

Chrysalis 921

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 921: Worm on a Hook

Rassan'tep kept his eyes lidded to conceal his impatience. Even the heated sand against his scales rubbed him the wrong way, irritating him further. The third stratum, it simply couldn't compare to the fine grain and hot sun of his native desert, but how many decades had it been since he could run freely on the surface? Too many.

[Enough,] he spoke to his chief servant, Ammon'sil, who signalled the others before they stopped producing fire beneath him.

The Old One stretched his hands, his claws flexed and scraped against the sand and he opened his mouth wide, stretching the loose skin and exposing his fangs, each a deadly blade that glistened with venom. Lethargy tugged at his thoughts but he pushed it away, there wasn't the time to sleep.

[You seem very antagonistic toward the ants,] he observed to his guest, [I would like to know why.]

High atop his mound of sand that steamed and sizzled within the confines of the brick walled furnace beneath, the great lizard looked down on the enormous worm who writhed in discomfort. Despite the tough outer covering of the Earth Worm, its flesh was still soft and vulnerable to heat. What would Yarrum think to see one of his own kind display such weakness? A foolish question. Yarrum would eat the entire city in a single bite, never caring if the city was filled with worm-type monsters or not. Of all the ancients, the Eternal Worm had a hunger second only to Tarriflyx.

Though there was quite a distance between the two.

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

Even the mind of this creature felt weak, slippery and noxious to Rassan'tep. In control as he was, he felt as if he gripped a poisonous toad as it wriggled within his grip. To think a creature such as this came from the same place as that ant. A *much* more promising specimen.

[You hate them,] Rassan'tep bared his teeth once more, a childish display, but he was angered. [You seek their destruction and you wish to use the kaarmodo to achieve it, because you are far too weak to achieve your desires alone.]

Sensing his master's distaste, Ammon'sil stepped forward and placed a hand against the Old One's side as he directed a glare at the worm. That such a thing would attempt to dissemble before his master was a sin that he would not forget.

[I b-betrayed them in the past. They seek my death! If they aren't stopped, there will never be a safe place for me in the Dungeon, or anywhere on the planet. They grow so quickly! You haven't seen what I've seen! The enemies they've defeated, the rate of their spread. Already they have a dozen nests, each with two Queens! They produce thousands of young each week. Already they can fight against you, they pushed you away from the garden didn't they? What will happen when there's a million of them? Or a hundred million? I might want them dead, but they are a threat that you cannot deny! Already they've defeated the golgari and the Legion. Will the kaarmodo be next?]

The great lizard let out a noxious breath and closed its eyes as it probed with its potent mind.

[And what of the one you wish to save?]

The worm recoiled, as if struck.

[W-what do -]

[I can almost see her in your thoughts. A female, yes? She is large. Powerful. Much more than you.]

He opened his eyes and stared fiercely at the creature, Jim.

[If we destroy the Colony, how will she be saved if you do not tell us? Have you even thought that far?]

A trace of his contempt leaked through and Jim shrank in on himself.

[I thought.. That is... I meant... I wanted to bring her up at the proper *time*.]

[You have lost your chance,] Rasan'tep spoke mercilessly, [I have it now. *Sarah*. A bear type.]

[Stay out of my thoughts!]

[Keep me out, if you can,] he flicked his tongue dismissively.

Obviously, the worm could not.

[You know nothing of this world, worm Jim. You think the Legion, defeated? The gulgari, helpless? I have seen it all in your mind. A puffed up border clan, filled with arrogance and foolishness. A green Legion, forced back to more important duties by the coming of the wave. The Empire of Stone can be traced back to before the Rending, their greatest warriors wield the mightiest blades of living stone this world has ever seen, their bodies coated in precious minerals harder than diamonds. I've seen gulgari warriors conceal themselves in flowing magma. I've seen them *chew through stone*. They have battled the Dungeon for three thousand years. They could annihilate this Colony with a turn of their hand, should they choose to.]

[But they were defeated!]

[You hear nothing of what I say. You think the strongest gulgari are in the second stratum? The *second*? Don't be a fool. It is a playground for the incompetent and the weak. That you would underestimate the Legion is even more pathetic.]

[I saw them retreat with my own eyes!]

[I cannot educate a fool. That which you see as a looming threat is still a grub in the eyes of the kaarmodo, the Mahaan will never take your warnings seriously enough to bring the required force to bear on the Colony. Even now that they have departed to the fourth stratum, along with your Sarah.]

[What?]

The worm is so stunned he actually stops writhing for a brief moment.

[She is no longer here,] Rasan'tep assured him. [The Mother Tree has called on the ants to protect her from my people and they have answered that call. Your friend went with them.]

[B-but then... in the *fourth*? She'll die! It's suicide!]

[It is indeed, very dangerous, and not just due to my people. There are more sentient beings living in the fourth stratum than there are on the surface, after all. Vast empires, enormous armies. The enemies of the Colony will learn they are there eventually, and then? Destruction.]

[I have to save her!]

Jim twisted and tried to lunge out the door, but his body froze in place, his mind gripped by the powerful Old One.

[You move too quickly, Jim. There is much we can do here before we depart for the fourth.]

[You... you're going to... help me?]

[For my own reasons. I am.]

The gratitude that flooded the mind of the worm was the final straw for Rasan'tep and he broke the contact. Such a weak creature. So unworthy. The ant, Anthony on the other hand, showed great promise. Very early he had drawn the eye of the Red Truth and he had only grown magnificently since then. He even felt the touch of the Worm Cult in his thoughts. A promising specimen indeed.

But would it be enough to turn that ant into a true diamond? The twentieth ancient? Rasan'tep knew there was only one way to forge such a hard material.

Pressure and heat.

One does not coddle an Ancient.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 922: Realms of Myth

The fourth stratum is considered by many to be the true world of Pangera. An incredible land of abundant mana, rich resources and verdant forests. Those strong enough to contest with the powerful monsters that spawn here can live an incredible life of infinite possibilities. For this reason, territory on the fourth is desperately sought and fiercely protected. Many of the great powers of the world have established their centre of government in this layer, their surface kingdoms existing merely to funnel people and resources to this, more important battleground.

If one looks deeper, there are multiple reasons for this, but perhaps one of the most overlooked is the nature of the fifth stratum. There is a great deal of focus on the positive qualities of the fourth, but in reality the inhospitable wasteland that is the fifth is a major reason why the fourth is so populated. First, it means an entire stratum is completely unsuitable for habitation, which puts a premium on land within the fourth. Unlike the third, which is merely unpleasant to live in, the fifth is completely hostile to life to an almost absurd degree.

The other consideration, is that the best place in the Dungeon to establish a powerbase to launch expeditions deeper is the fourth. The closer you can establish your safe zone to the fifth, the more likely you are to be able to push through and reach the sixth. For this reason, many consider the fifth stratum, the 'world of decay' to be the great dividing line of the Dungeon, even a halfway marker, of sorts. Of

course, it is unknown, at least to this scholar, how many strata there are to the Dungeon, so this is more of an unofficial title than an accurate descriptor, but the sentiment remains a powerful one.

As to what powers and wealth reside in the sixth for those strong enough to reach it, it's a little galling to admit that this humble researcher does not know. Such things are the closest kept secrets of the great powers and any speculation on my part would be purely baseless.

- Excerpt from 'The great dividing line: The fifth stratum' by Elric.

Commander Myriam wasn't happy. In an unfortunate quirk of her character, at least in the context of the role she served within the Legion, when she wasn't happy it tended to show clearly on her face. Not the best trait for an ambassador to have, but as long as the consul didn't care, then neither did she.

In truth, the Legionem Abyssis didn't seem to value tact in its representatives. The Legion didn't value pretty words, they valued powerful actions, which was likely why all of their missives to foreign powers were carried exclusively by the immensely powerful.

It was difficult for the faces of the kaarmodo to show strong emotion, but she could tell from their stillness, their unblinking stares, and the defensive posture of the setsulah, that they could feel the anger rolling off her in waves.

Good.

These idiot lizards had spat on thousands of years of tradition and discipline, they had *better* feel her anger. When she felt she had a good enough grip on her temper, Myriam turned to the ancient creature beside her and looked him dead in the eye.

"Please explain to me, Mahaan," she grated out, "exactly what you expect the Consul to say when I bring her word of this," she gestured roughly to the scene in front of her, "*atrocities*?"

The Mahaan shifted slightly under her withering glare and the setsulah attendants reacted as if she'd punched the fool in the snout. She shifted her glare onto them and they froze as the weight of her displeasure fell upon them as a physical weight.

[If you would speak with your mind I would understand you more clearly,] the deep tones of Parron'tep rang in her head, [it is important that we communicate clearly in such trying times.]

The commander grit her teeth once again at the *arrogance* of the oversized gecko. Who in the hell did he think he was talking to?

"Let me be clear," she bit off each word as she spoke, "if you don't explain this situation to my satisfaction, I will request the Consul intervene *personally*. I assure you, she will descend on this mountain at the head of our massed Legions and she will *flatten* it, along with you and everyone else in this room. Then your people will thank her and pray to all they hold dear that she stops there. You are in the *coldest possible sand*, Mahaan, one wrong word and you will freeze to death."

The clear, naked threat in her words riled the kaarmodo and they reacted strongly. The enormous creatures peeled back their lips to reveal dagger like teeth dripping with venom as the human in their midst threatened their lives with open contempt. All around the room the attendants reached for their

weapons, needle pointed teeth bared in anger as their master's indignation boiled across their bond. Despite all of their anger, nobody moved, as Myriam stood in the centre of the room untouched.

She even went as far as to tap her booted foot on the floor impatiently, waiting for a response from the Mahaan. Still, none of the kaarmodo moved. She could not be harmed, of this they were all keenly aware.

[We anticipated that you would not approve of this action,] Parron'tep replied. [As the Mahaan of this clutch, I have taken the responsibility of seeing this plan through to its completion, all that we ask is the Legion leave us to execute on our strategy in peace.]

If it were possible, the commander's face grew even tighter.

"You want us to look aside from a clear breach of everything the Legion has ever stood for? Three thousand years of martial tradition and sacrifice? For what gain?"

[The waves are growing ever stronger and they have not ceased,] the Mahaan replied. [Surely the Legion believes, as we do, that the possibility of a second cataclysm exists? We cannot wait for such an event without taking measures to prepare. If we are able to remove the Mother Tree, it will be a Mythic class monster that the Ancients are not able to convert to their side. Or worse, consume.]

"If you want to kill the Tree then rally your forces, contact your allies and attack it. Why resort to this... *abomination*?"

[We cannot risk losing even a fraction of our strength if we are to survive another Rending. Would the Legion throw their soldiers away knowing what is to come?]

The commander didn't reply, but it was clear that she did not approve.

"All you do is create another problem, bigger than the one you are trying to solve."

[They are perfectly under control. There is no chance they will escape our containment.]

Myriam snorted.

"That's what everyone thinks, right up until the last possible moment. It *will* get out of your control, nothing is surer. On the brink of a second cataclysm, this is *exactly* the sort of thing you shouldn't be doing. You create new enemies for us to fight at a time we are spread far too thin already."

She looked out through the shield once more into the chamber beyond. It was dark inside, but her enhanced vision saw everything in disgusting detail. Three pale, bulbous bodies, each over fifty metres long, pulsed grotesquely as an army of smaller insect-type monsters swarmed around them, hauling away clutches of eggs every second. At the heads of the beasts a constant train of workers came carrying loads of fungus grown in the vast fields beyond the chamber, an endless stream of food for the queens.

It sickened her.

"I already know what the response from the Consul will be. Shut it down, now," she spat.

A pause.

[With respect, commander, we will wait for an official response from your leader before we make a decision.]

"And in the meantime you'll continue as planned?" Myriam growled.

The Mahaan closed his eyes.

[Of course,] he replied.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 923: The Tree Fort

I'm no longer shocked by how fast the Colony can work. I mean, I've seen it all by this point, surely. Even if they can't shock me, they can get pretty damn close! In the twenty four hours after the initial battle with the termites, the area in which we fought has been transformed. A simple wall was only the stopgap measure, now we have defence in depth! Layers of walls, spiked pits filled with acid, surprise attack tunnels, the works.

The new walls are more than a little better. Compressed stone reinforced with Smithant's finest steel frames, enchanted to harden the metal even further, each wall covered in crenelations and cheeky sniper windows to allow mages to unleash their firepower from range. If the termites want to run headfirst into *this* then they really are blind. Gweheheheh.

The issue we have is the sheer amount of ground we have to cover.

"How much of the rock has been compressed in your area?" Cobalt asks.

She's been doing the rounds, getting a sense of how far along the fortification is.

"Not even twenty percent, I'm afraid," the site foreman lets her know.

Not even twenty percent?! My brains are fried over here!

"You're a long way ahead of the other teams," Cobalt lets her know wryly.

"Well, I think we both know why that is."

I mean, I don't want to take all the credit, after all, there's a lot of hardworking mages here putting in all thei- ... Oi. Why are you staring so admiringly at Invidia? He's not getting nearly as much done as I am! If you wanted to *blow up* the area then, sure, he'd be your guy, but I'm out here busting my brains to squish this rock!

Sheesh.

"You know I'm joking Eldest," Cobalt laughs, "no need to look so sour."

"Who? Me? I don't look sour. In fact, I don't even know what you're talking about. Who are you, again?"

Heh. Smooth. Covered myself well there.

"As much as your help is appreciated here, Eldest, we need you in another area."

I eye the tiny carver askance.

"You sure that's a good idea? The sooner we get this network set up, the safer we're going to be from enemy tunnels."

"The reality is, we can't cover such a huge area in anything less than two weeks, no matter what we do. I'd need five times as many work crews to achieve the job in the timeframes we want. So far, we've managed to cover the most direct paths the enemy could take to access the roots. That should help funnel them into our fortifications. The rest is just going to have to get done when we can."

"That increases our risk."

"We have to take on some level of risk," she shrugs. "By moving you around to where you're needed most we hope to minimise that risk as much as possible."

"All right then," I sigh and release the omni-elemental construct.

Immediately all of my mind constructs fall apart and for the first time in hours my brains relax. Compressing stone might be simple to do, mana wise, but it takes a *hell* of a lot of willpower. You're basically grabbing hold of the stone in a hand full of mana and squishing it, using the mana to heal the fractures as they occur and bond the rock tighter together. It's immensely draining, monotonous work and I'm well and truly over it. Seriously though, the next time I check my status I ought to see a huge boost to my elemental magic. I might even hit the next rank!

I'm excited to see what sort of magic I can get my hands on!

My friends in tow, I follow along behind Cobalt as we make our way out of the winding work tunnels that twist their way around the Mother Tree's massive main roots. As we travel I idly dip my attention into the Vestibule to see what my fellow members of the ten thousand strong expeditionary force are up to.

Quite predictably, most of them are digging, even the Immortals. Ah, it seems that Leeroy has learned of the soul devouring nature of the termites and is hoping, along with her sisters, that her soul will be consumed before her Phoenix Fire organ can kick in, circumventing her rebirth and finally achieving a glorious death in battle. Not a chance, Leeroy! I'll pull your soul out and stuff it back into your body myself if I have to. The soldiers are helping to coordinate the movement of soil and stone, it seems. Ah, it appears that Brilliant is attempting to reconstruct the root gates of the Mother Tree using a few twigs, a small metal pin, a rock and a fire. I'm not sure how much luck she's going to have there...

What's interesting is that I don't see Vibrant anywhere. And I've just realised a large crew of scouts has assembled near the main exit.

I think I've caught onto the issue.

"How long has Vibrant been missing?" I sigh.

The carver in front of me jumps.

"Ah. Since the battle. She ran off to scout and hasn't come back."

"And you want me to go and look for her."

"We want you to lead a team of scouts to find her, yes. There's a bit of concern that she might have followed the termites too far in their retreat and gotten surrounded or ... distracted."

If I had money, I would put it all on 'distracted' in a heartbeat. Still, we don't want to leave Vibrant out in the middle of the fourth stratum on her own. As powerful as she is within the Colony, she's a tiny little bug down here. Even at tier seven we'd only be average down here.

"You lot will have to be extra cautious while I'm gone," I fret, "if the termites come again..."

"We know the risks, Eldest. We have to have Vibrant back."

"I know that. I just worry about the family."

"We know. We'll be fine."

Dammit Vibrant, if I catch you swimming in a pool with little golden fish or something equally stupid I'm going to be a mad, mad, Eldest.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 924: Put a Toe out in the Fourth

Some part of me is still buzzing about being in the fourth stratum. I can't believe we managed to get down here without having to fight some epic war for survival in the third, or conquer an oppressive foe, or face down a full legion of metal death soldiers. It just seems weird. I mean, the kaarmodo are knocking on our door, and we have to fight to protect the tree down here, but I still feel like we got off easy. I mean, we had to face down Garralosh before we could even descend down to the second stratum.

I almost feel relaxed about it. We have tension with the kaarmodo across two stratum, which is definitely an issue, but I'll keep my claws crossed so they don't try to pull us into a conflict across the third and fourth. That'd suck. Big time.

Fortunately, it won't happen! We're cruising right now. All we have to do is hunker down, get ourselves properly dug in, and then hold off the termites in a war of attrition that they can never hope to win. Once we've fortified our hold on our territories in the third stratum, and expanded our numbers and nests within the second, we'll be able to flood down here and smash our colony rivals into smithereens. Once that happens, we'll be free to expand and explore down here to our heart's content. Things are looking good!

Until Vibrant went and threw a wrench in everything. Where the heck did she get to? She was supposed to chase after the termites until they left the tunnels we'd constructed to funnel them toward us and then come back. Naturally, Vibrant being Vibrant, she's probably found herself a pond or something and is trying to run on water or something ridiculous.

[Anthony!] a mind reaches out to me. [Wait for me!]

[Sarah?] I say as I turn and see the giant bear running up beside me. [You want to come along?]

[Yes,] she nods, [I'm not that useful for digging or constructing things, so I might as well come and help make sure you and Vibrant get back safely.]

[Sure,] I shrug my antennae, [feel free to tag along.]

I think for a moment.

"You need to be careful out there, Protectant. We're kicking around in the fourth now, you lot should stay hidden unless you *really* feel the need to intervene. Even then, think twice."

I don't get a reply, but I know they heard me. Honestly, ever since my bodyguards showed up, I feel like I spend more time worrying about *them* being safe, as opposed to them worry about me. They're probably constantly having to intervene behind the scenes to keep me on the straight and narrow though, so I suppose it all washes out in the end. Come to think of it, I should keep a closer eye on the guards through the Vestibule. Their hiding mechanism is incredibly strong and unless I focus they still tend to slip under my radar.

I spin up a mind construct and dedicate it to filtering through the wash of energy I receive from the Colony, spying on Protectant and her crew.

[Alright then, let's get going.]

Without too much discussion we get ourselves organised and head out at a rapid pace. Vibrant and her group would have been really motoring along on the heels of the termites as they retreated, so I don't doubt we have a lot of ground to cover before we catch up to them. The tunnels around us feel strangely heavy, as if the whole weight of the immense mountain and tree above us bear down on them. It's kind of strange that it feels more claustrophobic here than it does when I can't see what's over my head.

The veins of mana that permeate the Dungeon are present here as always, pulsing bright with a green tinged light. The level of mana is so abundant that I feel as if I'm swimming through an ocean of it rather than walking through air. Perhaps it's like humidity was as a human, if I can even remember what that was like any more. High humidity, as I recall, felt like the air would stick to you as you walked around. This level of mana feels far beyond that to me as a monster. It's like the air is literally water. Or even thicker than that. Jelly, almost. My core sucks it in the second I lose a single MP and fills right back up again. The mana being absorbed through my legs is absurdly dense, to the point I almost feel like I move slower because of it.

Through the tunnels we go, soon passing beyond the point where the tunnel walls have been compressed and reinforced by the Colony and entering the wild territory of the fourth. Evidence of termite activity is immediately apparent, in the tunnels and loops that have been carved into the rock here that the Colony still hasn't been able to erase. Beyond that, I start to sense a change in the air, a waft of life that brushes against my antennae before it fades away again.

[Do you feel that?] I ask Sarah.

[No, but I can smell it.]

[What do you think it is?]

[I - I'm not sure. It's not like anything that I've smelled before.]

[Be careful, everyone. I think we're coming up on the end of the tunnel.]

The group tightens up as we continue to walk and soon enough we can see the light beginning to filter through from the outside of the mountain. When we finally reach it, it's almost blinding, it takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust and when I do, the impossible vista of the fourth stratum is stretched out before me once again, but from a lower vantage this time.

We've emerged near the base of the Mother Tree's mountain and in front of us, in the distance, another just like it towers high, beyond our range of vision as it disappears into mist and clouds. Between us and this new peak lies a wide body of water of perfect, crystal blue, the mana so thick within it that it rises from the surface in a haze. As we watch, a humongous form breaks the surface for a moment, a host of razor sharp fins glittering in the light.

[Anyone feel like a swim?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 925: On The Trail

The discovery of the termite foe was of great import to the broader Colony. Of course, it precipitated several profound immediate changes, such as the large scale rescue mission that was launched into the fourth stratum, unlocking that most important realm to the family for the first time. More than that, there was a shift in the mentality of every ant, from the brood chambers to the mines. The Colony had always been in conflict, with the Dungeon, fighting off waves, with the golgari, or the Legion, but for the first time it felt as if we were at war.

We were all seized with strange, manic energy, even they who will not be mentioned seemed to relax their vigil as the Colony shifted to a new type of footing. Most of us had never seen a termite, and would never see one, yet we were possessed of new rage that drove us to work ever harder, be ever more perfect.

During this time the second wave of expansion was completed, bringing the number of completed nests to sixteen, the number of active, laying queens to seventeen. Shortly after each of them was elevated to the sixth tier through the relentless efforts of the workforce, maximising egg production and brood quality. It felt like the dawning of a golden age, as our numbers rapidly swelled and even greater swathes of the Dungeon fell beneath our influence, all the while we simmered as we contemplated our rivals below.

And once again, all at the behest of the Eldest. Their designs ever moved our family forward, from the very moment of our creation. I believe, as others do, that even back then the Eldest had seen what was to come, and the inevitable conclusions that would be reached.

- *Excerpt from 'The History of the Colony Volume 2, by Historiant.*

Seeing all this water is just a special type of bizarre. I mean, where the heck are we right now? We're in the Dungeon! We are deep, *deep* underground right now. I don't even know how far down we are now, hundreds of kilometres? A thousand? I have no idea how deep the third is, since we only touched the first layer of it, but how in the hell am I looking at this freakin' lake right now?! It's insane.

From far above, some unfathomable distance up in the air, water falls in a fine mist and I presume that somewhere up above there are a few of those islands that somehow manufacture limitless amounts of

water. I'm super keen to figure out how that works, but for now we need to get over this water somehow.

I can smell the scent trail laid down by Vibrant and her crew, it's right here in front of me and it leads directly over the water. How in the hell they got over there, I haven't the foggiest, but I'll have to head to the mountain opposite to see if the trail gets picked up on the opposite side.

[Any ideas, folks?] I ask the group.

[*We can ussse a platform to carry usssss,*] Invidia hisses.

[Ah! Good call, I forgot you can do that now.]

[*You helpsss. Givesss it to me!*]

[I'm happy to help, but that's a rude way of asking man, you need to work on that.]

Some things will never change.

Working together with my faithful, envy demon friend, we construct a platform shaped shield and everyone piles onto it before we lift off and begin to float across the water. Sometimes I forget how heavy I am. Keeping this thing aloft is serious work. I mean, Sarah is most definitely heavier than I am, not that I'll ever say that to her out loud, and she happens to be wearing her armour, which doesn't help. The end result is that I spend the time drifting over this vast lake straining all of my brains until they start to steam rather than admiring the scenery.

[Master, this water, looks very deep,] Crinis observes.

[Can you see much moving around down there?]

[There are many sources of powerful mana within range that I can sense. The water itself is also a potent source of mana, it's not like anything I've ever seen.]

[Yeah, I can't imagine what sort of things the monsters here are born with when the mana is this thick. Come to think of it, imagine what it's like two strata down from here. It's going to get crazy down there.]

[Do you really intend to go that deep, master?]

I shrug, more focused on the platform than on the conversation.

[Why not? I feel pulled in that direction. May as well go deeper if it's there, right?]

[If that is what you want, then I'll follow, of course.]

[How about you, Tiny? Want to go deeper and punch some super powerful monsters in the face?]

A big thumbs up from the bat-faced ape as a broad grin spreads across his face.

[Nice one, big guy. Invidia? What about you champ? Actually, never mind, I know what you're going to say.]

The big green eye flashes with energy before he looks away, as if disappointed he didn't get to chime in.

[*miiiiiiine,*] I hear a whisper trickle across our mental link.

Despite my concerns, we manage to land on the other island without incident, passing beneath the falling mist to get my first shower in this new life. Didn't take long, only... you know what? Doesn't matter. Personal hygiene standards are different for ants. Just to be sure I clean off my antennae.

Before us, a brand new mountain looms, one not topped by a possessive plant. It doesn't even feel right to call it a 'mountain', really, it's so damn vast, and so stupidly tall. And these things probably ring the entire stratum, all around the planet. This whole world is just insane, how in the heck does it stay together.

Magic. It's good stuff.

[Master, have you located the trail?]

Oh, right. I waggle my antennae this way and that, patrolling up and down the edge of the lake until I manage to catch the scent.

[Right here! Seems to head up that way.]

[That's good,] Sarah says, [hopefully we can find them soon.]

[I sense something strange up ahead. A mana reading I haven't seen before,] Crinis announces.

Curious, I wonder what she's spotted?

[Any clues for us, Crinis?]

I try to look around, but I can't see anything that might be considered dangerous right now. In fact, I hardly see any monsters at all. The mountain slopes up ahead of us, the rock being overtaken by greenery and forest, vibrant and lush as only a realm filled with life mana could be.

[It doesn't feel like a monster,] the ball of shadow says, [I can't sense a core, but it feels... big.]

Well that's ominous.

[Let's proceed cautiously and follow the trail,] I tell the others, [if it's something we can't handle, we go back and get reinforcements.]

They agree with the suggestion and we advance forward, leaving the water's edge behind and entering the forest. It isn't long before I begin to notice that something is off. The trees don't look quite right, less healthy than they should. Even the ground has a strange sort of feel, almost sticky under my claws. Shortly after, I start to notice patches of white mould clinging to every surface. The stuff pings strangely to my mana sense, as if it were part monster, part plant, part... something else.

And there's only more of it the further we go.

[Something is definitely off,] I announce. [Hold here for a second, I want to climb a tree and see what I can see.]

A tough looking behemoth of a tree isn't far away so I wander over and claw my way up the side somewhat laboriously. Trees this large would be a rarity on Earth, but here they seem to be a dime a dozen. My legs strain to carry my weight, but eventually I clear the foliage around me and get a good glimpse of what lies ahead of us.

And it's white.

An endless sea of white.

Come to think of it, don't a lot of termites cultivate fungus?

Chrysalis

Chapter 926: Lingers on the Palate

It appears as though we've stumbled into the fungus gardens of the termites, and boy oh boy, are they extensive. From my perch up in the tree I can see that the entire forest on this slope of the mountain has been overtaken by the white mould. From this distance it almost appears as if the land has been blanketed in fluffy snow, but knowing what I know, the scene draws only vague disgust from me, rather than wonder.

Aren't they supposed to keep the fungus garden inside the nest? Why are they letting their mess out all over the place?!

Gross.

I contemplate the act of fungus growing as I pick my way down the tree. There are ants who live off the stuff as well, herbivorous species that don't need to raid and consume other insects in order to survive. Probably the most well-known would be the leaf cutter ants. In massive colonies of up to two million individuals, some of the largest of all ants, the leaf cutters are so named due to the way they farm their food. Enormous work convoys exit the nest to find trees, where fat headed majors use their thick jaws to scissor up the leaves for the smaller workers to carry back home. Once they get it all underground, they feed the foliage to their precious fungus gardens that they feed on. I remember reading that new leaf cutter queens even take a small chunk of the colony fungus with them when they leave, so they can begin to cultivate their own garden once they settle down.

In those instances, the fungus is carefully tended in the depths of the nest, protected by obsessive workers who have to make sure that not a single speck of mould invades and corrupts the food supply. They certainly don't let it hang out all over the place!

Perhaps this has something to do with the kaarmodo? If they cultivated their own queen, or queens, to produce a species of termite carefully designed to fight the Mother Tree and bruan'chii, then it stands to reason they had to engineer a food supply for them as well. Only, it would appear as though they failed to contain it. Or perhaps they didn't try.

[It's a fungus garden, a massive one,] I confirm for the others when I get back down.

[You mean this is all fungus?] Sarah sounds appalled.

[Yep, and you haven't seen anything yet. The forest ahead, all the way up the mountain, is covered in the stuff.]

The giant, fearsome bear, shudders delicately.

[That's terrible,] she says.

[I mean, it's probably a viable source of Biomass. I doubt it's a fungal trap designed to take over our bodies from the inside.]

[Don't even mention that!] Sarah squawks.

I look at her oddly.

[You seem really adverse to the stuff.]

[I hate moulds and fungus,] she confesses, [always have.]

[Is that a bear thing?]

[It's a Sarah thing,] she tells me firmly, [doesn't matter which life.]

[Fair enough,] I shrug, [anyone prepared to give it a chomp?]

Silence descends for a few long seconds before Tiny decides he's game enough to try and wanders over to a clump of the stuff. He reaches down to pick it up and I see it tear off the ground in his massive, meaty hand. It almost appears fluff-like, almost candy cotton-ish in texture.

In one smooth motion, the giant ape lifts it up and stuffs it into his cavernous mouth. Breathless, we all watch him as we await his response. After chewing thoughtfully for a few moments, Tiny looks at us, then shrugs. Seems like a fairly middling report from the big guy, which must mean it tastes absolutely disgusting. If *Tiny* isn't enthusiastic about eating it, then I can only assume it tastes like radioactive waste.

[Well, if we aren't going to eat it, we could burn it all as we go or just leave it alone, I suppose.]

Sarah considers my suggestions for a second.

[We're on a rescue mission here, we don't have time to be trying to burn down a giant fungus garden. If you still have the trail, then I suggest we just keep moving.]

[Sounds good,] I agree, [I've still got the trail, and it's mixed with a *ton* of termite scent, so we should be careful as we go. We can probably assume that this mountain holds the termite nest itself, which means there's likely a lot of them underfoot.]

Understatement of the century. There could be millions of the critters in this mountain for all we know. Having made our decision, we set off again and are soon engulfed on all sides by the fields of white. It's so weird, the natural vegetation is still alive underneath it, if somewhat diminished by having this white stuff grow all over it, but the mould is just everywhere, to the point we have to walk through it. Tiny carves a trail through the stuff as if he's wading through powdered snow, a wide path of broken fungus strings behind him.

Actually...

As I watch, the fungus begins to reform in his wake, coming back together ever so slowly. It grows so fast! That makes a lot of sense when I think about it. Vibrant came through here with hundreds of ants, there should be a wide path where they stomped through all of this growth, but instead there's no sign

of their passage at all! In the time between them running through and us arriving it's completely grown back over.

It seems the kaarmodo must have turbo-charged the growth of this particular fungus in order to feed the voracious appetite of their termite colony. What better way to pump them full of easy Biomass before sending them off to fight the tree?

My antennae waggle back and forth as we push determinedly forward, desperate to stay on the trail that Vibrant left behind, but the further we go, the more concerned I become. Where the hell is she? Her scent remains strong, but I haven't seen any sign of her or her followers at all.

Then I feel something. Is the fungus... shaking?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 927: Hunting for Speed

The fungus rattles around us and every member of the group stills themselves, casting our senses about to identify the source of the movement.

[Crisis? You got anything?]

[It's difficult for me to see,] the usually reserved Crisis sounds frustrated and irritated, [the fungus has a mana signature that blocks my sight.]

Dammit.

[What about shadows? Are you seeing anything around us?]

[I think there are tunnels beneath us, but it's hard to say.]

That's not unexpected, considering where we are, I have little doubt that the termites have tunnels beneath us and all over this mountain for that matter.

[Stay sharp everyone. I think we might have company soon.]

The fungus continues to rattle and shake as I eye it warily, my minds already spinning up the constructs necessary to fight. I decide to start pumping out fire mana, since it seems like it'll have the biggest effect on the mould around us as well as on whatever comes out to fight.

The rattling all around us continues to intensify before it suddenly grows still, the five of us left watching the field of white in perfect silence.

SNAP!

A second later something beneath us breaks before the fungus begins to bulge in certain places, pushing upward as something erupts from underneath.

[Termites!] Crisis yells.

A moment later the surface layer splits to reveal the massive insects bursting through, their jaws filled with more fungus and their antennae swivelling wildly. In truth, they seem just as surprised to see us as

we are to see them, but that doesn't stop either side from rushing forward as soon as they realise what's happening.

My jaws snap back and lock into position as I *dash* forwards hoping to catch the termite on my right by surprise as it emerges from below ground.

[Crisis, how many are there?]

[I- I'm not sure! I still can't sense underground through the mould.]

[Nards. We'll stick here and fight for now, but don't let yourself get cornered! If things get too spicy we'll have to back out and retreat to safety over the water!]

ROAR!

With a mighty bellow, Tiny rumbles forward, his frightening mass towering over the termites as he swings with colossal force, his fists tearing through the air to crunch into the chitin covered insects, shattering their shells and sending them flying through the air.

CHOMP!

My mandibles slam shut as I close in on my chosen target, catching it across the head as it doesn't turn in time to get its jaws between itself and me. With a satisfying *crunch* the barbs on my mandibles punch through its shell, but without activating my skills, a single bite isn't enough to put one of these creatures down. Chittering with indignation, my opponent tries to pull back and snap onto my front left leg. In a normal fight between ants and other social insects, the battle for the legs is everything. With huge numbers available on both sides, fighting one on one is basically unheard of, instead teams will try to gang up on an individual, latching onto their limbs and holding them down so others can move in for the finishing blow.

I don't have the luxury of pinning this termite down for my ant allies to finish off, but the termite does!

No you don't! With a heave of my mighty frame I send the bug staggering back, its six legs flailing as it corrects its balance, its jaws snapping shut on thin air, only to be met with my ferocious charge a second later. The impact of activating the skill is staggering and the termite's shell cracks even further as my own diamond carapace slams into it.

Ha! You might be born on the sixth stratum but even you can't handle my shiny glory! Unwilling to play with it any further, I spin up the mana I've kept in reserve and unleash a torrent of blue flame, roasting the termite where it stands. What I don't expect is for the flame to instantly spread to the mould, melting it like wax even as it catches fire. If it were only that, perhaps it wouldn't be much of an issue, but unfortunately for us, it seems as if this fungus likes to burn, because the blaze spreads in an instant.

It's getting hot in here!

[Anthony! What the heck did you do?!] Sarah wails as she bats away the termites who try to swarm around her.

[I don't know!] I cry. [How was I supposed to know this stuff was so damn flammable?]

Even worse than the sudden conflagration is the reaction of our termite opponents. The sudden ignition of their garden sends them into a frenzy as they alternate between trying to put the fire out and punish us for setting it off. I see a few of them duck back underground and rush off through the tunnels, doubtless going to get help to manage the fire.

[We can't stay here for long,] I warn the others as I ready my mandibles for another chomp. [Let's clean up a little and then make a dash for it!]

[Are we retreating?] Sarah asks.

[Heck no! We're following the trail of Vibrant! The termites will be too busy tending to the food supply to chase us for a little while.]

[If you're sure...]

[Of course I'm sure!]

I express a level of confidence across the mind bridge that I absolutely do not feel, but what choice do I have? I can't leave Vibrant and her crew behind, not for anything.

DOOM CHOMP!

Activating my potent bite skill, I lunge forward and bring the black jaws of pure energy shut on a pair of enemies who have no time to consider what's coming at them before they are nothing more than notifications ringing in my head. A few detonations go off as Invidia blasts some small groups of insects and then we are off, racing through the fields as my antennae waggle furiously, trying to keep track of the scent.

[The trail is getting stronger!] I let the others know. [I think we're on the right track!]

Behind us we leave a scene of devastation and an increasing group of termites who boil out of the tunnels below and race about extinguishing the flames. A few give chase but Invidia is more than enough to ward them off, detonating any stragglers who get too close. It won't last forever though, the termites are just as capable of following scent trails as I am and I have no doubt they'll be after us in force soon enough.

Dammit, Vibrant! Why the hell did you go so deep into their territory?! There's no need for it!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 928: Hot on the Trail

[Run, run, run!] I holler at the others as we continue to sprint through the mould covered forest.

It really is obnoxious to run through this mess. There's mould beneath us, beside us and crawling up the trees to cover the canopy above us. It's like being in a suffocating winter wonderland except far more horrifying. Especially now that some of it is on fire.

[I don't think more fire will be a good idea, Master!] Crinis suggests as we race through the terrain.

[We might need another distraction soon. Starting a small fire will get the termites off our trail.]

[Won't it just bring more of them?] Sarah demands.

[I mean, yes. But also, yes...]

They be *distracted* though...

Perhaps that's still not good enough.

[No more fires,] Sarah tells me firmly, [we can think of something else.]

[Hmph. You're just worried about the fungus spores getting inside you,] I mutter.

[I hadn't even thought of that! Anthony!]

[Breathe it in deep. That's the sweet smell of fungus country.]

[I should never have come here. I hate this place!]

[Look on the bright side. When the termites are defeated we can remove the mould from this area and return it to wonderful forest, filled with aphids.]

[That's alright, the aphids are cute!]

Just another aspect of ant superiority. Even if we started fungus farming, we wouldn't let it run wild and out of control like this. It just isn't civilised.

[Do you still have the trail?] Sarah asks, sounding a little panicked as we continue to blast through the termite's feeding grounds.

[I have it,] I confirm, [it's getting stronger even. Wherever they are, we're catching up.]

I get a strong sense of relief from the giant bear as she heaves for air. She may be a somewhat delicate flower internally, but externally she is all beef. Her legs are thicker than a person and positively bulging with muscle underneath all of that fur, much like her shoulders. In fact, the shoulders are even larger. For all of her strength, she isn't much of a long distance runner.

[You've got to work on your stamina somehow,] I tell her, [how do you even last in a fight?]

[I berserk,] she snaps, [that usually takes care of it.]

Oh, right.

[Well no need for that here and now,] I hastily assure her. My antennae waggle furiously as I follow the trail. [The trail is starting to curve, follow me!]

I shift my weight and drive myself to the right, taking a chance to look behind as I do. There are definitely termites on our trail, but I can't really tell how many. Tiny bounds along in my wake, suffering much like Sarah is in this long distance sprint, Invidia perched on his back like a nightmarish bat, green eye blazing with energy as he surveys the land. We rush through a cluster of trees, blasting away the mould that had grown up to fill the space between them and showering ourselves in the horrible stuff before we pull up abruptly.

Up to this point we had been running further inland, heading up the slope of the side of the mountain which had been increasing the further we'd gone and I'd expected that to continue, but it seems as if our opponents had a different concept for this landscape. In front of us a vast yawning chasm has been

carved into the rock, the trees cleared for hundreds of metres in all directions. Like a passageway into the pit of doom, the wide tunnel is completely black on the inside, with no light source to be discerned from this distance. More terrifying still, is the view of the mountain I get from here. There are holes, all over the place, fortified with dirt and each angled differently. It's clear to see that they aren't natural features of the terrain, and judging by the weathering of those areas, they are likely to be recent.

This is the termite nest. The whole damn mountain is the nest!

I kind of expected it, but to see it for myself... it's just ridiculous! You could fit the main nest of the Colony into this thing ten times over with room to spare!

The other shocking development is the appearance of our quarry. In the mouth of the tunnel a tight gathering of ants can be seen, the large form of Vibrant zipping here and there amongst them. It's too bad they aren't alone. Not only are they swarmed by a host of termites, which is bad enough, but watching from above are five kaarmodo with their attendants in tow. In a flash I take in the full scene, drawing knowledge from the Vestibule as I allow the will of Vibrant and her coterie to fill me.

The kaarmodo are pinning them here, using shields and spells to lock Vibrant and her group into a fight so that the termites can harvest them for experience.

Not. Acceptable.

[Get in there!] I roar to Tiny who is only too happy to comply.

The giant ape rears back onto his legs and thumps his chest with his enormous palms, bellowing his rage in an ear shattering roar that shakes the trees around us. Then he's off, bounding across the mould covered stone, his fists cracking the ground with every step, gathering momentum as he goes.

[Invidia, keep him alive and blow up everything I don't like!]

[*Even the lizardsssss?*]

[Especially them.]

I can almost *feel* his eye flash with delight.

[*I will takesss everything from themssss!*] He gloats as his prodigious mind begins to weave the ambient mana into bundles of explosive doom.

[What should I do, Master?] Crinis asks, ready to leap into action.

[Deal with the termites. You're the best of us at holding off large numbers.]

[I'll sweep away the trash in an instant!]

She begins to slide off my carapace and into the blooming shadow beneath me when I interrupt her.

[Just one thing Crinis...]

[Yes?]

[I want them to *fear*.]

In her current shape, a formless blob of darkness, she wriggles with glee.

[They will,] she promises.

Damn lizards. You really think you can trap *my* siblings and feed them to your captive bugs? You must be outside of your mind! I spin up the omni-elemental construct and begin to pump out mana, but at the same time I dedicate a small group of minds to drawing deep from my gravitational mana gland.

Time to show these fools what they're dealing with!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 929: The United Ant's Front

In seconds I had enough fire mana to send spears of bright flame roaring through the air, igniting every bit of fungus that they drew close to. Smoke and fire billowed out immediately, drifting over the wide entrance to the termite mound and sending every one of the blind insects into a frenzy. Then I rush forward, my jaws locking in place as they flood with pure mana. When I'm close enough I spin together a mind bridge and extend it to the large ant zipping through the conflict at warp speeds, latching onto her almost by lucky accident.

[Senior! I had a feeling you might show up-up!]

[If you're talking slowly enough that I can understand you then I imagine you're exhausted. How are you holding out?]

As I draw closer to the melee I can see her troops are flagging, the relentless press of the enemy has been wearing them down. We've arrived just in time.

[We'd be fine if we could run!] Vibrant's indignation at being denied the freedom to move is total.
[Those lizard-gizards won't let us leave!]

[Of course not, they want all of you to be trapped and die.]

[That's terrible!] she gasps over the mental connection.

Even while running I slap myself between my eyes with one antennae.

[What did you *think* they wanted with you? To go for a friendly jog? They want the termites to rip out your souls and feast on your Biomass! We need to break their concentration or force them to retreat and then we need to get the *heck* out of here!]

[We aren't going to invade the nest?] she sounds disappointed.

[Of course we aren't going to invade the *damned*... no. That isn't going to happen. I'll be happy if we can you are your group out alive.]

[Thanks Senior!]

Despite all of the idiocy that led to this point, I can feel just how heartfelt her gratitude is, and underneath that, her desperate concern for those who had chosen to follow her. No more time for discussion, as I hit the melee, I force my way to the front and unleash a **Doom Chomp**, shattering the bugs in front of me before I hurl concussive blasts of fire down the tunnel. As I arrive, so too does Tiny,

the giant ape crashing into the encroaching hordes of termites with fire in his eyes and a broad grin on his face. Lightning crackles and fists of pure, blinding energy erupt in rapid succession as he deploys his patented ape boxing to devastating effect.

Invidia's arrival is explosive, to say the least. Detonations rock the face of the mountain, even reaching out to threaten the kaarmodo in their vantage point, however a powerful shield wavers in front of them and my green eyed friends, efforts are repelled.

[Give them the eye-beam,] I command him. [You have my permission!]

It'll take a little while for him to charge it up, but I'm sure he'll be ready to unleash hell at roughly the same time I will. I flick my attention inward to check on the progress of my sub-minds and come out pleased. Compressing a gravity-bomb is no small feat, especially at the levels of density I can achieve now. Comparing it to how I was after my second evolution is like comparing a match to a bonfire. I'll have to step in with my main brain soon, but for now I can leave it to the constructs.

Wave after wave of termites continues to pour out from the heart of the nest, but I fear that they are only just getting started. There are likely to be far more termites in the nest than this, millions even, but they could be anywhere, high up in the mountain, or down deep underground, tending to yet more fungus gardens. In fact, those who were chasing behind us are now starting to arrive and if enough of them turn up, Vibrant and her group are going to get surrounded. Which isn't ideal.

Chomp! Chomp!

I lash out at the enemy before me, dipping dangerously into my stamina in order to relieve the pressure on the other ants as much as possible and give them time to recover. They're going to need their energy in the sprint out of here.

It's almost with relief that I see a wave of dark tentacles emerge from all sides of the tunnel entrance, sprouting from the perfect darkness with each and lashing out at the nearest termite they can find. As the dark limbs covered in barbs wind around their victims, I turn away and focus on the greater threat above me, the kaarmodo.

I mean, it *is* important that I deal with these guys in order for us to escape, but I also really *don't* want to see what Crinis does to the termites. I almost pity them.

But not enough to tell her to stop.

Determined to give these giant lizards and their slaves a piece of my mind, I turn and run back, creating some distance but soon enough I slam into a barrier placed before me. The impact is sharp, but not enough to damage me and I shake it off quickly and look up to see the shimmering barrier that they've erected. Now that my pets and I are inside, they don't want us to leave, eh? I thought as much would happen when we rushed down here.

I rear back and begin to repeatedly charge into the barrier, smashing my hardened carapace into it with all the strength I can muster, only resting to unleash my most potent chomps upon it.

It's a futile effort, obviously, I can't break down a barrier created by five kaarmodo and their dozens of attendants, but what I *can* do is keep them reinforcing it, trading my energy and stamina for their mana and mental reserves whilst something else is built within me.

Switching my focus internally, my main mind takes over the handling of the gravity bomb, leaving my body in the hands of a sub-mind whilst I marshal the rest of the constructs to assist in the formation of this, the most potent bomb I've ever formed. The dark energy roils within me, a growing sphere of malevolent force, already emanating with its irresistible pull. The spell has grown so dark now it's practically black, a perfect well of darkness that I continue to feed with gravity mana as I *press* and *squeeze* with every ounce of my will, struggling to keep it contained.

At this point, it's as if the spell takes over, the flow of mana from my gravitational gland increasing from a steady flow to an outpour that threatens to outpace my minds as the greedy ball sucks in everything it can whilst my minds combine to hold it desperately together. What the heck is this!? Does the spell have a mind of its own!

[Invidia! Now!]

Immediately the little demon glares upward and unleashes a bright beam of green light that blasts toward the kaarmodo and shatters against their shield, the lizards looking on impassively as they maintain their protection. Let's see how they feel about *this*.

Eager to relieve myself of this dangerous magic, I go to cast the spell and am stunned when I find it resist me, as if the magic doesn't want to move. It's so damn *heavy*, as it sits inside me and continues to drink my gravitational mana.

Oh no you don't!

With a *heave* I force the spell out and launch it towards the kaarmodo and at that moment something truly awful was born.

HOOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWWWL!!!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 930: Death of a Star

The gravity bomb screams into life and I almost instantly die. The pulling force of the spell is so strong it almost rips me from my feet before I grip hard to the ground beneath me to prevent being ripped from the ground. The spell soon moves far enough away that the immediate danger is over and I can relax my hold, but a whole new fear is born in my heart.

If that's what it's like now... what will happen when it hits?

["EVERYBODY OVER HERE! NOW!"] I roar in every way I can.

[Master! What's happening?] Crinis asks.

[I just unleashed the mother of all gravity bombs and I'm worried we're all going to die when it pops off. Get everyone over here on the edge of the shield so we can dig in!]

And I start to do just that, ripping into the ground with my mandibles to create more distance and give myself a firmer foothold.

All the while that horrible scream shatters the air, the wind howling with despair as it is consumed by the bomb in flight. Even the light is eaten, the ball itself is almost impossible to see, it's so dark around

it. The reaction of the kaarmodo is immediate, the lizards going pale (that might just be my imagination) and their servants reinforce the shield Invidia had already been battering with his eye beam.

["Move it, dammit!"] I scream as the ants turn and disengage from the termites. ["Aren't you supposed to be fast?!"]

Crinis is already retracting her limbs back into the shadows and emerging next to me as Tiny leaps out of the tunnel mouth, Invidia once more riding on his shoulder.

HOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWLLLL!!!

The wrenching sound of the gravity bomb has never sounded so terrifying to me. I do *not* want to be anywhere near this thing when it goes off. I continue to frantically shovel tons of soil and rock with my mandibles, hoping to see the shield end at some point but the damn lizards have extended the thing into the ground, because of course they would.

"Senior! What the heck-heck is that?" Vibrant rushes up next to me and demands.

"Forget that! Dig and hold on! When the shield goes, we run for it!"

I poke my head up over the mound of loose soil I've created and take a gander at the bomb's progress. I can feel the lizards desperately ripping into the spell, trying to reduce its strength before the detonation, but when I focus on the slowly revolving ball of gravity mana, I notice something strange. As they try to tear mana free, the ball is trying to pull it back in, refusing to let any energy escape from its orbit. They're managing to get hold of some of it and rip it free, but their efforts are only half as effective as they should have been.

How terrifying! This is a spell that won't even let itself be torn down!

I smack my mind into the shield in front of me and I confirm that it's significantly weakened. Already the kaarmodo have been forced to pull their attention from it in order to protect themselves. With effort, the combined efforts of my family and I could break through it now, but I get the feeling that in a moment this barrier is going to vanish entirely.

Just before the spell hits, the ants begin to arrive, diving over the earth mound I've been piling up and frantically digging holes for themselves to hide in, even if they don't understand why. A small number of termites have begun to charge out of the tunnel mouth after us and I almost feel pity. Those blind idiots are already dead.

The gravity bomb impacts against the kaarmodo sphere and flickers for a fraction of a second. I don't see what happens next, since I stick my head as low as I can get it and hold on for dear life.

["GRAB HOLD!"]

Everyone rushes to do just that and for a brief moment, there is perfect stillness, as if the world were holding its breath. Then it screamed.

No, not a scream, a ROAR!

It's like nothing I've experienced before. The wind doesn't howl or shriek, it cuts and tears, ripping up the dirt, pulling up fungus, plants, trees, rocks, *everything*. I don't dare poke my head out to take a look,

I don't dare relax my grip for even a second, instead I force my legs deeper and press my body down to the ground.

["Compress the soil around your legs! Do it!"] I order everyone.

Further down the line, Tiny is hunched over, his hands and feet sunk deep into the ground with Invidia tucked against his chest. Similarly, Crinis has positioned herself underneath my abdomen, absorbed into the shadow there. His eye aglow, Invidia does as I ask, along with all the other ant mages in the group, reaching out with their minds to compress the soil beneath us, tightening its hold on our legs.

Like a creeping dread, the pull only grows stronger and every ant holds on for dear life, pulling themselves down until not a speck of space remains between their carapace and the ground beneath. The loose soil that had piled behind me as I dug is already gone, torn away in the first few seconds. If I angle my head even slightly, I'd be able to see behind me, see what it was that I unleashed.

But I don't dare. Even just the edges of it are scary. All I can see is darkness. A void. From this angle, I can't even see the sphere itself, but that doesn't seem to matter as the complete and utter lack of light has extended outwards. I don't even know if the kaarmodo are still holding on. I haven't received any notifications for kaarmodo, I suppose, but if they can survive *that* then they're a hell of a lot scarier than I thought they'd be.

I've gotten a lot for termites though. A *hell* of a lot.

On and on it goes, the hold of gravity on our bodies is relentless, pulling harder and harder as the magic of the gravity bomb burns itself out.

Gritting my mandibles tight, I extend my mind out to touch the barrier and realise with relief that it's gone, our way out has been secured. All we have to do is hold on until the spell fades.

["The bomb will burn itself out soon,"] I promise the others, ["and when it does, we run like hell back to the Colony. I want to see that legendary speed! Until then, hold on for your life, none of you are allowed to die before me!"]

The ants are too tired to reply, all of their energy focused on gripping the rock. Our communal spirit is strong, the weaker and more vulnerable members are shielded and gripped by the strongest. In this way, we all survive together.

The pull weakens slightly, then begins to gutter out.

["GO!"] I roar.

And we run.