

## Chrysalis 561

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#### Chapter 561: Waking

*The return of the Eldest after their brief time apart from the Colony was a momentous event. Throughout the history of our kind, it was always the Eldest who acted as the catalyst of change, the arbour of progress. As we grew in strength, wisdom and capability, there was danger of complacency, of waste and inefficiency as we followed a thousand different trails of knowledge to their fruitless conclusions. Instead, at the critical moment, the Eldest brought us firm paths on which we were only just becoming ready to tread, new ideas to throw our burgeoning industry forward and expand our imaginations.*

*Most importantly of all, they brought us enemies against which we could test ourselves, obstacles that we had to strive to overcome. This contention is not universally accepted amongst my siblings, but it is my belief that every action they undertook was deliberate and calculated, that they forged the Colony like a smith-ant forges metal, alternating the guidance of their hammer with the intense heat of the forge. In this conflict, we would be forced to purify our conceptual understanding of what we were and how we were to function. To become something even greater, stronger and more ambitious than before. All the while, the Eldest was there, watching over us, guiding us in the right direction. The Eldest saw the beginning and the end of our journey all at once. Only they saw what it was that we would become.*

*Excerpt from 'Development of the Colony: The first age' by Historiant*

SHASHIFRASS!

I'm up! Boy, I really needed a bit of torpor, more than I thought I did. I feel refreshed! I stretch out my antennae and flick my legs in a few different directions, finishing off with a few short hops to get the joints lubricated. Nice. Maybe I should implement this as a sort of morning exercise for the colony? A healthy body and a healthy mind leads to a healthy society! Perhaps they could set up some of those pheromone speakers for this purpose?

The image of millions of monstrous ants, lined up in row upon row, performing morning jazzercise blooms in my mind and I almost fall over laughing.

[Is everything alright, Master?]

[Gah! Crinis?! I actually forgot you were there for a second...]

She wiggles a little with happiness.

[Is that because I've become your second skin? I told you I'd never part with you again, this is just a natural progression.]

In what way is this natural? In fact, in what way is any part of Crinis natural? She looks like a nightmare born when another nightmare went to sleep. In order to keep her happy, I'll continue to tolerate this arrangement, but I'd be lying if I said I was getting accustomed to it. If anything, me forgetting that she's attached to me is just my mind fantasising about regaining my freedom.

Grumbling a little to myself internally, I gather up the cores I collected and begin to absorb them. I need to reinforce my core and put myself in a position of maximum strength for the upcoming conflict.

Nothing less than peak, optimum condition can be accepted. Before I evolve, I need to take in the Garralosh core also, pushing myself to a new peak of evolutionary energy. It'll be intense, and most likely very painful, but it needs to be done to secure the future of the Colony.

A flicker of energy in my Vestibule captures my attention before it fades away into the background once more. This irritating thing is back again! What exactly is it?! Having these stupid ghost ant signals creep up on me all the time is really getting on my nerves! I'm determined to work out exactly what is giving this strange feeling. I feel like someone is trying to pull one over on me. I refuse to allow it!

Brimming with fierce energy, I sweep up the remainder of the cores and check my status. Looks like I'm getting close to my maxed out core, I'll need to try and source the rest of the cores I need either out in the Dungeon, or perhaps from the city. Maybe I can buy them there? I don't know what they'd want in trade. Would they even be willing to trade with a monstrous ant is another question...

Alright then, time to get moving. I spring up to my feet and suddenly dash out the chamber. Maximum speed! As I do so, I focus all of my sub-brains on the Vestibule as it provides a steady flow of energy from the thousands of ants congregating throughout the nest. I'm going to find you, you damn flickers! They must be ants who are causing it, some sort of sneaky ant! I'll uncover your mask and give you a good thwacking for following me around!

AHA!

Almost simultaneously, I perceive the tiniest sputter of energy within the Vestibule and my antennae sense a disturbance in the tunnel ahead of me. Have I found one of them at last? I can't see them though?!

DASH!

Even more determined, I put the hammer down and accelerate to the limit! My huge body flies down the narrow tunnel, sending smaller ants scurrying in all directions and diving down side tunnels to get out of my way. Oho! The flicker has moved around the bend up ahead. Need to turn! I slam my claws into the ground and haul my mass around the tight bend before I dash once more. You won't escape me!

Even now, I can't see them, but I can feel that I'm getting closer! Any second now and you will receive my thwack of justice!

"Why hello, Eldest, I didn't expect to see you here."

From behind a bend up ahead, Advant steps smartly forward, cutting off my path. I hop slightly and land with all six legs dug into the ground to slow my advance as my momentum causes me to dig deep furrows in the ground. I manage to stop mere centimetres away from rolling over Advant and causing an embarrassing scene for the council, squashing one of their members.

"Advant? Where the heck did you come from?" I gasp.

"Who, me? I was looking for you, Eldest. It's time for the follow up meeting to discuss the scouting reports."

I grow still for a moment.

"You're timing here is rather perfect, Advant. You wouldn't be hiding anything from me would you?"

I raise an antenna.

"O-Of course not, Eldest! Why would I do such a thing?!"

Leaning in a little closer I stare down at the soldier.

"I'm not sure. That's why it bugs me so much."

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### **Chapter 562: Scouting Report**

*Records of the early days of non-monster habitation of the Dungeon are scarce, to say the least. The Dungeon opened itself during the cataclysm known as the Rending, and certainly before that time the vast network of caves and tunnels beneath the ground was both unknown and inaccessible to those on the surface. During the event itself, when hordes of monsters poured out of holes in the surface every day, pressing forward into the Dungeon was difficult, but not impossible. There are scattered records of several expeditions that managed to gain a foothold beneath the surface. According to the journal written by Alain of Exeter, the ruling ten decreed that defending against the monsters beneath the surface, where narrow tunnels make perfect chokepoints, would be far less costly than attempting to curb them on the surface, and so dispatched a mighty force to seize a Dungeon entrance.*

*Although the loss of life was horrific, Exeter was the first nation on record to establish a permanent foothold within the Dungeon. It began life as a crude defensive fort at first, the site, which came to be named Victoria, was reinforced and expanded throughout the Rending. It became a frontline defence against the monsters and was effective at reducing the numbers that breached the surface.*

*Victoria still exists today, though not in the form it once did. As Exeter pushed deeper into the Dungeon to seize its wealth and research its secrets, Victoria became a gateway city between the depths and the surface kingdom, a place of trade and travel. Although firmly placed within the first strata, Victoria is considered the first true metropolis beneath the ground, though many others would follow. Empires, kingdoms and nations of all sorts would rush to seize land in the Dungeon, establishing cities of their own. Even powerful merchant collectives or independent mercenary companies were able to construct their own safe havens in less desirable Dungeon locations. In this way, the community below ground expanded.*

I keep a suspicious eye on Advant as we march around to the council chamber, the teasing flicker in my Vestibule having now conspicuously vanished. They're trying to pull something over on me here, and I will not allow it! To think, the council that I raised and taught from mere hatchlings to the powerful and advanced monsters that they are today would try and sneak something past me. The whole idea is absurd! It will not be allowed to stand!

By the time we reach the chamber and settle in, Advant is almost shaking after receiving my withering, omni-directional glare for ten minutes straight. She hasn't cracked though, which means I'm still in the dark regarding their nefarious scheme. It's unfortunate that the survival of the Colony is at stake right now, I can't afford to be distracted by these side games. After another five minutes pass, the entire council has been assembled and settled into our individual seats.

"Hi-Hi! Eldest!" Vibrant chirrup the moment she enters the room. "It's been exciting out there! Things have moved so fast! Even for me! I've been all over the place for the last day, I don't think I've stopped moving, even for a moment!"

"That's great, Vibrant," I break in to stop the flow of scents flying from her before she can really get going. One of the things I've noticed about pheromone based communication, is that at no point is the person 'speaking' required to pause to take a breath. If an ant really wants to, they can launch into a diatribe that can be quite horrendous in length. Eventually they'll run out of pheromones, but with a few mutations, they can last a heck of a long time.

"So, what exactly did we learn?" I ask, moving to head off potential monologues from Vibrant.

"Quite a lot," Burke responds smoothly, "our scouts managed to infiltrate the outskirts undetected and gather quite a chunk of actionable intelligence."

"You're sure that you weren't found?" I'm doubtful. How could a city in the Dungeon survive without being monster proof?

"We can't be completely sure," Wills answers me, her antennae drooping slightly, "but we took every possible measure we could to avoid discovery. We tunnelled in ourselves, sent our stealthiest members and cooperated with the shapers and mages."

"That's right," Bella waved a leg to draw attention to herself. "We sent the pets in to see what they could see! We even made them fight each other to look believable. The tunnel approaches are watched carefully, that's for sure. The second we crossed a line, BAM, a bunch of humans jumped on the pets and annihilated them!"

That's a little worrying.

"Did you dig past that line?" I ask, intent.

"Are you concerned about a spherical detection zone?" Propellant asks. "We considered the same thing. Not to worry, we made sure to retreat before crossing over the line."

Hmm.

"So how much did we actually learn? It doesn't sound like we were able to get close to the city at all!"

"We know it's location, how much space it occupies, we've identified all of the entrances and tested the defences. Preparations have been made on tunnel access from a wide range of entrance points and every path in and out of the city is being monitored. Quite a bit in twenty four hours, I should say."

When you put it like that... Actually, what the heck did I expect? A complete census of the city? The names of every man, woman, child and a detailed inventory of their house pets? The place is effectively surrounded and pushing any further risks exposing us at a time when surprise is our most powerful weapon. Hang on, there's a thought.

"A census! I want a census done of the Colony! A record of every single member of the family. I want to know their cast, their age, the MP that their core can take, their skill levels and mutations! I want the works! Someone get on that!"

"Uhh, Eldest? Is that related to what we were talking about?" Sloan asks, her antennae twitching in a puzzled manner.

"Absolutely not. It came into my head and I thought it was important enough that I should mention it. Right then. If we've learned all that we're going to learn, it's time to go for it. What's the plan? When are we going in?"

There's a moment of silence as the members of the council look at each other. I can almost hear them silently considering who should speak and how they should frame it.

"No," I cut in, "I'm not sitting it out, and the first member of this council to ask me to will be 're-educated'."

I THWACK the table with all of my might, leaving a slight crack in the surface and causing each of the ants to flinch, except Vibrant, who leaps up with glee.

"I told them! I said it was dumb! Did you really think the Eldest would sit and watch as the rest of us ran in? You girls keep thinking that you can shield the Eldest and the Queen, but you're nuts. It won't work! Nope-nope! In fact, when I told the Queen what we were going to do, she insisted on coming along!"

"YOU DID WHAT?!" The rest of the council screams at her.

Seemingly oblivious to their outrage, Vibrant continues to hop and wiggle on the spot. She's still surprisingly light on her legs considering how large she is.

"Yep-yep! She's real excited! Or determined... One of those! With the Eldest and the Queen running into the unknown danger where who knows what waits for us?! It's going to be AMAZING!"

Sloan and Victor have collapsed on their chairs, legs dangling uselessly and eyes staring blank into space. I can only imagine that all of their plans have gone up in smoke at this point. I think they're reworking every strategy that they had and building in as much protection for the Queen as they possibly can. I have to admit, I'm a little nervous myself, but by this stage I've given up on trying to keep the Queen out of trouble. Mother is Mother, after all! She's more than capable of taking care of herself. What's more dangerous is the possibility of these guys going off the rails and jeopardising the mission in an attempt to keep her out of danger.

"Look, the Queen is going to get in there and fight. There's nothing you can do about that." I cut Vibrant off as she continues to rave and address the rest of the council. "If you want to protect her, then let's commit hard and make sure that our takeover of this city is done as quickly as thoroughly as possible. If it turns into a pitched battle in the streets then we've failed already. This needs to be over before an effective defence can be mounted. We get in, smash the defences, quell the populace and take any teleporters offline. Make sense?"

Leeroy puts up an antenna.

"So we don't destroy everything in the city?"

"No! Why would we destroy everything in the city?!"

"Because... what are going to do with a city full of people who hate us?"

"We - ... That's a surprisingly sensible point coming from you Leeroy. Look, we'll win them over, or if we can't, we just walk away and leave them alone. As long as they don't have those teleportation gates, we don't have any beef with them."

"So we eat them?"

"Not that sort of beef!"

THWACK!

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#### **Chapter 563: This is different**

Torrina Laksham wasn't sure what to think. The more time she spent around that remarkable ant, the more things didn't make sense. When she and Corun had accompanied Anthony to the surface, she'd been stunned to find an entire community of humans who not only seemed to accept the ant and his Colony, but were rapidly approaching something very close to worship.

The moment they'd seen the welcoming party, with their robes and ant-like regalia, she and Corun had shared a long and significant glance. The parallels they could draw between their own Cult and the behaviour on display were far too easy to draw. It was almost disturbing to see such devout actions taking place in clear daylight, in full view of everyone. The two of them had spent their entire adult lives concealing their beliefs and ideology, only to see these humans being so forward and direct with their burgeoning faith. It was, in many ways, shocking.

But also exciting. They were here following the direction of their triad leader, hoping to help cultivate a new ancient, and here was a group of people who responded to Anthony in much the same way that groups all over the world had reacted to the ancients during the cataclysm. To Torrina, it was a powerful sign that they were on the right track. Corun was less convinced.

[These people are backwards hicks from the middle of nowhere. Most of them have barely ever set foot in the Dungeon, let alone faced a monster in combat,] he argued over a mind bridge, [the moment any powerful monster appeared in front of them, they were bound to admire it.]

[Admiration is one thing,] Torrina said, [worship is quite another. Look around you Corun. There are monsters walking through the streets of a human settlement. And nobody cares. In fact, they are respected, revered and welcomed. I'm not certain that such a thing has happened in the entire history of Pangera, from the cataclysm to now.]

Corun just shook his head and looked around a little more. It was hard to deny the argument that his triad partner put forward, but he wasn't ready to commit quite as much. These people were just so backward. He found it hard to put any stock at all in their thoughts and beliefs. That didn't mean he saw nothing that he could learn from their interactions with the Colony, which was why he'd agreed to remain behind when Anthony had returned to the Dungeon.

The two of them had stayed with the Mayor, Enid, the previous night and plumbed her for information on the history of the town and its interactions with Anthony. The old woman was tough as any stone and quite cagey, but was unable to conceal her own deep respect and unquestioning faith in her powerful insect ally.

[These people are from the backend of the backend,] Corun tried again, [frontier farmers with no foundation, no connection to any of the great powers and no history. Regardless of what they think, is it really that important? You need to remember that Anthony is a special case, a reincarnated human. He's inclined to help these people based on his history, not to mention he's well aware of what the Colony would be able to learn from people such as these. He wanted them to trust him.]

The two of them were walking out of the town, accompanying a group of armed members and ant-robots led by the one-armed priest, Beyn, but Torrina was frustrated enough by his remarks that she stopped to stare at him.

[Do you really think it's so easy for a monster to gain the trust of humans? Or any sapient race? He didn't have the advantage of the god-like strength the ancients possessed, so how do you think he was able to do it? This has never happened before. Do you understand what that means? By its very definition, this is special. You'd have to be a fool to discount the significance of what these people represent.]

By the end of her rant, the usually cool as ice Golgari Shaper had more than a little heat in her gaze as she glared at Corun. Despite being the older of the two, Corun threw his hands up in surrender.

[Alright! Cool down! I'm not used to seeing you get this fired up, Torrina.]

She took a deep breath and felt her ire recede before she continued in a more even tone.

[I find that your own lack of enthusiasm to be more confusing. I feel there is a growing possibility that there is a real chance Anthony will ascend to become the twentieth ancient. The more I consider it, the harder I find it to remain level headed.]

"Everything alright back there?" a voice called.

Torrina and Corun turned to see that their entire group had stalled to wait for them as they'd discussed silently through mental communication. Corun smiled easily and raised a hand.

"Apologies to you all, my compatriot and I were merely discussing a few points and didn't want to disturb you. We won't delay you any further."

The two Golgari towered over the humans, their stone covered bodies and heavily built frames meant that even the largest human looked frail and childlike when stood next to them. This meant they acted in a very polite and reserved way around their hosts, not wanting to cause any accidents or to put the humans off side.

"You have come in support of the Great One, that is enough to grant you a great deal of leeway," Beyn declared.

With his remaining arm, he waved the group forward as they marched toward the towering anthill in the distance. Seeing an opportunity to pick the brains of this key human, Torrina strode forward to speak to him.

"Priest Beyn, may I have a moment of your time? I have questions regarding your own interactions with the... Great One."

The priest nodded, but didn't turn his head toward her, instead remaining focused on the nest in front of him.

"I see that you hesitate to refer to him as such. Perhaps you know his name?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I see. I choose not to use that name, instead referring to them with a title I bestowed myself. Perhaps it is hubris on my part, but I feel that being so personal wouldn't be right for someone such as myself."

Torrina tried to look as if she understood.

"I believe I heard, Priest Beyn, that you are the first human to come into contact with the Great One. How did that meeting go?"

The Priest laughed and wagged the stump of his arm.

"He bit my arm off."

Torrina nearly tripped.

"Not the most auspicious beginning, I'll happily admit," Beyn said with a wry smile, "I was confused then, I didn't understand what it was that I was witness to. It took some time, but I eventually was able to see the true path that had been laid before my feet."

"Sounds like you've had quite a range of experiences."

"Indeed I have."

"I'd love to hear more."

The priest was only too happy to talk and she listened intently as the anthill grew to loom over them until eventually they entered one of its many tunnels and plunged beneath the ground. It wasn't long until a representative of the Colony approached the group and led them deeper. There was a major campaign underway and the town would not sit to one side.

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#### **Chapter 564: Ant squad, assemble!**

*I have sought to capture the Eldest in their purest form for many years in various media. Stone was the first material I utilised, crude and rough, it was appropriate for them at that time. Just like the stone that I hewed with mandible, claw and magic, they were rough and unpolished, a creature of brute strength and straight edges. The edges never really changed, the Eldest remains as straight forward an ant as there is to find in the Colony. At least, if you know the turnings of their mind, as I do. I've watched them for far too long to be entirely ignorant of their inner workings.*

*When others try to learn my skills, I do my utmost to help them, of course. Even a few humans and some amongst the golgari have sought out my expertise after seeing my works. Of the basics, I had nought to teach them, they were skilled artists all. But there remained something of the spirit, of the dignity and power the Eldest possesses that they were never able to properly capture. I can honestly say that I held*



*nothing back in my efforts to teach them, there are none in the Colony who would hoard knowledge of how to spread the Eldest's glory, but I failed every one of my students.*

*To properly depict the Eldest, one must acknowledge the creature they truly are. The humans, the golgari and the other sapients, even many amongst the Colony, close their eyes to those aspects of their subject that they are not capable of comprehending. The Eldest is powerful, yes. The Eldest is mighty, of course. The Eldest is wise and generous and caring and brave and clever and joyful and frequently inscrutable, all know this. But first and foremost, the Eldest is an individual who contains and has experienced great pain. To me, the magnificent dignity of the Eldest is made even more impressive because of its source. Everything that they are, and everything that they accomplish springs from a bottomless well of suffering that most do not know exists and none can name the origin.*

*It's not something I speak of directly, it isn't my place, but I try to guide the eye of my students toward it. There, in that hesitation, do you see it? Here, in this selfless sacrifice, do you understand? They see a great mountain towering into the sky and try to capture it. I can see a tiny fraction of that mountain below the surface as it descends to darkness. It isn't much, but it is all anyone is allowed to see.*

*Excerpt from the private diary of Michaelangelant, great sculptor of the Colony.*

The more time passes, the greater the chance of things going wrong, to that end, it was decided to strike against the city as quickly as possible. The council left me out of the logistics, and I'm very glad they did. I think we can all acknowledge that isn't where my strengths lie. Instead, I gathered up my pets and put us all to practicing our Skills as we waited for the human contingent to join us. That the people of the town were so willing to risk their lives and limbs in this way was more than a little surprising to me, but what the heck, I'll take it. We don't intend to use them in a combat role, the ants are far better equipped for that, but we hope that they can talk down our opposition. People who think they have to win or die and get eaten are likely to fight very hard indeed. If instead we can have a person explain to the people of the city that they won't be consumed, nor killed, then perhaps they'll stand down and we can prevent as much death as possible.

To both sides, that is. I'm pretty confident the Colony could exterminate every man, woman and child in that city, but where would that leave us? If word ever got out, every Empire, Kingdom, mercenary and farmer with a sharp pitchfork would travel from all over the world to exterminate us. Perhaps that might happen even if we spare them, but I'll take a chance at life over a guarantee of death any day of the week. We need more time to get stronger. Eventually, everyone is going to want to come for us, I know that. On Pangera, we are the equivalent of thousands and thousands of crawling bags of gold. The only way we can survive is if we are more trouble to profit from than it's worth bothering with. Which translates to strength. More high level ants, more ants in general. It's a straight forward formula that only needs time to come to fruition.

As I grind away with several minds at my elemental Skills, Tiny punches at the air, Crinis practices Shadow Magic and Invidia makes barriers for Tiny to smash, I try to go back over the plan. The Colony is going to go all out for this one, a full ten thousand ants are being assembled for the assault. Soldiers, scouts, mages, core shapers, medics, generals, the whole shebang. I think every single tier four member is being called in. From what I gather, this means that aside from the necessary guard presence in the nests, along with the castes who don't operate on the field of battle, the Colony will have next to no

members anywhere in the Dungeon. Naturally there will be scouts out and about, as well as a few patrols, but for the most part, we are going all in against this city.

We should win handily. No, scratch that. We WILL win, easily. All resistance crushed and the unconditional surrender of the city will be offered in less than an hour. We go in, find any gates, smash 'em and work out what to do after that. I need to focus on my own job, which is to subdue any elites that we come across. With my three pets, I make up the most compact fighting force the Colony has at its disposal, the only thing we can bring to bear against the truly strong. The council, not to mention the rest of the ants, are totally willing to bring down powerhouses through sheer, exhausting weight of numbers, but I refuse. The loss of life would be obscene, as it is in nature when ants take on those creatures greater and more powerful than themselves. I suppose I'm greedy. It's not enough to win, I want to win and lose as few family members as possible.

Thinking these sorts of thoughts, I while away a few hours until the humans arrive, along with Torrina and Corun.

[Hey there gang,] I reach out to them, [how was the trip?]

"I greet you, oh Great One! We are here to serve and pledge ourselves to illuminating your glory!"

Before they can reply, Beyn leaps forward and prostrates himself in one smooth motion. There's no way he did that first try, he must have practiced. The rest of the "ant robes" follow suit and are kneeling in the dirt in a flash, declaring their joy and singing praise. With a weary sigh, I extend another mind bridge out to the one armed priest.

[How are you Beyn? I'm a little surpri- ]

[YOUR VOICE FILLS ME JOY, GREAT ONE! I CANNOT EXPRE-]

[LOUD!]

This idiot. He's nothing but helpful, but he really gets carried away with the 'great one' business. For a moment I consider attempting to redirect his devotion to the Queen, but I decide against it. Although far more deserving of these powerful emotions, I wouldn't want to burden her unnecessarily.

[It's nice to see you as well, Beyn, just keep it down, man. I was going to say I'm surprised Enid let you lead the procession down here.]

[IT WAS... It was believed that for this particular task, sincerity of feeling and honest dedication were the most important traits to make us more compelling witnesses for the Colony. For that reason, I was asked to bring my most devoted followers down to assist.]

His mental voice has become much more reasonable, but a literal flood of tears is pouring out of his eyes as he stares at me with frantic joy plastered on his face. It's freakin' creepy! Still, I can tolerate it, he and his people are only here to help, at significant risk to themselves. With some difficulty I create a branching mind bridge and connect it to all of the humans who are present so I can speak to them all at once.

[I welcome you and thank you for volunteering. It is my hope that your participation will save many lives, both ant and otherwise. For your bravery, and dedication, I thank you.]

I dip my head and antennae in a short bow/nod toward them and by the time I bring my head back up, each and every one of them is flooding the tunnel with their tears.

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#### **Chapter 565: Attack on Rylleh**

*The Dungeon city of Rylleh is relatively young, in city terms, barely older than the expansionist kingdoms that took root above it. Formed by a collective of experienced and high level delvers, the city benefited from the protection and knowledge of these individuals, allowing it to prosper relatively quickly. Positioned in a relatively barren section of the Dungeon's first strata, the city doesn't provide much in terms of resources or prime delving ground, but it does offer something much harder to come across, independence. Unbound from any greater authority and capable of standing its ground against the mercenary union, the city-state of Rylleh offers a haven to those who wish to delve without being tied up in string.*

*Naturally this means trading away richer hunting grounds for the frontier, but to a small yet vocal portion of delvers, the trade-off is more than worth it. So Rylleh has remained quietly prosperous for hundreds of years, administered by a ruling council of inherited seats controlled by the descendants of the founders, the city has relied on its own guard and a deployment of Abyssal Legion to defend itself from the depredations of the Dungeon.*

*Though really, what could possibly harm such a city in the first strata?*

*-Excerpt from Barringer's Guide to the Frontier: Adventures in the fringe*

Wallace Danton ground his teeth on a fresh wedge of dungeon chew, pausing only to lean over and spit, as he stared at the warning crystal array in front of him. Stood by his side, his deputy rolled her eyes and took a discreet step away from the man. Chew was a common enough vice in Rylleh, useful as a stimulant with slight numbing properties, but by the Path did the stuff stink!

"Captain..." she warned.

"No."

"Regulations..."

"I *write* the damn regulations, Yas."

"The council will be shocked to hear of it."

"Lieutenant Yasmine, could we perhaps focus on something a *little* more important than my personal habits? Like our *jobs*?"

Yasmine just sighed, adjusted her glasses and checked her clipboard once more. The captain had been spooked by the multiple alarms that had been tripped in the last two days and had ordered every guardsmen to be in a heightened state of alert. She didn't think the man had slept in twenty four hours, hence the copious amounts of chew he kept cramming in his maw. Even she felt he was overreacting, monsters approached the outer tunnels all the time, she had to admit that the old man had good instincts. He'd been captain of the Rylleh guard for over twenty years at this point, and a powerful delver before that. If anyone knew the Dungeon like the back of their hand, it was him.

"It just doesn't feel right," Wallace muttered to himself as he stared at the array. "Why would so many trigger, so close together? All *shadow* monsters..."

Here in the central guard tower, they were situated almost in the centre of the city, next to the council chambers themselves. Ever since the alarms had triggered, Wallace and Yasmine had been ensconced deep in the tower, in constant contact with the crystal array that connected to each and every outpost that guarded the entrances to the Dungeon. By connecting to a similar enchanted detection device in each outpost, the command array before them would light up to show the location of any monster that encroached within the city's detection radius, the instant they did so. On the wall behind them, communication spells powered by monster cores gave them real time communication with every guard on the perimeter and every guard station within the city itself.

It was a massively expensive investment that many had called unnecessary, but the measures had proven invaluable ever since the work had been completed. The ability to instantly respond to any possible incursion was worth so much to the defence of the city.

"Still no word from the delving parties outside the city?" He asked Yasmine without turning around.

"Not since you last asked twenty minutes ago..." she said.

"It's strange."

"No, it isn't," she insisted. "There are only five groups delving right now and all of them planned to delve for at least a month. Two days of no-contact is hardly unusual."

The old man stubbornly shook his head.

"Fool girl," he muttered, not tearing his eyes from the array.

She felt her temper flare.

"If I'm *so wrong*, why don't you deign to explain *why*?" She spat.

She immediately regretted her actions and snapped out a salute to her superior officer.

"I'm sorry, captain! I don't know what came over me!"

He didn't bother to look up.

"You're tired and cranky because I made you stay here all night instead of going home and getting rest," he said, "it's only reasonable. Focus and I'll explain."

He pointed to the outer ring of crystals that represented the outermost guard posts.

"We had this post, this, this, and this, all detect monsters within an hour of each other. All of them shadow monsters, second strata dwellers. Right?"

"Right" she nodded slowly.

"So if there's enough second strata beasties out there that they hit each of these points near simultaneously, there must be a huge contingent of them that have risen up to this layer."

She thought for a moment.

"If our delvers had run into anything like that..."

"They'd have reported it immediately," he confirmed, still staring at the crystals. "That's why I don't think it fits."

He spat to one side, then stuffed another wedge of chew into his mouth.

Suddenly, one of the crystals on the array lit up and Wallace stood quickly, his chair clattering over behind him as he leaned in to stare. A tiny ball of red light representing a single monster flared to life as it approached the guard station to the west of the city.

"What do you think it is?" Yasmine asked.

"Shhh," Wallace hissed, his eyes intent.

Flash, flash, flash, flash! In the span of second, four more lights burst to light and Wallace slammed a hand down on the array. Immediately a sphere was projected above the array, a model of Rylleh and its surrounds. In the time it took his eyes to focus on the projection, each and every array crystal was lit. Within the projected sphere red lights began to appear by the dozen as communications began to crackle through the arrays behind him.

"Uhh, captain? Got a lot of contacts within the perimeter."

"Captain?! Something in the tunnels! I can hear them coming!"

"Orders? Monsters on the approach!"

"They're in the walls! They're in the walls!"

Yasmine's eyes widened in horror as she stared, unmoving at what was unfolding before her. This many contacts? So close together? Is this a wave?!

"WE'RE UNDER ATTACK!" Wallace roared. "PREPARE TO FALL BACK TO THE CITY!"

"What!?"

"Confirm?! Captain, confirm!?"

"GET YOUR ARSES BACK TO THE CITY!" Wallace turned to bellow directly to the wall. "AND SOMEBODY CONFIRM A DAMN VISUAL!"

"I don't see anything, captain!"

"Yasmine! Yasmine? Yas?!" The captain turned to his second in command to find her staring in a daze at the projection behind him.

He shoved her roughly in the arm until she turned to look at him, her eyes vacant.

"Focus, idiot!" he hissed. "Get those damn soldiers back to the gates and then lock them! You hear me?! Get to it!"

He turned her around and pushed her toward the audio arrays before he spun back to the projection. There were hundreds of small glowing points of red light now, and more appeared every second in every direction, all moving toward the city.

"What the hell are you?" he muttered, "what could you possibly be?"

The guards manning the outer defences fell back immediately, abandoning their posts and equipment as they sprinted to safety. One by one the guard stations went silent until the monsters approached them. That's when Wallace heard it.

"Click, click, click..."

"Click, click, click, click, click, click, click ... "

[illegible]

From every array the same sound rattled out a thousand times over a few seconds. It wasn't the sound of a foot, or a boot, but something harder and sharper, stabbing against the stone as it gripped. Wallace only had to think for a second to determine what kind of monster it could be.

That's when he knew they were dead.

## Chrysalis

## Chapter 566: Attack on Rylleh pt 2

The captain of the Rylleh guard knew, deep in his gut, that he was dead, that *everyone* around him was dead. He felt as if his blood had slowed to a crawl in his veins as he stared at the projection, more red lights blooming to life each second. There were *thousands* of them, because of course there were. He knew what was coming. In that moment, he felt as if two divergent paths lay before him. He could surrender to the inevitable death that awaited him and every person living in the city, lay down and give in, or he could fight and take as many of the filthy monsters down with him as he could.

It didn't seem like much of a choice at all to Wallace.

"Yasmine! YAS! Get over here!"

His second in command, a quaver of panic running just beneath the surface, rushed back to his side and he stepped in front of the display before he turned to speak to her.

"What's been happening?" he asked.

He could hear the rumbling and clatter of more guardsmen piling into the headquarters, responding to the emergency summons that was automatically sent out once the alarms were tripped.

"Well," Yasmine steadied herself, "I've done as you asked. All of the outer guardsmen are retreating to the gates, which are being closed and reinforced. The reserves have been summoned and the city has been notified of an attack."

Wallace nodded.

"Right, I want everyone to abandon the gates and fall back to the city centre. Issue an evacuation order to the populace. Everyone into the city centre, collapse the buildings in a hundred metre radius beyond the square. Then I want -"

"Have you gone mad?" Yasmine demanded, aghast. "Are you abandoning the city?! You'll kill us all!"

"They're tunnelling through the rock! The walls are useless, they're just going to go around them. They're tunnelling up from underneath us as we speak!"

"That's impossible! What about the enchantments? The reinforced rock? It's absurdly hard to break through the stone!"

"It would be if they were human," he ground out, "but they bloody well aren't. Now listen close and keep your bloody mouth shut, alright?"

He reached out and grabbed her by the shoulder, his old calloused hand digging painfully into her flesh. She looked at him and noticed for the first time the faint glint of something mad in his eyes, something *other*.

"Are you alright, captain?" she whispered.

"I will be soon," he chuckled, "now shut up and listen. I'm going to tell you something and it's very important that you don't spread this around. The last thing we want is a panic, alright? Do you understand?"

"I-I think so, captain."

"Good. We are under attack by ants. This is an ant horde."

He muttered the words low, forcing her to lean closer to hear him. He could see the moment she comprehended him as her face drained of blood and she began to shake. He gripped her tighter and tried to give her the strength to hold on.

"There's thousands of them, alright? Thousands. Not a single one below tier three. I know, shut up," he held her eyes as she tried to break in but he refused to allow her to panic. "The gates are going to be useless, they'll tunnel around and come at our people from behind. The only way we have a chance is if we gather in the square and use those walls to hold them off. Alright? Breathe, Yas. Just breathe. We can make it, but we have to act fast! I need you to hold it together and help get the orders out, otherwise we're finished."

Used to dealing with bar scuffles and the rare monster wave, she wasn't equipped to handle this, but she gathered her courage and nodded. She would do her best for the city of her birth. They wouldn't die today!

Seeing the firming determination in her face, Wallace nodded and released her to her duty. He'd had to lie to her, to keep her steady. Even when they gathered in the square, the ants would tunnel under the walls and come at them from beneath, but hopefully they'd be able to swat a few of the filthy bugs as they approached. It was the best they could hope for.

Not even aware of the smile that twisted his face, Wallace rushed out to give his orders.

*Not far away.*

"They want us to WHAT?!"

"Abandon the gate! Orders came straight from Wallace!"

"Like hell we are!" Ernes yelled back through the communication crystal, "has that old fool turned traitor?!"

The voice on the other side of the enchanted gem grew frustrated at his intransigence.

"If you think the *captain* has betrayed the city, your're drunk. Get your men to the square and follow orders! This is an attack, not a Sunday dance!"

Ernes Bally slammed his fist onto the expensive array, cracking it right down the middle. He'd be *damned* if he was going to abandon his post during an invasion, regardless what his orders were! When it was all said and done, he'd be commended for holding his ground whilst Wallace was dragged through the mud for his cowardice.

"What are our orders, Ernes?" one of his men called.

"We hold the line! Whoever is stupid enough to take this city on is going to get a taste of our steel!"

Confidence surging, he rushed out of the guard house attached to the west gate and helped to finish closing and sealing the gate. A massive construction of enchanted metal and stone, the gates had held off hordes of monsters during the recent wave and Ernes doubted there was any chance they would fail now.

"Prepare the firing ports! Mages at the ready, archers behind! Shields up!" he roared.

There were more than fifty guards manning the gate by now and they leapt to their tasks like a well-oiled machine. As their major, his heart swelled with pride as he rushed to join them. A full fifteen metres high, the back of the gate was lined with three tiers of viewing ports accessed by ramps that joined across the centre. At his command, the guards flew up the ladders and took their positions, ready to throw open the hatches built into the gate and annihilate on whatever they saw on the other side.

"Steady, men!" Ernes urged them, "when I give the command, unleash hell fire!"

Heart pounding in his chest, he took a deep breath to calm himself. His reputation would be made by what he did here today. This was going to be the defining moment of his life. He was ready. It was time.

He needed to see what was happening, so he threw open his own hatch and courageously lent over to look, exposing his head to enemy fire. For a brief second, he gained vision of the tunnel approach to the gate before he flicked his head back out of the way and slammed the hatch shut.

"Well, how is it, sir?" the guard next to him asked.

Ernes frowned. He wasn't sure exactly *what* he'd just seen. He'd expected onrushing soldiers, siege weapons, or *something*.

"I need another look," he muttered and performed the action again.



Open, peek, slam!

...

Did that person have *antennae* on his head?

Then a voice called out from beyond the gate.

"Please surrender to the Colony, and you'll be spared! Weapons down, uh, would be very appreciated! There isn't much time, so, I'd do it fast..."

A murmur of confusion arose from the guards on the gate as they tried to unpack exactly what that meant.

"Major? What the heck is that?"

Ernes shook his head, still confused.

"I think it was a person? Asking for our surrender?" Anger built inside him once more. "Mages! Prepare to fire the tunnel on my mark!"

Asking for him to surrender? Idiocy! He refused to bend to Wallace, he wasn't about to lie down for a single invader. They'd roast this fool to send a message. Regardless of what happened at every other gate, the west gate would stand firm!

"Three, two, one, m-"

BOOM!

Before he could say the final word, the stone *exploded* outward on both sides of the gate. A shower of rock and dust flew into the air but even that couldn't obscure the two *gigantic* ants that had burst out of the wall.

CLACK! CLACK!

Jagged and barbed mandibles opened and shut with tremendous force, unleashing an ear splitting crack into the air. Ernes could only stare in horror as the two titans turned toward the guardsmen and woman clinging to the back of the gate preparing to fire on the person outside. Before they could even begin to process what was happening, a flood of insects poured through the tunnel openings, climbing up the walls and throwing themselves onto the guards in seconds. Ernes couldn't even scream before an ant was upon him, throwing itself forward and latching its mandibles around his neck.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 567: Attack on Rylleh pt 3**

From what I understand, we expected the gates to be abandoned at this point, so I'm more than a little shocked to find this one fully manned. Not that it did them much good, as it turned out. Surely by now the city knows exactly what is attacking them? What did they really expect gates to do? We're ants! Never happier than when we're digging!

I should also say that the generals have got together and created specialised digging teams. Only a colony of ants would have the resources and spare bodies to be able to dedicate individuals to such a

niche task as breaking through hardened and magically reinforced stone, but here we are. Turns out that when mages who's sole pursuit is breaking down earth enchantments are paired with huge soldiers that have dedicated every ounce of Biomass and evolutionary energy to ripping through stone with their mandibles, that you can really dig a tunnel. As it happens, you dig the heck out of a tunnel, regardless of what people have done to try and prevent you from doing just that.

So ten of these teams went to work and I was able to burst out of the wall in suitably dramatic fashion with hardly a wait. The Queen was able to come out at just the same time and I have to say, the poor defenders looked as though they fair browned their trousers. In less than ten seconds they were overwhelmed and pinned to the ground, multiple ants gripping them by their limbs and pinching their necks at just the right pressure. At that point they became very still indeed. When Tiny and Invidia leapt out (Crinis is still with me), they became practically statues.

"Well, that went fairly smoothly," I observe to the Queen.

She dips her antennae, but I can tell she's anxious, looking for the next fight.

"We have done well so far, child, but we must advance. If the others reach the city before us..."

She's worried that they'll take the brunt of the return fire when she and I should be absorbing it instead. Good 'ol mother! Always thinking of her children.

"Not to worry, they know to hold back and give us a little time to get ahead of them. Let's get this gate down and then we can move on."

Working together, the two of us approach the massive gate, nearly as impressive as our nest gates, and get to work opening it. Since we're on the inside, there's no need to try and tear the thing down, we just leverage the bar off its mount and bam, gate's open. With that job done we are able to welcome Beyn within the city without much fanfare.

A decision was made that we ants wouldn't communicate with the defenders, since the idea of intelligent ants was more likely to terrify them than the thought of a human invader with a horde of ants under their control. So once he's inside, we task Beyn with trying to sound like he's in charge (not hard for the priest) and getting information out of our captured defenders. I didn't think they'd talk much, but I was genuinely surprised at how much they were willing to cough up in a short amount of time. I suppose having two or three monsters with their mandibles on you is rather persuasive. The humans also seem rather shocked that they aren't dead, which adds another element to their mental distress.

With our tasks done, the Queen and I prepare to run ahead of the rest of the invasion and get closer to the city. At the moment we are still in a well-shaped tunnel, but I can see it opens up roughly a hundred metres ahead. After all the fuss, I'm quite keen to see what this city looks like! Discounting the nest, this will be the first major Dungeon construction I'll have laid my many lensed eyes on! Despite the fact that I'm ostensibly invading the place, I feel quite like a tourist!

"Alright then, Mother. Ready to charge forward recklessly and endanger ourselves?"

THWACK!

"That is not what we are doing," she reprimands me firmly, "we are attempting to focus attention on ourselves as we are in the best position to absorb danger."

I rub my head and refrain from pointing out that it's basically the same thing in the end. Mother has a look in her eye as if she knows what I'm thinking and one of her antenna twitches irritably.

"Right then, off we go! Come on Tiny! Keep up Invidia!" I say and scurry off.

Mother is in a grumpy mood! She must be stressed, what with all of this invasion stuff going on. For now, it's best to avoid giving her opportunities to punish me too extensively.

At the east gate.

"How much longer do you anticipate the Eldest will need before they move into the city itself?" Sloan asked.

"Give them at least another five minutes. I know we estimated ten minutes of 'Eldest delay', but I think we can afford a little more buffer time considering the gate abandonment has gone according to plan," Victor suggested.

"Agreed."

"Do you think the Queen will be alright?"

"Don't start this again, Victor. We've done all that we can on that front..."

"I'm just worried!"

"We're all worried!"

The two generals cleaned their antennae vigorously to calm themselves before deflating. It was true, they'd done all they could to ensure their mother would be safe. The extra measures put in place to protect the Eldest were, so far, working well, though Advant was adamant that they suspected something.

"At least everything is going to plan so far..." Victor said.

"The next part was always going to be the major challenge," Sloan agreed, "overcoming stone and dirt isn't a challenge. Getting what we need from this city without having to destroy the inhabitants and throw our sibling's lives away was the challenging part. That's the sort of thing we rely on the Eldest for."

"Would you two stuffy generals get to doing something useful? I swear, the laziest caste of the lot. All you do is stand around, provide auras and think a lot."

Burke, like most scouts, never hesitated to needle the generals. In truth, though they were the most physically fragile of all the soldier caste evolutions, the generals still put themselves on the front line and fought. Rather than armchair planners, the 'generals' were more like hardened squad leaders in the forces of the Colony.

"We decided to wait an extra five minutes," Sloan informed her sister.

"Ah, Eldest allowance?"

"Indeed."

In the distance, the ants could feel a powerful vibration shake the air as it rattled against the fine hairs of their antennae, followed by the sound of a large crash in their comparatively smaller ears. If they had to hazard a guess, they'd say that a large building or wall had collapsed, possibly as a monster of considerable size had smashed into it. In that moment, they each considered whether the Queen or the Eldest were responsible for this destruction.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 568: Attack on Rylleh pt 4**

Yasmine had seen the captain focused on his work. During the more intense moments of the last wave, he'd been relentless in his energy and application, but this time something was different. Gone was the calm, determined figure that she was accustomed to, replaced by a beast with so much nervous energy he almost vibrated in place. He roared and shouted through the communication arrays and at anyone who happened to cross his path. He bullied and intimidated everyone who so much as queried a word that came out of his mouth. She could have accepted that, perhaps, considering the situation they were in, especially knowing what he had told her, but the wild look in his eye coupled with the rictus grin plastered on his face unnerved her to no end. Wanting to escape, she'd offered to act as a liaison and assist the citizens falling back to the square.

There was panic in the streets by the time she arrived, the news of the gates being abandoned had spread like wildfire, causing an uproar that threatened to turn an orderly retreat into a riot. Yasmine was forced to intervene multiple times in her first few minutes outside to prevent altercations between city folks and the guards trying to protect them.

"Get to the square! Take nothing with you but what you can carry! Move with all haste! Volunteers to the armoury!"

The crush in the streets was unbearable, only her superior physical stats due to her Class allowing her to press through the crowds. On every corner, a guardsmen or volunteer hollered out orders at the top of their lungs as teams went door to door. There wasn't enough time to ensure everyone obeyed the command, anyone who chose to stay in their homes would be abandoned. Left to fend for themselves against the ravenous ants.

She shivered as she considered the fate that awaited those who didn't listen. A fate she couldn't even warn them about. It was only a matter of time before the true nature of this invasion was revealed, but every second between now and then allowed them save precious lives. Yasmine had no doubt that the instant the citizens realised they were being invaded by ants, a mad panic would descend.

As she neared the market on Dionys street she found the guard out in force, funnelling people toward the square and the inner wall to be found there. She rushed forward, flashing the insignia on her uniform the moment she arrived.

"Lieutenant Yasmine," Sargent Lyssa saluted hurriedly, "are there new orders?"

She shook her head.

"At the moment we continue to get as many people into the square as we can."

Lyssa nodded grimly before she turned back to the hundreds of terrified people rushing past.

"Does the captain really think all of these people are going to fit? The town hall doesn't have enough room for this, surely? Are they planning to activate the gates?"

"I don't know," Yasmine said softly, "we don't control the gates, the council does. It's possible they're reaching out for aid, or for somewhere to receive us, but we haven't heard from them."

"Useless bastards," the Sargent spat, "If their ancestors could see what their blood has come to."

Yasmine swallowed her agreement. There was little point ragging on their rulers now.

"I'll head upstairs," she indicated Merry's fine potions and wares, an alchemist shop with an upstairs residence, "see if I can get a better view."

"Right you are lieutenant."

Inside the market was mayhem as the merchants tried to load their wares into carts to bring with them or were zealously defending their cash boxes. Yasmine had no time for any of them, ignoring their indignant screams as she rushed into Merry's and kicked down the door blocking the stairs. Good thing the fussy old man wasn't home, otherwise he'd have pitched a fit. She leapt up four stairs at a time and burst onto the westward facing balcony just in time to see something she would never forget.

From the west gate entrance crept an enormous ant, taller than a person and *long*. Its long mandibles were barbed and cruel, but its carapace glittered with the most beautiful light. An earthy red colour with a rear segment of pure black, the creature poised at the gateway and gazed down on the city from above like a pitiless conqueror. It stood eerily still and made not a sound for a handful of breaths as Yasmine felt a scream constrict her throat.

What *was* this creature? Tier four, five?! An *ant*!? There were thousands more of them out there, she knew that, if there were more like this one, what sort of chance did they have?

CLACK!

Even from hundreds of metres away, she clearly heard the sound. The great monster had opened those horrific jaws wide and slammed them shut with unspeakable force, the piercing sound tore through the din of the city with ease. From where she stood, Yasmine could see the people in the streets turn and look, start pointing as they discovered where the noise was coming from.

A terrified hush descended on Rylleh as that monster gazed down on them, not an ounce of mercy reflected in its frame. When it finally moved, it was slow, one leg a time, it stalked down the ramp that lead to the city itself and from the tunnel behind it emerged an enormous, dark ape that *crackled* with electricity, another smaller shape on its back. As the creature slowly began to move amongst the buildings, another ant emerged from the tunnel, even larger than the first. This one didn't hesitate, but moved forward immediately, clearing the way for what came next.

From out of the tunnel came an *explosion* of monstrous ants, dozens of them at once, crawling over every available space of the entrance. They ran up the walls, towards the ceiling, fanning out in all directions as more and more poured out each second. If anything, the flow increased with each heartbeat until the area around the entrance was carpeted in a living wave of giant insects.

As if a spell were broken, a great cry rose from the people of Rylleh. A unified scream of pure terror that emanated from thousands of throats. In an instant, the semi-orderly evacuation was over and the crowd transformed into a frantic mob. Rather than watch her own people shove and crush each other, Yasmine reached up with shaking hands to grip the eave above her head and pull herself onto the roof. Her stomach churned and she struggled to contain her bile as she righted her balance and looked around.

From the east, the north and south, the scene was repeated. The inner sanctuary of the Rylleh had been punctured so easily by these creatures and now they came in a great flood to wash the city away. She fell to her knees, no longer able to stand. For a reason she couldn't explain, she turned back to gaze at the first ant to enter, and found herself staring at something new.

A thousand barbed tentacles rose from the ant's back, attached to a central trunk that housed three separate, gaping maws of pure darkness. As tears began to roll down her face, Yasmine watched as each of those mouths opened impossibly wide, paused, then screamed, a piercing wail that blew through every mortal soul that heard it and rattled their minds like weathervanes.

That sound seeped through their ears, into their brains before it sunk into a deeper place, a primal place of fear and terror that every child knows and adults wish they could forget. For many, the madness that followed was almost a relief.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 569: Attack on Rylleh pt 5**

This place is amazing! I mean, wow, ingenuity and all that good stuff is on display in copious amounts right here. The city itself is nestled inside a gigantic egg-shaped cavern, with some sort of humungous crystal light source on the ceiling? What the heck is that thing!? Are they powering it with cores? Holy heck that must suck up a lot of mana. My entrance comes out about halfway up the side of the egg and from that point down the buildings begin to appear, built right into the walls of the cavern itself. All sorts of impressive stone constructions poke out, fort-like citadels and graceful mansions gradually give way to more humble living spaces and markets. I wonder how they find the vertical living here on the side of the cavern? Must be a little awkward getting up and down. I hope for their sake that there was something other than stairs to get up here, that would have been painful.

The most stunning aspect of the city and one that I only noticed after entering the main chamber, is the total lack of Dungeon veins! How the heck have they achieved something like this?! I've not seen such a thing done before, not even by the Sophos! This secret *must* be unlocked for the Colony! As we expand deeper into the Dungeon, this could make our nests invulnerable fortresses during a wave and ensure the safety of the precious brood! If nothing else comes of this raid, then this technique *must* be uncovered!

I don't get so distracted by gawping at everything new around me that I neglect to pay attention to the defenders of the city, such as there are. It appears that the citizens are being herded into the city centre, I can see an inner wall there where I assume they hope to make their final stand. There also seems to be a terrific amount of screaming and running going on as my siblings flood into the chamber.

[Hey, Crinis. What was that scream thing all about?]

[I am letting them know what they are dealing with!]

[It looks like you got quite a strong reaction.]

[Naturally I did, Master! I wanted to ensure they ran away... in accordance with your plans, of course!]

...

Suspicious. Not that I have the time to deal with it right now.

[Come on Tiny, let's move up and see if anyone comes to try and deal with us. Stay alert, they may attempt to ambush us from amongst the buildings, so be careful.]

Attempting to follow my own advice, I stick to the middle of the pleasingly wide roads as I rush down the side of the cavern. Judging by the winch and pulley systems I see about the place, these sections aren't really for walking on, but they suit me just fine!

BOOM!

"What the heck, mother?!"

Rather than follow my example, the Queen simply smashes through the first building that gets in her way, sending the stone tumbling down and damaging a few more houses on its way. She looks even larger than usual, I assume she's activated her 'war queen' form.

"What is it, child?" she asks as she continues to barrel forward.

If they were planning on lying in wait within the buildings, I'm going to assume they aren't considering it anymore.

*Within a nearby building.*

From the third story window, Sylvin was able to see the onrushing horde of monsters, led by two truly colossal insects.

"What do you think, boss? Should we leg it?" a voice asked him nervously.

Sylvin sneered but managed to wipe the expression from his face before he turned back to his nervous compatriots.

"Run?" he said, "why would we run away when a literal *fortune* is rushing forward to meet us!"

There was nervousness and anxiety in the air inside the Mercenary Union of Rylleh, that was a smell that he knew well, but rising above that fear was a more powerful motivator: *greed*.

"Jessim, do we have any more union members coming in?" he asked.

"No sir, we got about half the membership in here, the others must've headed to the square."

"More for the rest of us then," Sylvin chuckled and a few others in the room picked up on his energy and laughed along. Glancing around the room, he could see the rising tension in his fellow merc's faces. It was a familiar scene, one didn't make a living hunting monsters in the Dungeon without being familiar with pre-battle jitters. His people just needed a little push.

"What we've got out there," he pointed out the upstairs window to the masses of ants creeping into the city, "is money on legs. A horde of low-tier, low stat monsters with no Biomass. If we stay in our teams and hold the line, we can kill a million of them."

There were rumblings of agreement as people hefted weapons and tightened their fists.

"Over *there*," Sylvin now pointed to the two enormous ants leading the charge, "is the real payday. Tier five, maybe six. Sounds scary, but remember, these are ants. The tier may be high, but the stats are low. You'll never get a better chance for experience than this. And don't forget the cores. We get our hands on them, and we're set for life."

Grins and eager faces began to appear amongst the gathered men and women of the Union. These people were hardened monster killers and they weren't about to run and hide like the guard at the first sign of Dungeon spawn. After all, this was how they got paid. Sylvin shot an assessing glance around the room. He'd worked out of the Rylleh Merc Union building for years and he recognised many of the faces he saw, but there were still many he did not. At least his regular team was here, he trusted them to watch his back.

"Make sure you've got your gear organised, people. This is going to be bloody work today and don't think otherwise. We've only got a few minutes to prepare before they reach us, the big two need to go down first. Let's get moving."

All around the room, hardened mercenaries began to organise themselves into teams, checking their equipment and a dozen muttered discussions began at once. Sylvin moved to one side and indicated with his head for his team to join him. The troops were all fired up and it was time to work out how to seize the prize when it hit the deck. They were mercenaries after all, sharing just wasn't in their vocabulary.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 570: Attack on Rylleh pt 6**

Sylvin gathered his team and as the Mercenaries began to fan out from their building he kept close with the people he trusted. Ogran was a tremendous brute of a fighter who wielded a two-handed hammer in battle, perfect for shattering the carapace defence that these ants relied on. His level wasn't the highest in the group, but his physical strength certainly was. They'd need to rely on him to crack the big ants open. Yann was the scout of the group, deadly with a bow in hand or the rapier she kept at her waist, her stealth had reached a high rank, allowing her to move with almost no sound. With her shadow cloak, made from weaver spider threads farmed in the second strata, she could vanish into the shadows in an instant, a powerful ability for someone with her talents. Sylvin had been pleased when they added the mage Illianus to the group. A highly skilled Golgari merc, she was excellent with healing spells and possessed an impressive offensive repertoire to back it up.

He himself was something of an all-rounder. He'd spent a lot of time grinding away delving in the first and second strata when perhaps he could have challenged the depths. But he wasn't stupid. How many had he seen think that they'd graduated the first two strata and leave Rylleh to find opportunities somewhere deeper? Most of them were dead within the month. The shadow sea was perilous to life, but the demons of the third strata were cunning, vicious and held little love for delvers in their territory.



One wrong step would see an entire party annihilated in the blink of an eye should they run across a demon hunting pack.

Dabbling in elemental magic, training his stealth, his movement skills and weapon handling, he'd never bothered to focus on only one area, rather he kept himself interested by branching out. This had earned him a reputation as the best delver in Rylleh, something he acknowledged but hardly valued.

Inhaling through his nose, Sylvin almost scent the terror in the air. He chuckled in wry amusement. Imagine, living in the Dungeon and not bothering to level up enough to feel safe. It was insane that so many of the civilians in this city were so incapable. Sure, they only lived in the first strata, a small pond, but they were so content to be the tiniest fish here.

Not him.

"Yann, get out there and find a spot high enough to give you good line of sight. You've got no chance of dealing damage with that sewing needle you call a sword."

"Get stuffed, Sylvin," she scoffed, but vanished into the gloom in a breath, already making her way higher.

"It'll be you and me on the frontline, Ogran," Sylvin turned to the brawny human, "stay nimble and don't get hit. We'll need your hammer to crack this nut."

"You got it, boss," Ogran rumbled.

A man of few words, he merely hefted his hammer kept his eyes on the surroundings, a professional.

"I suppose you want me to back you up and try and keep you safe whilst you prance around pretending you know what you're doing," Illianus drawled.

Her leader shot her a grin.

"Business as usual, eh Illi?" he said.

"That's not my name," she warned him.

"I know," he smiled, "let's get to work, they'll be here any minute."

The abandoned streets and buildings made for an eerie backdrop as the four mercs moved swiftly to prepare the perfect ambush location. Behind them, more teams were taking defensive positions, getting ready to fend off the swarm that was descending on them. Barricades were being set, obstructions made use of and chokepoints set up by those looking to profit from killing as many ants as possible. A few of the more high level groups doing just as Sylvin and his team were, getting ready to jump the big fish. The experience alone for killing these high tier monsters was almost prize enough for them, the fortune a potential rare core represented to shallow delvers like them was just the icing on the cake.

Even now they could still hear the wailing of the populace as they rioted to safety. The scent of smoke had begun to rise in the air, evidence that somewhere a fire had started. Probably some idiot looting during the chaos. Sylvin pushed it all from his mind, he needed to focus. Along with all the mercenaries around him, he settled his body, crouched behind a corner as he watched the two massive ants pick their way forward, walking over the top of buildings or just smashing through them.

He studied the creatures closely, using all of his years of experience as a delver. Both were heavily mutated, especially the smaller one, which didn't seem to make much sense. Judging by the shape of the mandibles and carapace, the offensive and defensive abilities were sure to be formidable. He felt a flicker of nerves in his heart, but he quickly quieted them. This may be a higher tier of monster than he was used to fighting, but they were just ants. He shared a glance with Ogran, who huddled next to him. The big man was as cool as ice, hands steady on the haft of his weapon. They were going to do this, they would win.

Sylvin never saw the attack coming. All of his concentration was honed to a razor's edge, focused on the two great monster's that approached, but even were he to be more generally aware, he still may not have noticed. The ants seemed to materialise from thin air, they leapt from nearby buildings, charged from the streets around them and erupted from the stones beneath their feet.

When their jaws found him, Sylvin managed to cry "they're here!", before he was pinned to the stone.

Ogran lasted a little longer, able to swing his hammer and knock aside the first attacker, but three more were on him before he could ready another strike. They bore him down, their mandibles shattering his hammer and gripping his limbs. Atop a nearby building, crouched against the slate roof, Yann saw nothing before they found her, too confident in her own Skill. Illianus, at least, knew what was coming, her finely tuned magical senses gave her the slightest glimpse of the monsters closing in, but her mind was assaulted on multiple fronts at once, battering at her mental defences until they crumbled and she fell, unconscious.

Their work complete in less than ten seconds, the twenty ants checked each other and their surrounds, making sure that their efforts had gone unnoticed by those around them. One of the ants moved from group to group with light steps as she checked on her fellows. The situation well in hand, she leant down to look at the face of Sylvin, clamped in the mandibles of her sibling.

"To think that pitiful creatures such as this, would dare to raise their hand against the Eldest," Protectant muttered.

"Do you think they noticed us?" Defendant wondered.

"I don't think so," she replied, "but we must be careful. They've already come so close to us already."

"What do you want us to do with these aggressors?" Defendant asked, her jaws squeezing tighter around the mercenaries head.

"Knock them out, quickly. Then back to the shadows. We'll have much work today, the Eldest is going to be busy," came the reply.

Sylvin heard none of this, since none of it was spoken out loud. All he knew was the fear of death and the pressure around his head, until a blow fell on his skull, and he knew nothing.