

Chrysalis 941

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Chapter 941: Colony Assault

From the floor of the third stratum, four giant pillars were rising. Compressed stone, marked with grooves, rotated upward from an enormous base of gathered material. Around the base of each laboured a thousand earth mages, combining their will to enable the great working, shifting thousands of tons of rock with their minds alone.

Hundreds of metres above, lashed with the burning wind and flecks of ash that filled the air of this layer of the Dungeon, yet more thousands of ants gripped tight to the sides of the columns as they drew ever closer to the plate above. A barrage of spells fell toward them, deflected by shields and broken apart by yet more mages, but some fell through, crashing into massive soldiers who absorbed the blows with their hardened carapace.

Atop glittering platforms of pure energy, teams of demons battle in the air, flinging magic and their own bodies at each other for control of the sky, such as it is, around the outer edge of the plate.

Yet more ants mass around the base of the assault columns, grouping together in teams before they begin to ascend. The stone will make contact any moment now, they need to be in position for the final assault.

The air is filled with flashes of magic, smoke and fire, making it difficult for Sloan to see, but she can grasp enough of the situation from her position on the command hill to make a snap judgement.

"Move out the healer teams, we want them coming in right behind the assault crews."

"Yes, general!"

"Bring the artillery scouts to the forward firing position. I want the edge of that plate covered in acid in one minute."

"Understood!"

She fired off orders and the messenger scouts positioned around her dashed away to deliver her instructions to the dedicated relay stations. A mixture of mind magic and enchanted pheromone projectors would be used to spread the word over wide distances in a short time frame. In thirty seconds her instructions could hit any point on the battlefield.

The demon city above loomed ominously. Iritel, a smallish settlement by the standards of the third stratum, only slightly larger than Roklu had been when the Eldest had found it. The petty lord who ruled over it had been the unfortunate recipient of the Colony's eye and now faced an assault the scale of which could not have been foreseen.

Fifty thousand ants and hundreds of demons had massed against the city and it could not possibly hope to stand against their combined might. Brixin commanded the gathered demon forces, her demonic heart pounding with glee as her territory was set to expand once more.

Iritel rested half way up a world pillar that stood dozens of kilometres from Roklu, on the opposite side from the contested land with the kaarmodo. For now, the Colony had decided against antagonizing their neighbours any further, but that situation remained volatile.

"Contact!"

A faint rumbling could be heard resounding from kilometres above their heads as the slowly rotating pillars crunched into the bottom of the stone plate. The moment they did so ants rushed up the connected pillar, a living carpet that covered each pillar began to spread along the underside of the demon city, the ants clinging to the stone as they made their way to the edge, an enormous drop to the ground below them.

"Get the human teams in position. I want those aura buffs to hit the moment our teams rush over the edge. Tell the demons to unleash their maximum firepower. Are those artillery squads in position yet!?" Sloan bellowed.

"Artillery firing!"

There was an extended series of low thumping sounds as four separate batteries of specially evolved scouts launched their enormous payloads of compressed acid into the air. Huge streaks of sizzling fluid arced through the sky before they fell upon the plate. The demons in the landing zones, trying to hold off the encroaching forces are forced back from the edge, lest they be overcome. No sooner does the first barrage land that the second is in the air, then the third.

Once the fourth lands, it's time to move.

Ants flood over the edges, gnashing and biting at everything they see as roaring priests accompanying fiery eyed human warriors leap from their specially prepared floating platforms onto the plate to fight alongside them. Energized by the potent aura buff of fighting alongside their allies, the ants push forward aggressively and overrun the outer defences of the city.

The landing zones rapidly expand as more ants reach the upper side of the plate, splitting off in teams to reach their predetermined holding points. Brixin landed on the plate alongside her handpicked team of assistants before she pushed hard toward the centre of the city. It was up to her to put down the tier seven city lord. The ants could defeat them, but not without sacrifice. Better to leave it to their demon ally and play safe.

With their forces already running rampant through the city, the battle was over and Sloan sighed. She didn't allow any sign of her draining tension to show, but internally she allowed her mind to wander. Iritel was only the first city that would fall to the Colony this week, three others were lined up and preparations were already underway, resources gathered.

After several weeks of preparation, the time of expansion through the third stratum had finally begun. A hundred thousand new recruits had poured down into Roklu over the last few days, bolstering the Colony's numbers before the offensive had begun. Land, resources, an increase in the number of demon allies that they could draw upon were the goals the Colony had set for themselves.

Higher level hunting grounds were also essential if they hoped to raise yet more tier six members that could assist in the conflict that raged even now in the fourth stratum.

Things were getting busy.

Ten minutes later, word came back to the command tent that Brixin had emerged victorious, the city was subdued. Onto the next.

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Chapter 942: Something New This Way Comes

"Well, isn't this the plops."

Isaac Bird looked out over the vast, smoke filled expanse of the third stratum and sighed. After his first trip here, he wasn't sure he'd ever be back, and yet here he was, back fighting alongside an increasingly fanatic band of mostly human ant worshipers. His first battle in the demon layer had been a whirlwind tour of death that nearly got his head separated from his shoulders. The fact that it culminated in a climactic battle that nearly got the Great One killed was just the icing on the cake. The whole thing had been catastrophically dangerous from the get go, and yet he'd come back without hesitation.

The things he did for love.

He was stronger now than he'd ever been before, by a long shot. The constant fighting, be it in battles against waves, or regular patrols within colony territory, had netted him bucket loads of experience and driven his spear skills to new heights. He was a better, more capable soldier than he'd ever been. Even so, he couldn't help but feel that his goal was getting away from him.

From the last he'd heard, Morrelia had retreated with the Legion and was now deep underground somewhere, in who knew what layer of the Dungeon, doing whatever it was the Legion did down there.

Unless he missed his mark, she was most likely doing whatever she needed to in order to move forward. That's what she did.

When he recalled those fiery eyes, her strong powerful build and those soft... fiery eyes, he just couldn't pretend he wouldn't do anything to see her again. To stand at her side.

Which led to his current dilemma.

"There you are Isaac, what are you doing hanging out here? You weren't going to jump were you?"

Isaac turned to see Derrick jogging over to him with one hand raised in greeting.

"No I'm not going to jump, you moronic plop sweeper. Don't joke about such things."

Derrick ducked his head and grinned sheepishly.

"Sorry. You just don't see many of us hanging around near the edge. For obvious reasons."

The sheer drop of several kilometres being the obvious reason. The Colony really should put up a fence... although gripping the edge wasn't something they really had to worry about, the ants regularly walked right off the edge and underneath the plate.

"I like the open air," Isaac confessed, running a hand over his clean shaven face. "This is as close as we get down here to a sky, so I wanted to take it in. Helps me think."

"Well you better think quickly. The call came in from the command hill. We're moving out in a half hour."

"Half an hour? You can't be serious."

"I know when not to joke."

Isaac levelled a hard stare at his junior officer.

"Derrick, if that was another attempt at a joke I'll have you on latrines until your nose doesn't work."

"I never joke, sir. Can't in fact. Lost my sense of humour in battle."

"Good. You'll live longer."

The two men settled into a comfortable silence, though it was clear Derrick was becoming increasingly impatient. Isaac ignored his fidgeting for a few minutes before he eventually sighed and turned away from the edge.

"All right then, go muster up the men. Are the elevators working yet?"

"Not yet."

"They're moving us by platform again?" Isaac's face twisted into a grimace.

He'd much rather have something solid under his feet instead of a gleaming, iridescent plate made of mana. The whole thing gave him the willies. Still, it beat climbing.

"Seems that way. We've been told to meet up with general Anticus on the east side of the city. A camp has been prepared five kilometres' march from the base of the pillar. We have two days to regroup and then we move on the next city."

Isaac listened with half an ear as the instructions were rattled off without pause. He still couldn't help but feel amused when the former bouncer for an inn acted in such a professional manner, but he should be used to it by now. In truth, what had begun as a ragtag group of former town guards and militia running into the Dungeon to help the ants had grown to be a professional outfit in a shockingly short amount of time.

Goodness knows what the Colony thought about them in the early days. They'd been shockingly weak compared to the monsters they were trying to help. Unable to keep up on patrols, panicking at the first sign of monsters. Even Isaac, with his limited Dungeon exposure, had been one of the more experienced members back then. It was the Colony that had helped them, more than the other way around. They made sure the humans had received experience, fed them weakened prey, protected them and healed them when they were hurt.

Now they had a fanatical army ready to fight at their side.

"Derrick, I want you to round up the squad and make sure they get their gear packed and stowed properly this time. If Leon forgets his spare spear again I'll plant his first one directly where he doesn't want it."

His second in command nodded but hesitated before running off.

"You aren't coming?"

"Not immediately," Isaac clarified, "I've got some business I need to deal with in the command hill."

"Okay. Good luck."

"Thanks."

It wasn't often that non-ants poked their heads into the command structure of the Colony. In fact, it was exceptionally rare. Not that they were banned or forbidden, far from it, they were allowed in whenever they wanted. It was the overall atmosphere that people found intimidating. The ants did not find it odd or unusual to be climbing all over each other in cramped tunnels or low roofed chambers, even when directing a battle, but for a human such as himself, being packed against so many monsters was unnerving to say the least.

Still, his stride was determined. If he wanted to achieve his goal, he couldn't afford to hesitate. *She* wouldn't hesitate.

It didn't take him long to find the structure. The ants had wasted no time moving their command post up into the city the moment the battle had ended, that way they could better coordinate the arrangements within the newly conquered city. It was still impressive, the hill was easily fifty metres tall and just as wide. They'd managed to build it in a matter of hours.

He circled around the base until he found the non-ant entrance. A mage on duty quickly connected to him via a mind bridge.

[Welcome, friend Isaac. You have something you wish to report?]

[I think I need to speak to the general. This is possibly important and she might want to hear about it directly.]

[To Sloan? She is very busy right now. I will relay the message if you are certain.]

[I'm sure. Please do.]

He was knee deep in the plops now.

Efficient as always, it didn't take long until he was brought inside a small holding chamber, unsurprisingly with elegant wooden chairs, a woven rug and a hot cup of tea at the ready. He shook his head at the creature's comfort and chose to stand to attention instead. He wouldn't let them coddle him, though he was grateful they hadn't decided to bring him into the inner chambers.

He waited for a short period before another ant entered the waiting room from the inner side. Small by comparison to the massive soldiers, but still larger than he, Sloan was quite distinctive due to the large number of advanced mutations she possessed, particularly her large, wider antennae that swept impressively through the air as she walked.

[Friend Isaac. I am told you have something important you wish to discuss.]

Isaac snapped out a quick salute and stood to attention. Technically he wasn't part of the ant chain of command and didn't answer to Sloan, but that wasn't how it worked in practice. Better to show respect where it was due, in his book.

[General Sloan. I have recently reached level forty in my spearman class and I am ready to upgrade it to a new class.]

The ant nodded.

[Congratulations,] she said sincerely, and waited.

Clearly there was more to come.

Isaac took a deep breath to steady his thoughts before he continued.

[Have you heard of the Class Ant Lancer before?]

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Chapter 943: Evolving War

In the first place, what does it mean to be a monster? It's a question that has special significance on Pangera, a world under constant threat from monster attacks. Whilst the sapient races of the planet are fully capable of monstrous acts, visiting great violence upon each other for petty or worthy reasons, the term exclusively refers to those who were born from mana within the Dungeon itself. This definition has led to tragic circumstances, such as what befell the Sophos, who came to be known as troglodytes. For whatever reason, the Dungeon took a liking to them and began to spawn young Sophos.

This led many to declare the entire race products of the Dungeon and therefore monsters, subject to hunting and destruction just as any other monster. The Sophos were pushed to the edge of extinction before they stabilised, building secretive communities around known Sophos spawn points so that they might protect and include those individuals in their society. To this day, natural born Sophos still exist, though they are rare and indistinguishable from those who are created of mana.

But they are far from the only monsters to possess sapience. The Demons of the third stratum, once they reach the sixth tier, are considered to have risen above their base instincts enough to be able to enter society. Though the manner and rules of that society are crude and barbaric to many, the fact remains that such demons are capable of reason and can be interacted with safely some of the time.

Deeper in the Dungeon, many further examples of intelligent monsters can be found. The Shulk of the deep seas in the fourth are truly ancient beings of great wisdom, and though they are hunted in some places, they are welcomed by the Brathian in their underwater cities.

The slug tribes of the fifth are an example of the darker side of Dungeon intelligence. Monsters with a cruel and sadistic streak that delight in the suffering of others, the tribes are reviled the world over. Delvers live in fear of falling captive to these creatures, and though the cores extracted from them are highly prized, many refuse to hunt them lest they suffer a most horrible end.

Monstrous sapience is a hotly debated topic to this day. What rights if any could be afforded to such entities? Are they to be protected? Or hunted? There is no universal answer on any individual case that has presented itself so far, and there likely won't be until the sun sets on this world.

Excerpt from "The World of the Dungeon" by Arrica.

"CHARGE!" I roar.

"FOR THE COLONY!" thousands of ants reply behind me in a tidal wave of pheromones that stings my antennae.

Before us an army of termites five thousand strong, double our own number, is busy ripping into our outer defences, tearing down the stone barriers we erected to delay their advance.

[Tiny! Go!] I order.

"GRAAAAAAHHHH!"

With an ear-splitting roar, the giant ape spreads his wings of shadow and dashes forward with extreme speed, his body twisting as he winds back his fist for a mighty blow. The bright light of a skill activation ignites his fist, along with a powerful lightning charge before he swings too fast for the eye to follow, a deafening roar following immediately after. The discharged electrical energy blasts outwards from his fist like a bolt of lightning, subjecting the termites in front of him to an incredible amount of energy.

Some are able to tank it, if barely, but many others are roasted on the spot and give up the ghost, creating pockets that break up the termite formation.

"With me!" I call back to the others. "Annihilate the enemy!"

I can practically see the red light of anger flaring in the eyes of my siblings. When it comes to fighting against the termites, they don't need any encouragement! To tell the truth, the wood eating nemesis doesn't look any different. There is no love lost between the two social insects!

The massive soldiers of the Colony form a flying wedge as our momentum builds over the final twenty metres and the termites shift to match our tactics. Gone are the idiotic insects who ran at us like mindless creatures. The Ka'armodo have been busy and have modified their experiment to better suit the new enemy who has appeared. The enemy line up in rows, braced against each other as the largest soldiers present their savage cutting mandibles towards us.

The phalanx of ants with me at their head crash into the termites with a thunderous impact that smashes chitin, breaks legs and shatters mandibles, but the savagery doesn't stop there. The termites strive to catch their jaws around my neck, severing my head from my thorax, but I don't allow it, launching a final burst of speed to catch them off guard and twisting my body away from their bites.

The weak point of any insect's armour is the joints between segments, and both sides instinctually target these weaknesses without having to be taught.

I want to push forward into the gaps that Tiny continues to open up with his onslaught, the gorilla hasn't stopped his rampage, but organised ranks of hardened defenders face me, making it difficult to rush forward without risking being surrounded. The tactics of the enemy continue to evolve, along with unique evolutions and mutations that I don't believe existed before. Even now some termites are rushing around their allies applying a foam that they vomit up to neutralise our acid. They can't protect everyone, but they can blunt the effectiveness of our long range weaponry.

As the ants continue to drive forward around me, the termites give ground, backing away and refusing to allow us to break through their lines. When they've retreated almost two hundred metres from where the battle started, the signal comes from the generals.

"Disengage!" is the call.

The response is immediate as the front line steps back almost in unison, unlocking their mandibles from those of their foes with ease. The two sides stare at each other with barely concealed fury, neither happy that the other will be able to walk from the field alive. But it's the right call. We've advanced beyond the outer perimeter and this is no longer our territory. Scent trails can't be trusted, nor can the integrity of the walls. There could be ten thousand termites burrowing toward our position right now.

"Orderly retreat!" can be scented up and down the line.

Tiny and I are the last to leave, staring down the termites with our steely glares until we too turn and walk back to the secured fortifications of the Colony. More than half of the termite force was able to survive this engagement and we are not satisfied. Those numbers will be replaced in just a few hours. But we still hold.

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Chapter 944: Hold the line

Damn termites. What the hell are those ka'armodo doing over there? They seem to pop out reinforcements just as fast as we kill them. I refuse to believe they can spit out tier four and five monsters so quickly without incurring some kind of cost. After all, the Colony has been doing this for months and have honed the process to be as efficient as possible. We have an entire caste of dedicated teachers, an academy with a constantly adjusted curriculum and Queens with the most beneficial mutations for mass producing the highest quality individuals.

It's just not possible that they are better at it than we are!

And in truth, they aren't. Our enemies may be a higher tier than would normally be expected from their numbers, but their cores remain weak. The question is how the lizards managed to maintain the quality of their insect troops, or in fact raise it, whilst creating increased production to such a ludicrous degree. If they'd been able to produce these sorts of numbers from the beginning, I don't think the Mother Tree would have been able to hold out as long as she did, not while withholding the bruan'chii from assisting her.

"Eldest, welcome back."

"Good to see you, Eldest!"

"Work hard!"

"I will. Make sure you take an appropriate break though!"

The ants who called out to me so cheerfully a moment ago hesitate in their stride at my mention of taking a break before they continue on their way. The fear of the torpor enforcers continues to apply even here during this desperate, ongoing battle. Tired soldiers are sloppy soldiers and sloppy soldiers

get their own allies killed. Personally I'm thankful that they've continued to maintain a strict standard of rest amongst my siblings, even in these circumstances.

But I'll be the first to admit that those standards have slipped from the traditional eight. It's a war after all.

"Eldest! The meeting is in here!" I see Advant calling me over with a wave of her antennae and follow her into the prepared chamber in the Colony's main staging ground. Inside I find the usual carved table - I really have to find out who makes these damn things, they are spectacular - along with each member of the council who has joined me on this venture.

Vibrant, Advant, Bella, Burke and Wills, Victor, Leeroy, Mendant, Cobalt, Propellant and Coolant are all in attendance. Only the Queens and tenders are not represented. For obvious reasons they have not been brought down to the fourth.

Although, when it comes time to establish our own mountain nest in this stratum, I can't wait to see the mighty Queen's and powerful brood that we create. Perhaps we should even create a central academy here? No, it's far too early to be thinking about that stuff, don't get carried away.

As I take my 'seat' at the table I glance at the others and I'm not surprised to see them looking fatigued. It's been two weeks since my rescue of Vibrant from the ka'armodo trap, and there has been near constant fighting since then. Whatever the big lizards are doing back at that mountain, they've been moving quickly, ramping up the production of their proxy soldiers and making modifications to the templates within the queens to better arm the termites against us, their new foe.

In return the Colony has sent three waves of reinforcements, bringing our total number of deployed Colony members to forty thousand. This is far more than I wanted to commit to defending the Mother Tree, but any less and we run the risk of getting overrun. Fighting for the sake of someone not in the Colony is one thing, having thousands of my siblings wiped out would be completely unacceptable.

"From the reports I have, the lines appear to be holding well, despite some back and forth movement on both sides," Victor leads the conversation as the resident general. "Our biggest issue has been adjusting our defensive strategy to meet with the new reality of the foe. With the Ka'armodo involved, the termites move completely differently to how they did before. Our plan to hole up in fortresses and let the enemy dash themselves against the walls no longer can be considered. Retreating like that will just give our now smarter opponent the time and space to manoeuvre around us. Thus we have engaged in a defence in depth strategy that involves hit and run tactics. How has it fared in the field, Vibrant?"

"Really well actually the hit and run is so fun - fun and we love moving really fast so when the termites come we chop them and run away before we run in and chop them again it's funny actually because they can't move fast enough to keep up so they just look so silly don't you think?!"

"And what do you have to say, Advant?"

"We are exposing ourselves more than we would like, but by choosing the ground we engage on and moving fast we've been able to damage the enemy and then pull back with minimal losses. So far there haven't been any incursions making it past the third defensive line."

"The strategy seems to be succeeding then. What are your thoughts, Eldest?"

Each of the council members turns toward me and I feel the familiar pressure in these moments. It's only made worse because I can feel their attention and high expectations through the Vestibule. Don't turn those shining eyes filled with respect toward me! I made you smart for the express purpose of doing all the thinking so I didn't have to, dammit!

"I'm worried," I just come out and say it.

"Why?" Victor asks, her scent attentive.

I scratch my head with an antenna.

"I'm worried that the lizards are just pinning us down and keeping us occupied while they build up an even larger force. I'm sure you've noticed that no matter how many we seem to kill, the raids continue apace. The termites are doing a better job of preserving their numbers through every engagement and are just probing our defences. I believe a surge will come, and possibly soon. I think they've increased egg production by far more than we've realised and when the new generations are ready they will throw everything at us, not in a massive wave, but in an organised advance that will engage us on as many fronts as possible."

I pause for a moment.

"Which I think will also include the third stratum. There won't be termites, but I think the ka'armodo will engage with allied demons and their own numbers to spread us even more thinly. If we don't have the capacity, the antpower, to cover all of these fronts, we could be in serious trouble."

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Chapter 945: Colony Vs Colony pt 4

It was almost as if Leeroy had died and entered some sort of paradise. Except, frustratingly, she still clung to her mortal shell, along with the other Immortals. Despite this, she revelled in her current existence. The release she sought, the glorious end she strove to experience, had never felt as close as it did now.

As she strode back and forth before the massed ranks of her followers, her chosen sisters, the massive weight of her armour was a comfort bearing down on her carapace. The Immortals were almost shivering with excitement to the point the joints of their armour rattled. They had fought recently, a glorious battle that had pushed them to their limits. The Colony had pulled them back and forced them to wait until their Phoenix Fire organs had recharged, and now they were ready to be sent out once more.

"Are you ready my sisters?" she demanded of the waiting armoured troops. "Are you prepared for the fire that is to come?"

"YES!" they roared as they slapped their antennae against their armour.

"Will your charge never falter? Will you crush the ranks of the enemy?"

"YES!"

"Will you fight until you collapse? Will you fight until the last breath leaves your body?"

"YES!"

"Then, when you are engulfed in cursed flame, will you rise? Will you do it all over again?"

"YES!"

"WHY?" she roared, her pheromones billowing around her.

"WE SEEK!"

"WHAT YOU SEARCH FOR IS OUT THERE! IN THE MASSED RANKS OF THE TERMITE YOU CAN FIND YOUR REST! GO AND TAKE IT!"

"WE SEEK!"

With that final, suffocating roar the Immortals began to advance. There were almost two hundred of them now, each tier five or six, each armoured with a custom, fully enchanted suit of the finest armour the Colony could provide. Every individual represented multiple tons of pure, righteous ant fury. Their charge began as a walk, the armoured column moving in lock step, the tread of their six legs shaking the ground as they moved as one.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

At the head of the column, the rhythmic drumming of their steps matched the urgent beat of Leeroy's heart. Every time she had sortied over the last weeks, the battle had been desperate and they had been pushed right to the brink before they were pulled back.

So close.

She'd been so close! The glorious, blazing and climactic end that she had yearned for from the moment she'd hatched had been within her reach numerous times. Even now, the scent of desperate battle hung heavy in the air. The acrid tang of formic acid, the bitter waft of ichor and the meaty iron of fresh Biomass washed against her antennae as the battle drew closer. Her eyes burned with passion. As she'd told the others, it was out there. They just had to find it.

Leeroy picked up the pace, no longer a stately march, she accelerated to a quicker gait, her legs beginning to eat up the ground and the column behind rose to match her pace. No longer did their tread create a steady beat; instead the noise had elevated to a constant rumble, more like an avalanche building in the distance than troops on the march.

Soon, they saw the battle lines up ahead. A horde of ravening termites threatened to overwhelm the ant defenders through sheer weight of numbers. A desperate struggle had broken out as the Colony fought to retreat as termite reinforcements poured from a tunnel in the wall.

Another breach. The ka'armodo were cunning and their mastery of magic beyond what the Colony could manage. Using their unknown methods they'd been able to guide their insect slaves through twisted and convoluted paths in the rock, evading detection and penetrating deep into ant territory. The breaches could happen almost anywhere at any time, tunnels crashing open and vomiting thousands of enemy

combatants behind the main lines. For this reason the Immortals had been stationed as the rapid response force.

As always, the sight of the hated enemy ignited a primal rage in her gut and Leeroy embraced it. Their elongated mandibles, their strange, alien bodies, with only two segments rather than three, and their beady, near sightless eyes. They were unnatural and did not belong in this world. She firmly believed that, how else could she explain this instinctual hatred?

With a flick of her antenna the entire Immortal column accelerated to full speed. The avalanche was no longer in the distance, now it was right here and the ground trembled under the force of their charge.

Leeroy activated her skills, accelerating beyond what she was normally capable of as her Dash and Charge skills combined to elevate her speed. The tunnel even sloped downhill, perfect conditions.

With the Immortals rushing forward from behind them, the still battling ants scrambled to disengage and get out of the way, unleashing potent blasts of acid and mana to create whatever distance they could before the steel phalanx that was the Immortals reached them.

These were the moments that Leeroy lived for. Her soul was on fire. The ranks of the enemy grew larger and larger in her vision as she lowered her head and prepared to meet them, the ground blurred beneath her.

The moment of impact was like the detonation of an explosion.

An inrush of air.

The deadly silence.

And then the deafening crash. The shockwave swept through her body as her armour crumpled, the termite before her vanishing as the sheer force of her mass sent it flying back into the massed ranks of its allies. What did she care for ranks? What did she care for the new tactics of the enemy? The Immortals did not acknowledge such things.

Their charge continued as their legs pounded the ground, urging every bit of speed possible. They smashed through line after line of the enemy, squashing them beneath their claws, breaking their carapaces upon their armour.

Finally it came to a halt as their momentum slowed, the charge ground to a halt, and still there were termites in front of her.

Leeroy clacked her mandibles with joy.

"There's still plenty left!" she cried. "Rejoice, my sisters!"

And there were, the termites continued to flood from the tunnel before them, the lines reforming as they closed around the Immortal column.

And the ants rejoiced.

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Chapter 946: Colony Vs Colony pt 5

The grind of an ongoing melee was a very different type of combat than the thrilling and domineering charge of the Immortals. The mass that had propelled them through the ranks of the enemy now bore down on their back. Leeroy welcomed it. It had taken her a long time to grow accustomed to fighting with a second shell, but once she had, once her armour wearing Skill had risen to a sufficient rank, she had come to understand its power.

The jaws of the termite foe, long, curved and sharp beyond belief were designed to find the weak points of an insect carapace, the joints between body segments, and sever them brutally. For the Immortals, such weaknesses did not exist. The joints that connected their head, abdomen and thorax were heavily protected by layers of enchanted and hardened metal that defied even the potent mandibles of their enemies.

They had no powerful magic. They could not blast with fire, or ice, or blow powerful gusts of air that would scatter their enemy. Nor did they have powerful streams of acid that would melt their enemies by the dozen. Their mutations and evolutions had driven them in a different direction and it was on those strengths that they now relied.

Their enlarged heads held dense muscles that powered their long, compounded mandibles and they leveraged those with devastating bites. Their legs were specially evolved and mutated to hold their immense weight and drive bursts of speed that allowed them to initiate small charges when given a breath of space.

Though they couldn't reach full speed, these smaller charges allowed them to throw their weight around, bashing into the termites around them, shattering formations and cracking their shells, creating weak points they could exploit.

Fighting in close quarters with Leeroy and her followers was like a human trying to contain a miniature Vibrant in their hand. Painful.

They bashed and crashed, bit and scrapped, stepping over the fallen and broken bodies of their opponents as yet more emerged from the hole in the tunnel wall to take up the fight.

Even with their thick, reinforced carapaces and sophisticated armour, the best that ant ingenuity could provide, they were not invulnerable. As thousands of termites surrounded their hundreds, it was inevitable that they would begin to take damage.

The first wound Leeroy took was close to her neck and she was glad for it. She'd gone too long in this battle without her HP lowering at all. Had her armour not stopped the pointed end of that barb dead in its tracks, she may have suffered a serious wound, more's the pity.

She battled on, her reserves of energy dwindling as she expended her stamina to bite and snap her way through the melee. As the conflict raged, her sisters and her suffered more and more harm. Vastly outnumbered, there was a limit to what they could do to defend themselves as they sought to inflict as much damage on the enemy as possible.

Not that it mattered.

Those tier six members of the Immortals, inflicted as they were with the terrible curse of not properly reading their evolution options, felt the Phoenix Fire building within them. The more damage they took,

the brighter it became until it raged within their bodies, a dense ball of energy just waiting to be released.

Still, they fought on. Dragging the enemy down with them kicking and screaming, buying as much time as they could for reinforcements to arrive so that this offensive could finally be repelled.

Finally, she could stand no more.

A termite lunged forward and Leeroy couldn't react in time. The vicious monster grabbed hold of her leg and threw its weight backwards, causing her to stumble. Before she could reorient herself, three more termites fell on her, biting furiously, their jaws seeking the gaps in her armour that had been torn open over the course of the battle.

Exhausted, wounded, no longer able to support her own weight, she slumped to the ground as the light began to fade from her eyes. It was in these moments that Leeroy felt most at peace, and though she knew it wouldn't last, for a brief moment, she could embrace the illusion that at last she could rest, secure in the belief that her heroic sacrifice had bought time for her siblings, that she had died a worthy death.

Only for the briefest time could she indulge in this fantasy before it was cruelly torn away. That cursed organ, deep within her carapace, pulsed ominously before the energy contained within flooded out. A torrent of bright flame erupted within her and rushed through her veins before it ignited her flesh and seared the termites around her.

Awareness came flooding back. Energy came flooding back. From the brink of her eternal rest to cursed, rejuvenated life in a matter of moments. Strength filled her limbs and Leeroy pushed herself to her feet, her mandibles clacking as she shook off the remains of those unfortunate termites who had clung too closely when they thought her defeated.

All around, the fires of her sisters had begun to ignite as her fellow tier six Immortals took the brunt of the enemy retaliation, not to protect their weaker sisters, but to bring this moment on all the sooner.

When Leeroy surveyed the field, she saw that still thousands of termites remained to fight. Her siblings were hopelessly outnumbered still, and no sign of the Colony's reserve rushing to their rescue could be seen.

Joy and hope bloomed in her.

"NOW IS OUR TIME, SISTERS!" she cried and flung herself back into the battle.

Now each wound would stick. Every dint in her HP was a step closer. Against impossible odds the Immortals flung themselves again and again, grinding down the foe, burning out their enemies using their own flesh as the tinder. Leeroy fought like a creature possessed of madness. No injury could stop her, no massed ranks could suppress her, she charged again and again, crashing through the lines, biting and clawing at everything she could reach.

Her vision began to blur. One of her antennae had been torn off. One of her legs was broken. She fought on. Surely. Surely this time.

"Let not a single termite live! Chase them down and exterminate them!"

She didn't know from where this new scent came, but the following rush of steps announced the arrival of more ants to the scene. Soon she was surrounded by fresh soldiers who threw themselves against the depleted termite force, filled with rage and vigour.

Her heart sank.

She'd been so close.

"Well done, Leeroy," Advant came and patted her on the back. "You can go and rest now."

She didn't reply except to nod wearily as she turned and dragged herself back towards the safety of the newly established ant lines. She knew it would be hopeless to continue fighting, she'd tried it before. She didn't want to be dragged back to the healers again, they hadn't let her go for days.

"Immortals, to me," she called to her sisters and slowly the now patchily armoured behemoths began to regroup, pulling themselves away from the fighting, dejected. Another opportunity lost. Another chance at eternal glory denied to them. For how long? How long could they endure?

Forever, if the Eldest had their way.

Leeroy shoved down a wave of bitterness as she reached out to comfort those around her. A few required help to move, their armour having become so twisted it needed to be removed before they could rise. They set to the task sluggishly, all of their previous enthusiasm killed by the scorned hopes.

"Leeroy," came a call, and the mighty soldier turned at the strange note she detected in the scent of her sister. "Come here."

She turned to see one of her comrades standing over another Immortal, one leg extended and placed on the other's carapace. The steel of the fallen one's armour was so twisted, so tortured, there was no possible way she could stand, she would need help. Leeroy sighed and began to drag herself over. She would assist her sister, of course she would. She may need to bite through the metal and strapping in order to free her, then she could be healed and they would return together.

Except, the ant who had called her remained strangely still. The fallen one still hadn't moved.

A strange emotion bubbled up in Leeroy at that moment. A feeling she could not identify. A hope she would not name.

Her limping stride grew longer as she forced her broken leg to move.

"What is it?" she demanded, not taking her eyes off her fallen sibling.

"I... I think she..." the ant could not go on. She trembled.

Leeroy reached out with her remaining antenna and touched it to the carapace of her fallen sister.

"She's gone," she said.

Her words rolled through the Immortals like a wave. One by one they gathered in silence until every member of their order stood in a circle around this one, still form, lying where she fell on the tunnel floor. They dipped their heads in respect.

Overcome with emotion, it was all Leeroy could do to force herself to speak.

"Her search is over. This one has found her rest. She has found her glory."

She choked.

"Does anyone know her name?" she asked.

"Cardigant," someone replied.

Leeroy nodded slowly. She turned her head to better see the eyes of her sisters. They burned. They burned so brightly she almost couldn't bear to look. She felt it too.

It was possible.

IT WAS POSSIBLE!

"RAISE HER UP MY SISTERS! RAISE HER HIGH AND WE WILL BRING HER HOME TO HER FINAL REST! HER ARMOUR SHALL BE OUR TREASURE AND WE SHALL NEVER FORGET THE FINAL CHARGE OF CARDIGANT! SHE SEEKS NO MORE!"

"**REST IN GLORY, SISTER!**" they thundered back at her.

The other ants watched, bewildered, as a joyful and triumphant column of Immortals made its way back through the tunnels, bearing the body of the first and only member to find what she had been looking for.

When next Leeroy and the Immortals emerged to battle, they did so with a fervour and fanaticism that none had ever seen before. Their hope had been renewed. Once again, the Immortals were reborn.

Chrysalis

Chapter 947: Tricky Patients

Who can say, truly, how many termites were defeated, down in the dark? Amongst the roots of the world tree we hunted and were hunted in turn. The fighting was vicious, brutal in the extreme.

In some ways it was a good thing that our non-monster allies were unable to join us, despite the enormous help their auras would have been. Without them we were able to engage with the enemy on the same ground. Fight fire with fire.

We fought on the walls and ceilings. We fought in complete darkness within cramped tunnels. We fought within the verdant growth of the tree. We fought on our own terms. Enormous numbers on both sides, an endless conflict that would never end until one side could no longer sustain the fight.

It was war exactly the way we wanted it.

I loved it.

- *From the journals of Advant.*

A war of attrition against the Colony was not the wisest of strategies, Mendant reflected. The field hospital around her teemed with activity as the wounded were rushed in on her left. The fighting must be fierce today considering the numbers that they were seeing.

Considering this was only one of the medical posts the healers had established, there must have been over a thousand ants in need of healing coming into the facilities run by her sisters.

Considering how durable and easy to heal the monsters were, only particularly serious injuries made their way to places like this, ones that couldn't be instantly cured with an application of healing magic, or fixed over a period of hours after consuming Biomass.

One thing they weren't short on right now was Biomass.

Like a conductor directing an orchestra, Mendant was the centre of operations as her healers flowed around her. She directed resources to where they were needed and when, ensuring that every ant received the care they needed in a timely fashion.

Most would be fine after a few days, whereas others might need a week to return to full health. The ants, especially the soldiers, were incredibly durable, able to recover even after losing half of their body, if they were tended to on time.

As she continued to direct traffic, she was distracted by a strange sensation that overcame her. She turned to see the other healers standing unusually still. A moment before she could reprimand them, she realised the patients were acting in a similar fashion.

What was happening?

A second before it happened she shifted to watch the entrance. There was a beat, then the bizarre sight of the Eldest being carried... or floating... into the hospital met her eyes.

Mendant stared in shock as the enormous form of the Eldest appeared to drift in. Were they being carried? She thought she saw ants underneath, bearing the weight of that frame, but she couldn't seem to focus on what her eyes were telling her, as if her brain refused to acknowledge it.

She puzzled over it for a moment longer before she shook off the confusion and rushed to meet the Eldest.

"What happened?" she demanded, her pheromones calm.

The healers were always calm, but her eyes nearly boggled when they saw the extent of the injuries that had been inflicted on the strongest ant in the Colony.

"Oh, hey Mendant! Good to see you. No problem, just a little explosion issue."

A what?

"How does one have a 'little' explosion issue?"

The Eldest, still somehow hovering in mid-air waved their antennae expansively.

"I managed to track down a ka'armodo, and they weren't too happy to see me, so to speak. I mean, did I try to bite them? Maybe. But I don't think that means they needed to detonate me, especially that many times."

The burns were one thing, huge chunks of missing carapace and the blackened flesh on the inside, but the cuts, as if sections of the Eldest's body had been removed with incredible precision, were something else entirely.

"What caused this?" she wondered as she prodded the wounds with her antennae.

"Some sort of laser thing. Absolute rubbish. Anyway, spot of healing, I'll be fine. Hit me up Mendant and I'll be on my way."

She levelled the Eldest with an even stare.

"You'll be here for at least a day. I'm assuming your healing gland is empty?"

"I think it needs to regrow..."

"Right. Well. I'll see what I can do. Is there any chance you can levitate over to a table?"

"Levitate? Oh. Sure thing, they'll figure it out."

And indeed 'they' did.

Once that giant form was placed down, she prepared to get to work. As she began to spin up her healing magic, she prodded a nearby healer with an antenna.

"Get back to work, all of you."

Her words shook the room out of its stupor and the healers got back to their tasks as the patients seemed to wake up and remember that they were significantly injured.

Mendant could only sigh and turn her attentions back to the Eldest, who continued to insist that they didn't need to be here, certainly not for a day, but she would brook no argument.

"Sit still and let me heal you," she demanded as she continued to work.

Eventually a series of dark tentacles sprouted and pinned the Eldest down, allowing Mendant to work. They even helped rotate the Eldest when she needed to shift her attention to a different wound. Literally wrapped up, the most esteemed member of the Colony could do little but suffer in silence, attempting to preserve what dignity they could.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 948: Narrow Escape

There weren't too many times in his centuries of life that Rasan'tep had truly feared for his life. He'd been outnumbered and surrounded during a wave defence in the fourth in just his fifth decade, barely out of the nest. Only the intervention of an Old One had saved him from the jaws of a ravening horde of Emerald Lizards. As he had grown, increased his level, power and prestige, he had not found himself in that situation again.

Until today.

The Ka'armodo found a nice shady spot and crawled in before settling down to try and recover some equilibrium. Not far away, others tended to the termite brood, accelerating their growth and directing

them to battle each other to improve their skills. The Old One felt nothing but contempt for the efforts of his comrades in their continued attempts to attack the Mother Tree, and by extension the ants. Even so, he would continue to use them for his own purpose.

[Master!] His faithful chief retainer, the Setsulah Ammon'sil, rushed to his side, placing both hands on the great lizard's side in an unusual public display of concern. [I felt your agitation through the bond. Is all well?]

Under the calming influence of his servant and the cool of the shade, the powerful mage began to feel his blood slow in his veins as he gathered himself.

[It goes to show what happens when I leave without my faithful servants by my side,] Rasan admitted, ruefully.

[I warned you not to go.]

[Peace, Ammon'sil. I know. I judged it to be worth the risk, and I am still not convinced that it wasn't.]

His chief servant subsided and bottled his objections, allowing his master to think and calm himself as he kept his hands pressed to the great lizard's side. He monitored the breath and thoughts of Rasan'tep through the bond as he felt that ancient mind turn.

[I was able to find our specimen,] Rasan'tep finally conferred. [Though I saw it much closer than I would have liked.]

[You were attacked?] Rage blossomed in the heart of the servant at the thought of such a lowly monster threatening his master, but Rasan'tep only chuckled across their bond.

[I was, indeed. Such a fury of a monster. I don't know how it found me, but it came after me so quickly I didn't have the time to retreat before it was upon me.]

The scene was far more terrifying than he communicated, and he could feel the confusion in his Setsulah, but he made no effort to dispel it. Better that he remain in ignorance than try to grasp the desperate madness that monster possessed.

Rasan'tep had taken his turn to lead a brigade of termites toward the tree, controlling the horde through the methods the Ka'armodo had built into their servants. Of course, he couldn't possibly refuse this opportunity to study the budding ancient in action and had purposefully attempted to engage it in combat.

It had taken several days of careful manoeuvring, but he had finally encountered the target toward the centre of the lines. It had been trivial to arrange an engagement where he would be in position to both watch the conflict unfold and make a quick escape, yet things hadn't exactly turned out that way.

The specimen was everything he had hoped to see. Domineering, decisive, radiating strength and power. The colossal ant had fallen upon his termite horde like a natural disaster, the pets kept by its side unable to keep up with the sheer fury on display. Magic of many elements, including that strange, unknown power, was on display, along with potent physical abilities that shredded through the termite force far quicker than anticipated.

That was when things had taken a turn.

He'd been so engaged with watching the monster annihilate his troops that he had missed the window to retreat. When he tried to correct this mistake and withdraw, he'd already been noticed by the ant he'd been trying to study. Even so, he should have made it out; the distance between them was large enough, but necessity was the mother of invention, after all. The ant had leapt towards him, its body flying into the air as it burned its skills to accelerate as fast as possible. That still wouldn't have been enough, but a powerful explosion had erupted beneath the creature, flinging its body towards him even as it suffered severe damage.

It had commanded its pet to create the explosion in order to propel itself at him.

The memory of that gnashing, chomping nightmare of chitin and flesh that had set upon him then was enough to accelerate the heart of Rasan'tep once more. Truly a powerful monster. Any thought he'd had of preserving the monster, this potential ancient, had flown out of his mind after a minute of combat. It had taken every ounce of mana that he could produce to keep the creature off him, and only after inflicting wounds that should have killed it five times over was he able to disengage and escape.

If his servants had been there, connected through the bond, their collective strength would have allowed him to withdraw far more easily, but even so, he couldn't help but suspect the creature would have found a way to make him pay by destroying one of his servants. Truly, a fearsome and indomitable monster.

It was becoming increasingly obvious that he would need to make contact with whoever had created or was guiding this monster so that they might collaborate in their efforts. His plan to accelerate the growth of the creature through difficult combat appeared to be working, but it was always good to confer with one's peers on the correct course of action.

Also, he had strongly begun to suspect that the termites, and his fellow Ka'armodo, were significantly underestimating what would come their way when the ants began to turn on the offensive. Even after the display of strength at the termite nest, they still didn't believe the ants were worthy foes.

And now that they had redoubled their efforts in producing a termite war machine, they failed to realise they were not grinding down the ant resistance, but feeding it, strengthening it. Despite inflicting casualties, the ants who remained were growing in strength, and none faster than the specimen. There was trouble on the horizon.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 949: A Cultish Personality

[I thank you for your cooperation.]

[To you as well. I hope that your research is of some use to the Colony.]

[I wish the same. If you wish to view our published work, you can find it in the pheromone library. There are copies in every major nest.]

[Wonderful. I will read with interest.]

Torrina placed her pen away and shut the book in front of her as the interviewee, a tier six mage, amongst the first, turned and walked out of the room. With more ants reaching the sixth tier, it became more important than ever before to correlate their evolutionary options and choices. Granin in

particular had been obsessed with it, almost as obsessed as the Colony itself, which was why the triad had been busy interviewing and documenting every tier six ant they could get to talk to them.

Which was all of them that they could reach. Once they realised the fruits of their research would be delivered to the Colony, they were only too happy to help.

If only her own colleagues had been as forthcoming with information, they would have been able to achieve so much more. The petty rivalries of the shaper circle seemed even more absurd to her now than they had when she was a student. Perhaps the day would come when social discord and competition would arise amongst the ants, forcing the siblings to struggle against each other, but as of yet, that day had not dawned.

A level of cooperation that bordered on the fanatical, that was the defining trait of the Colony in her eyes. In many ways, Anthony himself exemplified the trait. There was nothing he would not give of himself for his new family, even if he would never say as much.

She stood from behind the desk she had been provided, ensuring she didn't scrape the immaculately woven rug under the carved chair. Once again, only the best had been provided for her use, and she was careful not to damage any of it. Furniture such as this would have cost her a small fortune amongst the golgari.

As she stepped out of the "office", she found Corun emerging from his own room next door. The young shaper gave her a broad smile, the stones of his true skin grinding together as he did so.

"Another day done. Got everything you need?"

Torrina nodded.

"I don't have any more mages or core shapers to interview, if that's what you mean. I'm not sure if that will satisfy Granin though."

Corun pulled a face and laughed.

"I doubt it. I'm done with the soldiers, scouts and generals that are within reach as well. For the time being, we won't have any choice but to move on to something else. Hopefully, moving down to the fourth to see what Anthony is up to."

The two fell in alongside each other, the easy manner gained through years of association and friendship between them evident in their relaxed demeanour.

"I don't think he's going to need us for a while yet," she said. "He won't be close to evolving this early, he's only been tier six for what? A couple of months at the most. You can't expect the same sort of speed out of him that he had before."

"He's hunting big game down there," Corun replied. "From what I've heard, he's been munching on literally thousands of tier four and fives. Even if they're weak, that's still going to be a lot of experience. He might want to get some advice sooner than you think. The next evolution is going to be a big one."

"Damn right it is."

The two jumped and turned to find Granin, the granite-covered senior shaper looming behind them like a boulder. How he managed to move so quietly covered in such a crude stone, Torrina would never know.

"Hey there, boss," Corun greeted their elder and leader of the triad, "I'm guessing this means that you're done for the day as well."

Granin grunted.

"Unfortunately. Most of the tier sixes have been sent down to the fourth, apparently. The rest are on the front lines of the expansion war. We just can't find enough to interview to complete the evolution tree."

She could tell how upset he was at that prospect. In all the time she'd known him, she didn't think she'd seen the old man so enthused with his work, as she imagined he must have been in his younger days. He was obsessed and determined to burn the candle at both ends if it meant furthering his knowledge of this new monster type he had thrown his lot in with.

"Have you determined anything yet?" she asked him.

He flicked a glance at her.

"Not here," he said. "Let's get back to the rooms."

Corun and Torrina shared a look at his caution, but they were conditioned to follow the triad leader and so they did not question him, but instead followed as he led the way.

They followed the corridor around the outside of the hill towards the area where their rooms were located. Candelabras of gleaming metal held small cores that burned with beautiful, dim light, illuminating the intricate carvings, woven rug and tasteful embellishments that lined their path. But even such luxuries didn't compare to the view that she glimpsed through the occasional window as they passed.

Through a full metre of reinforced stone, she could see the vast open space of ash and smoke that was the skyline of the third stratum. The ominous red light bleeding from the outside into the corridor, infusing it with a macabre glow. Despite the opulence, it was impossible to forget where they were, or how high up. She'd been shocked at how quickly the builders had put together this truly titanic nest, the capital of the Colony in this stratum, for want of a better word.

From the floor of the stratum to almost reaching the bottom of the plate on which the demon city of Roklu sat, the great nest was kilometres high. The internals were still being worked on, the vast majority of the nest's volume not being utilised, but for now a segment close to the top had been allocated for the allies of the Colony to use. Barracks, training rooms and medical facilities for the troops, along with a separate area for Granin, Corun and her to conduct their research.

The engineers had been embarrassed when she'd asked them why they'd chosen to place their rooms and corridors as the external walls of the nest out of curiosity. They'd timidly told her of their thoughts on a new technique, muttered something about crumple zones and then assured her they'd done everything they could to ensure they were as safe as possible. She'd shrugged and told them she thought they would want the view for themselves but the ants had looked at her as if she were mad.

What care did they have for a grand vista? None at all. They wanted the dark and security of their cramped chambers and tunnels.

After walking down several flights of stairs they arrived at their private rooms, greeting the few humans and golgari they saw along the way before filing into Granin's chamber, the large shaper closing the door behind them.

"Why the secrecy?" she asked him, confused.

He flicked her a glance before he walked to his plush couch and took a seat with a sigh.

It had taken the ants awhile to grow used to the idea of furniture specifically for golgari; their true skins didn't allow for the same comforts as a human might welcome. Her people didn't like soft or fluffy things, and needed materials that were durable enough not to scrape or dent when exposed to the hard minerals that coated their bodies.

After some time, the ants had developed a soft, springy material that was firm enough not to be damaged by them, strong enough to hold their weight, and with enough give to provide comfort. It was quite a feat and Torrina wasn't sure she could live without the stuff anymore.

She and Corun sat as Granin leaned forward to discuss his thoughts.

"I have a few matters of concern. The first of which relates directly to Anthony himself."

He considered his words for a moment before he went on.

"I'm sure you're seeing the same thing that I'm seeing with the tier six ants, but tell me what you think is unusual about them. I want to see if you've picked up on it."

The two younger shapers glanced at each other before Corun spoke.

"They're strong. Very good evolution options, even at the basic level. Good stats and more than acceptable bonuses almost across the line. I've only encountered a few dud choices, which is rare."

"I concur," Torrina admitted. "No matter the ant, their skill levels or evolutionary energy, the choices provided by the System have generally been good."

"Exactly," Granin nodded, pleased. "And I think you are smart enough to make a few deductions as to why."

"Ants aren't supposed to make it this far up the tiers," Torrina said.

"Right. A tier six ant *should* be as rare as a golgari with diamond skin, basically non-existent, yet now there are hundreds. The Colony has made something common that the System considers rare, and thus they are benefiting from these powerful evolutions."

"This could still only be considered compensation for their weak starting position, don't you think?" Corun argued. "The Law of Evolutionary Propulsion applies particularly well to ants since they have such a poor initial state."

"Indeed, that is also the case," Granin agreed, "which is having a compounding effect. We have a monster type achieving heights that the Dungeon considers rare, and thus rewards, as well as them

having weak starting positions, which accelerates the quality of their evolutions. Across every caste, their options have been good. It's almost unheard of."

An excited glimmer had sparked in the old man's eye as he leaned forward.

"So you're particularly excited for what Anthony might get at tier seven, is that it?" Torrina asked.

"In part. Considering he's maxed his core at each step, and in fact gone a little beyond where he should have, his core should reach the bottom of Mythic grade during his next evolution."

Although they knew this already, the two nodded solemnly as they considered this. Going from a Rare core to a Mythic was a big deal for a monster. It meant they were on the road to being an Ancient. As far as she knew, there were only two classes of monster higher than Mythic, one of which being Ancient. Although researchers couldn't be sure exactly what grade of core those god-like beings possessed; nobody had ever seen one of their cores after all.

Mythic grade demons were exceptionally rare, since they almost never evolved with maxed cores, but on the fourth, they became more common. The tier eight Mythic monsters were the true powers of that stratum.

"His next one is going to be big, and we should prepare ourselves for what's coming," Granin stated.

She nodded.

"What else were you worried about?"

The triad leader grimaced.

"I got an annoying message delivered today," he grumbled. "I hate dealing with those damn Red Truth idiots."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 950: When a Man Meets a Lizard

Arranging a meeting between two cult members wasn't easy, especially given the current conditions between the Colony and the Ka'armodo. Granin grumbled at a constant rate as he and his fellow triad members trekked across the dangerous terrain of the third stratum. It was a testament to how wild the land was in this layer of the Dungeon that even the Colony, with its enormous numbers, intelligent approach, and absurd dedication, hadn't been able to construct countermeasures to ward off the never ending spawns. The best they could do was prune and manage the higher tier demons that still roamed the wastes between cities.

The Demon Raising program that the ants had launched was another initiative that Granin had followed closely. Raising demons to be strong and efficient in their builds to use as pets was hardly anything new, Invidia had been a perfect example of the practice, though some disregarded them due to their odd habits. Mass producing high quality demons on the scale the Colony was? He was almost certain it had never been done. After all, why would anyone bother? Nobody needed that many pets, and wild demons were liable to do whatever their obsession demanded of them. They were far from reliable allies.

Only the Colony had been able to harness the demons so effectively, probably because they allowed the third stratum natives to be themselves for the most part, whilst still surrounding them with an overwhelming structure of authority. If he had the time, he'd love to research that work more deeply. The demons were another group of monsters that needed more research. Although, come to think of it, the Red Truth had probably done plenty.

And not shared it.

"Did we really need to come all the way out here?" Corun asked.

Granin turned to the young shaper.

"Do you think we can wander over to a city controlled by the lizards and have a friendly chat right now? There's significant risk for the other party too. Think about it for a moment."

"I can't imagine how it feels for someone with soft skin to walk around out here," Torrina observed.

With the constant tongues of flame, ash and smoke that filled the air in the third, it was certainly an inhospitable place. Protected by the hard minerals that coated them, the three golgari didn't have to worry too much about the environment, even if it was uncomfortably warm.

"Let the humans worry about that. The ants, Ka'armodo and us have other things to worry about. In fact, the lizards absolutely love this stratum. The heat makes them all fuzzy inside."

[Being cold blooded has that effect on a being.]

The mind connection snapped into place with such ease that Granin almost didn't notice it until the bridge was formed. He rolled his eyes. They always had to show off.

[Are you planning on showing yourself or are we doing this full clandestine?] Granin drawled.

[Remaining hidden will be the wiser path in our current circumstances. I'm sure you understand.]

[That's fine, but I want to include the rest of my triad in the conversation. You're sharing this with your retainers, are you not?]

[... that is acceptable.]

With that, Granin wove mana of his own to extend the existing bridge to Corun and Torrina, allowing them to be part of the conversation.

[Rassan'tep, these are the members of my triad, Corun and Torrina. To you two, make sure you are properly respectful to Rassan'tep, he's old.]

[Older than you?] Corun asked.

[Shut up.]

A tiny hint of amusement leaked over the connection, which, culturally speaking, was equivalent to a hearty belly laugh. If letting Corun make fun of him helped to loosen the Ka'armodo's tongue, then he would tolerate it, for the moment. When they got back to safety there would be hell to pay.

[Well, you went to a lot of trouble to call me out here. Frankly, I'm not even sure how you did it.]

[Unlike the Worm Cult, we followers of the Red Truth have many means. It wasn't overly difficult to locate and pass a message to you.]

[Come on Rasan'tep. I don't need the pointless 'my cult is better than your cult' rubbish. Out with it. What did you want to say?]

There was a pause.

[And Yarrum would totally kick Arconidem's arse,] he couldn't help adding.

Indignation railed against his mind.

[That puffed up worm wouldn't be a match for the Demon God! You can't possibly expect me to let that pass!]

[Oh come on. I don't care how big a larval demon gets, there is no way it can beat the worm that wrapped around the world.]

[Comparing Arconidem to an infant demon? Preposterous!]

Granin laughed out loud. It was always like this between the various cults founded, according to legend, by each of the ancients. The followers always bickered about nonsense rather than cooperate as they should, given that they shared essentially the same mission. Corun and Torrina were casting him odd looks as they listened to the exchange. They didn't have much experience when it came to interacting with other cults; insulting their patron was a time honoured tradition.

Find the twentieth Ancient and usher in the new world.

[Alright. I've had my fun. What did you want to say? I presume it has something to do with Anthony? What's he been up to?]

[He's not injured, is he?] Torrina asked, a little nervously.

[He is in fact, injured, though I expect he will be fully healed by now.]

[What happened?] Corun butted in.

[I did,] Rasan'tep replied, a little smug.

Granin's hands slowly clenched into fists.

[What are you saying?] he growled.

Again, that hint of amusement over the link.

[I got a little too close and was forced to defend myself from him. He nearly ate me.]

Such an admission from a proud Ka'armodo was not an easy thing to obtain. They were almost as stubborn and puffed up with hubris as the gulgari themselves.

Granin relaxed.

[I'm a little surprised. He must be quite angry with your people to do such a thing.]

[There are fools amongst every race. This venture was a horrific idea from the beginning and the execution has only gotten worse.]

[It's going to cost your people a lot in the end,] Granin observed.

[It will not matter. We have been gathering power for thousands of years. We are ready.]

[Everyone has been gathering power. I think this might turn worse than you expect, by the end. At any rate, Anthony?]

There was a lapse in the conversation and Granin could feel the prodigious mind of the great lizard turning.

[Are you aware of what it is that you've made?] he asked eventually.

Granin raised a stony brow.

[Made? Let me be clear, I did not *make* Anthony what he is. He did that himself. I saw his potential and decided that I should put myself in a position to advise.]

[So to be clear, he isn't a planned attempt by the Worm Cult to create an Ancient?]

[He is not.]

[That helps explain how powerful he is.]

[That's cheap.]

[I wanted to meet you,] Rasan'tep continued, [because I am beginning to believe that he might actually have a chance.]

There was some residual shock over the connection and Granin assumed it came from the Set'sulah. They hadn't been aware of their master's thoughts.

[I've thought that for a while now,] Granin agreed, [and believe me, I think that after he evolves again, we won't be the only ones.]

The great lizard's thoughts sharpened, his curiosity surging through the connection.

[You have some information?]

[I've been conducting some research with my triad. I don't think anyone expects what's going to happen next. Least of all your termite breeding friends.]