shrug.

[Hey, sure thing. To be honest, the help is very welcome. I expect when the Golgari get here, we're going to have our backs against the wall. Why don't the two of you come with me for a second, we can have a chat and I'll try and sort out something for you.]

This branch tunnel wasn't wide enough for the three of them to traverse at the same time, so Anthony had to back up until they reached a wider branch to turn down.

[I don't want to tell you what you can and can't do to help,] the ant was telling the two of them. [You want to help dig tunnels? Great! You want to help defend the nest, also great! You want to fight on the front lines? You're insane, but hey, that's also great.]

[Isn't that where you're going to be?] Sarah asked him.

[Well, yeah. But it's my family after all. Better me than them.] He turned and pointed at the many smaller ants bustling throughout the tunnels.

[You really think that, don't you?]

Anthony shrugged again.

[Of course. Anyways, I think what I'll do is get one of our teachers to talk to you specifically, Sarah. Work out exactly what you want to do and how you can help. Florence is her name. A good worker. Jim, I might put you in touch with Cobalt, she's a carver, in charge of building stuff. I'm certain she'll be able to find a heap of things you could do...]

He kept nattering at them, totally unaware of the very different emotions growing within his two fellow reincarnators.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 560: Taking Stock

After dropping Sarah and Jim with Florence, I rush back out to the storage area I'm told we stashed our haul from the outpost in. I'm feeling a touch buoyed by the run-in I had with Sarah and Jim. I'm not sure how much they'll be able to help out, but like I told them, every little bit helps. I doubt it would ever happen, but having Sarah on the front lines, a monster who's supposedly strong enough to rip me up would make an incredible ally. It would take a lot to get there, considering her aversion to violence, but I'm sure she'll be able to contribute no matter what.

When I finally make it to the chamber, I find a wide, low ceilinged chamber filled with precious loot. My siblings have been busy in here, categorising and stacking all of the goods in neat shelves that they've shaped out of stone. Probably another innovation that they stole from the humans. At the time I arrive, Coolant is there, picking through the various magical materials and items. Ellie is also there, making a meticulous inventory of the many, many cores we brought back.

I crawl over and drop Garralosh's core with a massive THUD. Ellie's antennae begin to quiver uncontrollably the moment she notices it.

[Eldest! That core?! Are you here to donate it?]

[Ah, no. This one's for me, unfortunately.]

[Are you going to make a pet with it? Surely you will!?!]

[You know what core this is, right?]

[Of course I know! I still can't believe you never let us study it, but it's an amazing chance to create an incredibly strong pet.]

I shouldn't be surprised that the core shaper would be interested in the most potent core the Colony has gotten its mandibles on, but I kind of hoped they'd have gotten over it by now?

[No, I won't. I'll be absorbing this core after I've maxed out my current limit. That's why I came here, have you finished categorising the cores yet? I want to take the more useless ones and absorb them.]

[Hmm. I may not have enough for you here. A lot of these cores are of real interest to us. Unknown monsters that we haven't come across before, new organs that we haven't experimented with, there's a dizzying amount of new information.]

[Surely there's a bit of trash that they had lying around. I just need the energy, not quality.]

[Give me a second,] she says and starts rummaging around, looking for what I need.

I leave her to her work and wander over to where Coolant is busy.

[Hey there Coolant,] I greet her, [did we actually get anything useful from those geezers?]

She scratches her head with one antenna.

[Well, it's not easy to say at this stage. We certainly got a *lot* of stuff that we haven't seen before. I *assume* that it's useful, otherwise why would the Shapers have been storing it? But since we've never come across this stuff before, we don't know what we can do with it. Hence, my lack of commitment.]

[What sort of stuff *did* we get?]

She starts pointing out various things on the shelves with a claw.

[We managed to scrounge up a few pieces of equipment, staves mostly, a couple of enchanted robes and ... loincloths? There are also many other items that we are yet to be certain of their purpose. Over here, I've collected a series of gems and implements that I believe are for scrying for certain mana signatures over great range. If we can discover what each enchantment is designed to find, it will be a great advancement in our ability to create magical scouting tools.]

Fascinating!

[Are we making any progress on that front?] I ask.

[Not yet, we've only conducted initial studies on the tools at this stage. We're assembling teams of our best tier four mages and enchanter to look over them. Claws crossed, they'll be able to unravel the secret soon. If we can make scrying tools for Golgari...]

[Holy. Moly. That *would* be a game changer. Because they surely have ways to scry monsters. Did we have anything else?]

[Well, we *did* collect quite a variety of mana infused ores and metals. It seems to be something that they quite fancied, since we found such an abundance of it.]

She leads me to a separate shelf behind the first, laden with chunks of glittering ore. Flipping on my mana-sense, I can feel the pure energy of the Dungeon flowing throughout these materials. Some are clearly more precious than others, but all of them are rich with mana.

[Any idea what we can do with these?] I ask wonderingly.

Coolant shrugs.

[I have no idea. Our only thought at the moment is to try and determine what affinities these materials have and then pass them over to the carvers. They should be able to make something useful out of them.]

Makes sense. There's not really any point in hoarding them. If the Colony can work out how to create useful items out of this stuff, then we'd have a reason to actually seek it out and mine it.

[Have the humans been consulted about what to do with these materials?]

[I believe that is still being done, Eldest.]

[Right...]

[Here you are, Eldest!] Ellie breaks in. [This is what we have that you can use.]

With little ceremony, she crawls up next to me and drops a thin stone bucket filled with cores on the ground. Even just by looking, I can tell that there won't be enough to max out my core. Still, can't be ungrateful for the help of the colony.

[Cheers, Ellie. This is a big help.]

[Anytime, Eldest. I better get back to work.]

I decide to leave the two council members to their business. I place Garralosh's core on top of the bucket, even though it doesn't quite fit, and lift the container in my mandibles before heading out of the storeroom. Carefully balancing myself, I tread through the tunnels until I arrive at a relatively small, out of the way chamber that I picked out for myself. Not too much traffic nearby and not much going on inside, the room is quite perfect for my purposes. I wearily plunk down all the cores and take a moment to settle myself.

Physically, I'm not tired at all, but emotionally I'm starting to flag a bit. Too much running around, too many things to worry about. I need to take a break. Time for a little well-earned torpor, I think. I can deal with these cores after that, then try and find out what's happening with this city.