

## Chrysalis 951

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#### Chapter 951: Free Time

*This period of history became known as the Great Expansion, the first of several large spans of aggressive land claims made by the Colony. What differentiated these from the manner of conquest utilised by the sapient races of Pangera was our unusual 'top down' approach. When the Colony claimed an area in the third stratum, they also seized the land above it in the second, and the first, and on the surface.*

*When we descended to another layer in force, we strived to ensure that the resources and cities beneath what we had already taken became ours as well. Although it was generally considered a normal practice to try and achieve this vertical structure, none were as fanatical about it as the Colony. Indeed, it was commonplace to possess significant holdings in the fourth stratum, a place of incredible value to any with the means to exploit it, and not bother to invest in the extremely difficult to manage third stratum, and unimportant second and first strata.*

*As we remained creatures of low mana requirements, the nests and academies spread far and wide across the upper levels of the Dungeon, accompanied by matching outreach from the human population on the surface. During this first wave of outreach, the city of Rylleh established its exploratory foundation that initiated construction of the new city that became Sothoth.*

I really need a holiday. As nice as it's been to engage in endless combat against the termites, and believe me, it has been satisfying on a primal level to rip into those damn abominations, I feel like I need a break.

With the lizards stepping in and taking control of the offensive directly, the entire battlefield has turned into a giant cat and mouse game. Vast swarms of termites sweep forward, tear up our tunnels, try to hunt down our patrols, lay false scent trails and generally be a nuisance before they retreat. Or they pretend to retreat but instead lay a trap and when we run in to try and chase them out, termites pour out of the walls and drop on top of us.

Naturally this means the Colony has returned fire, setting traps of their own, false tunnels, chambers filled with concentrated acid, misleading trails, surprise forays into disputed territory, raids on termite tunnels as they ferry reinforcements to the front lines.

Despite the long conflict, we still haven't managed to get hold of a single lizard. They're crafty creatures, deceit dripping from every cursed scale. The only ant who got close was me, and I had to let Invidia half blow me up to get the rocket jump I needed to close the gap.

Every other time they've slipped away without even being seen, no matter how hard we try to intercept them.

For my part I've just been running at the termites along with Tiny, Invidia and Crinis, sometimes with Sarah, causing as much mayhem as possible before retreating back to safe ground. Once we regroup, we try to find another likely location and run out to do it all again.

Despite the ongoing conflict, the reality of the situation cannot help but sink in. The number of termites swarming around the territory of the mother tree continues to increase. Things are coming to a head.

Which is why I've had to pull all the way back to the Bruan'chii settlement to try and get an audience with the tree herself. As a fellow reincarnation, I have a much better chance of conversing with the insane plant than my own kin.

I stare up at the massive Grove Keeper as he stands over me. In terms of overall mass, I'm quite a bit larger than the tree man, but ants tend to be much longer than they are tall, I'm quite a midget for a tier six monster in that respect. I barely come up to Tiny's waist when he stands up straight.

[Is she willing to talk or not?] I ask.

[Hmmm. I will ask, though I am not sure what she will say. Mother's mood has been... difficult of late.]

Seriously? That weed? She's always been difficult! As far as I've been told, she's been difficult from the moment she reincarnated on Pangera...

Feeling a little indignant, I wait while the many flowers, bushes and roots that adorn the walls in the chamber rustle amongst themselves as the Grove Keeper tilts his head, listening to the words of his creator.

[She will speak,] he tells me eventually.

[Nice. So I have to ask, is she going to be able to help against the termite threat any time soon? We've been doing pretty darn well holding off in the invasion so far on our own, but a little assistance now and then wouldn't go astray...]

[She *has* been helping. When the incursions reach her roots, hasn't she been fighting?] the Keeper replies without consulting his mother.

[She has been doing the *bare minimum*. When there is a direct threat to her, she fights, but my family are fighting, and dying, without any aid from her at all in the tunnels abroad. Don't deflect my words, I want to hear from the shrub-in-chief. Ask her.]

What follows is an extended period of rustling as the two silently argue back and forth. I can't even detect a mental connection between them.

[She has been gathering her strength. She expended a great deal of energy in her fight against the termites. Without our aid, there was little she could do to prevent them from destroying and pillaging their way towards her roots. It will be years before she is able to return to her previous strength.]

[So that means she doesn't have to contribute to preserving her own life? That's just nonsense! Without us here, fighting *her* battles, where would she be? Where would *you* be? We said we would come and lend aid, and we have. We've risked far more in the defence of your mother than she ever risked in protecting the Colony. If she wants to continue to enjoy our help, then she needs to *step up*.]

The anger in my voice is rising the longer I go on. My siblings continue to fight and die in a war that really is none of their business. If the Mother Tree wanted us to repay a favour, then I consider it repaid a hundred times over by now. She wants to sit back and lick her wounds while we defend her? No chance.

There is another long silence as the Grove Keeper and the Mother Tree argue. I can't know what they are saying, but if I was to guess, the Grove Keeper doesn't want her to get involved, and she is actually willing to help. The Keeper's attitude grows more stiff as their debate continues until finally he turns to me.

[She will help,] he says gruffly before he turns to stomp away.

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### **Chapter 952: Don't You Open That Trapdoor!**

Burke skulked with all her Skills working to the fullest, her stealth enhancing mutations humming as she slipped from shadow to shadow, creating patches of darkness where none existed and blending into the rock behind her as her carapace shifted and moulded itself to match the surface she stood on. She was on high alert, every one of her senses strained for the slightest hint of stimuli.

When a pebble shifted and rolled down the tunnel wall, tumbling over the rocks on its way to rest on the uneven floor, the fine hairs of her antennae vibrated furiously. Despite being drawn to such a height of tension, she didn't move, but held her position still on the ceiling. She was far from the territory of the Colony, on a deep scouting mission, she could not afford to make any mistakes.

Clinging to the darkness felt unpleasantly spiderish, an insect she despised with all her ant heart, as did being alone. She felt no trails that were not her own in this far away place, unnatural to say the least. Yet even so, she enjoyed these moments, the times when everything rested on her own carapace and nothing else.

Confident that there were no demons in the vicinity, she crept forward a few metres before she drew still, wrapping her stealth around herself once again. She was so close to the goal now, she couldn't afford to be impatient.

She briefly considered digging herself another resting chamber, a hidden room that she could fall back to and enclose to avoid danger, but decided against it. One look at the walls gave her all the information she needed as to why.

Rivulets of lava streamed all around her, so hot they seared the air itself. Delicate blue flames danced across the surface as the boiling rock flowed ceaselessly from reservoirs of unspeakably dense mana above. She was far too deep now to risk digging anything at all. It was hard enough to find sections of stone solid enough to grasp onto; if she were to try and dig, the odds of everything collapsing on her head was far too high.

What was that? A trembling in the air. Eddies of wind that brushed against the hyper-sensitive hairs on her front legs.

She tensed, locking her muscles in position. She could retreat or attack in a flash, depending on what she saw, but hopefully it wouldn't be necessary. She could see her target now. Having to fight at this point would be such a pain.

From the darkness opposite emerged a lithe, bladed shape. A demon, high tier. Illuminated by the lava streams, it certainly appeared dangerous, the flames glinting off the absurdly sharp blades that emerged

from that dusk dark skin that coated each of the monsters native to this stratum. Hesitant at first, the demon sniffed heavily, sucking in the heat and ash as it tasted the air.

Burke didn't flinch. Her scent was disguised, just like the rest of her. The demon was only twenty metres away, but it was likely too far for a single dash to reach. Patience was her ally.

Finding nothing amiss, the demon advanced toward the hole in the rock and vanished quickly out of sight. Burke didn't move. Only after ten minutes had passed did she shift her leg, then froze again as she watched for any response. Finally confident that nothing remained in the area she advanced to the target and began to poke her antennae through a millimetre at a time.

She still sensed nothing and now dared to poke her head in.

What met her gaze was much what she expected. No matter how deep she went, the third stratum remained much the same, the only difference being that what made this layer unique was more evident the further down one travelled. Right now she stood over an entrance into the fourth 'layer' that made up the third stratum. The pillar was close, and far below, obscured by burning air and thick clouds of ash that made it almost impossible to see, lay a massive demon city. At least a dozen plates, each larger than what the Colony had conquered at Roklu.

That would take a bit of work to control. And that was putting it mildly.

Thankfully it wasn't her job to worry about that. All the planning could be comfortably punted to the generals and carvers. She was of one mind with the Eldest when it came to thinking too much. Leave it to those better suited. She would instead focus on the things she could do exceptionally well.

Stealthy as ever, she emerged through the gap and clung to the ceiling above the sheer drop of a dozen kilometres that spread out beneath her. Once she'd achieved a solid grip she positioned herself carefully and focused her gaze on the distant city, giving some time for her lenses to focus.

Gradually things came into better focus, though it was immensely difficult to see much through the smoke. It was so hot she could swear that the air was on fire. Ants certainly enjoyed the heat more than the cold, but there were limits for everything.

Wait a second... what was she seeing?

That smoke, was it purely a product of the stratum? Or was the city... on *fire*?

The longer she stared the more confident she became, something was happening down there. An attack? A planned demon war? She didn't know who controlled the city below, but surely they wouldn't allow an inter-city conflict to extend to this point?

That was when she saw it.

A demon. Enormous. Like a drawn blade of blood and fire. The moment she saw that towering form its aura washed against her senses, crushing her will and battering her with thoughts of battle and war. Her mandibles strained against the desire to gnash and chomp as she fought for control of herself. Only after a long battle did she manage to regain mastery of her own mind.

What was *that*?

The city *was* burning. Whatever that giant demon happened to be, it was clearly attacking the city. With an aura that powerful, it had to be at *least* tier seven, and it was directly below the territory the Colony sought to claim... this wasn't good.

She watched carefully as the fight progressed, her gaze frustrated by the frequent gusts that broke her line of sight, but the glimpses she gained were more than enough to chill her heart.

Then she saw the other one.

In a flash, Burke was gone, back up the hole she had emerged from and rushing back to her nearest hiding spot.

One was bad enough, but two? Just what the Colony needed. Another enemy too powerful to deal with.

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#### **Chapter 953: Hooked**

"They found WHAT?"

Pulled aside by Sloan during a break in the fighting, she drops some heavy ordnance on me.

"Tier eight demons," she repeats grimly, "fighting in the deepest layers of the third stratum, right beneath the land claimed by the Colony."

Pants. This is the last thing we need right now. We've got these termites to deal with, along with the ka'armodo pulling the strings as well as acting aggressive along our border in the third. There might be hundreds of thousands of us by now, but even we can be stretched too thin!

"I'll have to go back up there," I declare, firm in my conviction. "Nobody else in the Colony is equipped to fight them, not without suffering extreme casualties, so I'll do it."

Sloan slaps herself with an antenna as if frustrated by my reply.

"What?" I ask defensively.

"Eldest. You might be the strongest member of the Colony, but *you cannot do everything yourself*. Grokus was only tier seven and he came close to killing you. If you were to go head to head with a tier eight, what do you think the outcome would be? Honestly?"

Well, if I think about it that way.

"I would be flattened like a pancake in a machine specifically designed for the purpose of crushing pancakes to be a single atom thick... would be my guess."

"I don't understand all of that, but I think my point got across. Even if these demons had abysmal quality evolutions, they would still be far above you, and there are *two* of them. Any thought you have of defeating them yourself needs to be cast aside."

It feels kind of sad to be pushed aside like this in a moment of crisis, but she certainly has a good point. I can't very well yell at the Immortals for trying to throw their lives away and then replicate that behaviour against even worse odds.

"All right then, so what *is* the plan then? I presume we aren't just hoping they won't come for us."

Now she looks insulted.

"Of course not. We are in the process of putting together a strike team of tier seven demons that we can call on in the event these powerful enemies find us. Observation and deep scouting operations have been increased dramatically and teams of generals have been put in place to game out possible scenarios. We are doing all that we can."

I have a question.

"Generals aren't really the smartest ants. Are we sure you should be the group in charge of the theory crafting?"

They are the most intelligent of the soldier caste, obviously, but that doesn't mean a whole lot. Not that Sloan appears to appreciate me pointing that out.

"Instead of insulting my intelligence -"

"That's not what I meant!"

"- what I wanted to ask, Eldest, was what level you are currently?"

My level? I honestly haven't looked in a while, which is a bad habit I've been falling into. I've probably got skills that need to be upgraded and a fair chunk of Biomass to spend after all the fighting we've been doing down here. I take a quick look at my status and almost jump in surprise.

"I'm at eighty one," I say, more than a little shocked.

That's past the halfway point! Tier seven is approaching fast!

"Good. If you continue at your current pace then you may be able to reach the next tier before anything happens with these demons. Jumping two tiers is too much even for you, Eldest, but one might be possible."

Considering the boost to evolutionary energy doubles each evolution, I'm not sure how a tier seven would cope against an eight, hopefully it's not that bad! Despite the reassurances of the coolheaded general, I can't help but look up nervously. The threats on the third are becoming more dire by the day and I'm stuck down here in this endless insect war.

"I still feel like I should head upwards. Even if only for a little while," I say. "I can help steady the situation before I return."

Even if I'm only there for a few days, with me and my pets being such powerful tier six monsters we can make a dent in whatever our enemies throw at us. Within that stratum anyway. Once I'm confident no mass invasion of lizards, or uprising of uber demons is around the corner, then I can back down and continue to chomp on termites as we gear up for the final push.

Sloan considers my proposal for a while before she reluctantly agrees.

"That might be a good idea. At the very least it will help settle a few nerves. You must ensure that you are back within two days. I worry that after that much time the enemy will realise you are gone and try to take advantage."

"Good call. I'll get the group together and depart immediately."

Which means kicking Tiny awake and going to look for Sarah. She's been fighting all over the place recently so it takes a little while to track her down.

[Hey there, Sarah! I'm going to be heading back to the third for a couple of days. Interested in coming along?]

The giant bear is currently being tended to by numerous healers as she heaves breaths that sound like the forge bellows operated by the Colony in the main nest.

[Just... give me a minute... I'm still... I'm still calming down.]

[Oh, shoot. My bad.]

I wait a few minutes for her to get a better hold of herself before we continue.

[It seems like you've been getting a lot better at controlling the rages,] I observe. [That's great stuff! Well done.]

She smiles, as much as a terrifying death bear can.

[Thank you. I've been trying hard. I still lose control sometimes, but I can feel the improvement.]

[Nice. So, about the third?]

She hesitates before shaking her shaggy head.

[I think I'll stay. I'm helping here and I'm making a lot of progress with my own problems. Besides, I don't want to go back up there to where Jim is...]

[That's fair enough. Don't go too wild down here. Take care of yourself.]

[I will.]

With that done, it's off to the gate. Back up toward the trunk of the world tree, past the village, up the roots to where the gate stands waiting. After so much time fighting against the hated enemy, I'm almost looking forward to going back to the blazing hot land of the demons. All that smoke, and ash, and ... and... what the hell am I looking forward to again?

Ah well. Here we go.

The gate looms in front of me, glowing with incredible mana that makes no sense to me. Wait a second, what am I sensing?

"Brilliant?"

"Uh. Yes...?"

"Where the hell are you hiding? I can sense you but I can't see you."

"I'm working on something. Something dimensional."

"Are you in another dimension right now?!"

"No."

"Damn."

"But I'm hiding in a pocket space!"

"Oh, sweet."

"There's a lot of research to go, but the team and I will crack the secrets soon!"

"I look forward to it."

Nice to see the second champion making strides. If she can make pocket spaces, will gates be far away? My hopes are up!

Feeling positive and not wanting to waste any time, I step toward the gate and brace myself for the disjointed feeling of being transported via magic.

Except I don't feel it.

I look down. My leg hasn't moved. That's odd.

Let's try that again. Take a step forward. Into the gate. Aaaaand now. Nope. What about... now! Nothing. HAH! Still not moving...

What the hell, leg? Why have you betrayed me?!

In fact, the more I try to force myself to move forward, the more something deep within reaches out and yanks on my being, locking my body in place. I'm just a few metres away from the gate, but I can't move into it! This is so strange...

Then I feel it, more clearly than I ever have before. A tug. Like a hand taking hold of my leg and pulling on it ever so slightly. Except it isn't my leg, it's my soul. And it isn't a hand, it's the Dungeon.

It's calling me down.

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#### **Chapter 954: Mind Control?!**

I strain. I push. I fight with every fibre of muscle and every strand of brain matter to get my body to move forward! Nothing. As an experiment I try to move backwards and find no resistance, but once I move forward again, no dice. I'm frozen in place as long as I attempt to move forward.

This is crazy! The Dungeon is basically refusing to let me walk forwards?! Are you telling me I don't have control of my own limbs?

Dammit, Gandalf! Get your scrawny wizard backside out here and explain this. I won't take another step until this unpleasant phenomenon is spelled out to me. I mean... I *can't* take another step... but that's not the point!



[Master? Is everything alright?]

I realise then that my comrades have been watching me skuttle backwards and forwards, straining against an invisible barrier in front of the gate for over a minute now. I can imagine it doesn't look at all that sane, prompting Crinis to check in with me.

[I, uh, seem to be experiencing technical difficulties?] I reply.

Crinis is confused.

[I'm not sure what you mean. Is there a problem?]

[In a sense. I can't walk forward.]

[You can't?] She extends a tentacle forward toward the gate and meets no resistance. [I don't think anything is there?]

[This is a little hard to explain. It feels like the Dungeon itself is preventing me from going through the gate. As if it refuses to let me move somewhere that's going to take me up a stratum.]

[The *Dungeon* isn't letting you move?]

[Yeah, it sounds weird, I know.]

[CONTEMPTIBLE DUNGEON! UNHAND THE MASTER!]

Exploding with wrath, the tentacled shadow-mass unleashes her fury upon the Dungeon. In the literal sense. Stones fly and the bark beneath us splinters as Crinish lashes out blindly. Tiny, witnessing this chaos, naturally does the first thing that pops into his head, which is to join in. Chunks of wood start flying everywhere as the giant ape joyously smashes his mighty fists into the root beneath his feet.

[Hey. HEY! Knock it off, both of you. That's not the Dungeon, that's the Mother Tree!]

The plants nearby rattle and hiss in fury as my two friends restrain themselves, Tiny much more reluctantly than Crinis. A Grove Keeper stomps over, a rare expression of anger plastered on his face. I reach out to him with my mind before he can go off the deep end.

[Sorry about that! Misunderstanding! We didn't mean to attack the Mother Tree at all.]

Obviously this doesn't satisfy the Grove Keeper one bit and he replies in a tone rumbling with anger.

[You would brush off this attack so brazenly? Hmmmmmm. There must be a reckoning!]

[Geez, we hardly chipped the bark, don't get your logs soggy,] I retort, [besides, since you're here I have a question for your mum. She might be able to help me out.]

[And why would she help you?] the Keeper grumps.

[Because you'd be dead if I wasn't here?]

There isn't much he can say to that. Still bristling with anger the Grove Keeper turns toward the bushes and engages in another rustling session with them before he turns back to me.

[Mother is most displeased at her roots being disturbed. What is your question?]

[The Dungeon is preventing me from moving through the gate. Does she have any idea what that might be about?]

[Hmmm. The Dungeon, you say?]

[It sounds crazy, I get it. Talk to the tree would you?]

I'm being a little rude, but to be honest the inability to walk where I want to walk is freaking me out more than I'm letting on. Not being able to go back up a stratum is one thing, I kind of expected that to happen as I kept evolving, but this constant tug dragging me downwards is something else entirely. Now that I'm aware of it, I'm starting to think it's been there for quite a while and I just wasn't conscious of it. Ew, that's weirding me out. I have to wonder why it's so much stronger now than before, has something changed? In fact, when was the last time I travelled up a stratum?

This could also explain why I was so eager and reckless when it came to descending.

[Mother has some understanding of what you refer to,] the Keeper sounds just as surprised as I am at the answer we get back. [The Call. She says that many monsters have felt it at one time or another, even Mother for a brief time. She believes that any monster with the potential to become the final Ancient is called to the depths to take up the mantle.]

Are you serious? Does this mean the Dungeon itself has acknowledged me or something? I don't want it, the Dungeon can get stuffed!

[She experienced it herself? But doesn't now? What made it go away?]

This is an important point.

[She believes that when she evolved to her current form, sacrificing much of her potential to be able to create us, her children, she no longer qualified.]

[So if I take on some useless options during an evolution I won't have to put up with this?]

[Hmmm. Useless?]

[Ah! Sorry, poor phrasing. You know what I meant! Useless in the 'becoming an Ancient' sense. I like you branchies, always have, honest!]

The Keeper gives me a long look before he confers further with his mother.

[She has said all she wishes to say on this matter. Please refrain from attacking her any further.]

[That was totally a mix-up!]

I slap Crinis' tentacles down with an antenna as they start to extend past me to throttle the Keeper as he turns to walk away.

[Ha-ha! Friends!]

I pause.

[Crisis! What the hell?]

[... he was being rude.]

[You weren't connected, there's no way you could know if that was true.]

[I could tell.]

Ah... I can't deal with this right now. Actually, didn't Garralosh mention something about a pull or call? Was this what drove her over the edge as she spent all that time locked in the first stratum? Holy moly, that's horrible. Doesn't forgive what she did, obviously, but having this damn hook yanking at my guts for decades would be enough to make me crazy too.

Gah! I need more information. I have to know what's going on, if it can be subverted or overcome. If the Colony needs my help in the third, I'm supposed to just sit here and do nothing? Ridiculous! But who can I talk to?

Granin. He has to know something, surely. He's the most informed when it comes to Ancient stuff. If I can get back to the third I can track him down, or I can put out a call and get him to come here.

Wait a second. I've got an idea.

[Alright. This might sound a little weird, but listen in guys. Tiny, Crinis, I want you two to pick me up and throw me through the gate.]

Crinis freezes on my back whilst Tiny just looks confused.

[Look, I can't walk through the gate, so I need another way to get through. Invidia, use forcefields to bind me up so I can't bite or move my legs, then you two pick me up and toss me through.]

[Master, I can't do that!]

Crinis is appalled.

Tiny, on the other hand, is grinning widely and flexing his hands.

This might have been a poor idea.

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### **Chapter 955: Origins of the Call**

I'm not sure what anyone on the other side of the gate was expecting to see, but catching a glimpse of 'the Eldest' as I soar gracelessly through the air probably wasn't it. After I hit the ground I roll several times, legs flailing wildly as I try to slow my momentum.

Dammit Tiny! Was it really necessary to put *that* much arm into it? That lousy ape puffed me like a baseball. Just how strong is that idiot? I weigh multiple tons at this point!

As I finally get my legs under me and manage to slow my roll I can see many ants standing guard around the gate boggling at me. I wave shakily with one antenna.

"H-hello all. Nice to see you again."

And then the hooks in my soul decide to make themselves known.

HAK! Holy moly! That suuuuuucks...

Tormented by the sudden intensification of the drag I flop onto my back and flail at the air. It hurts! Great googly-moogly that stings! I feel like a fish with a shark hook lodged in my guts. It's deeply unpleasant on a level I cannot hope to communicate.

Heedless of the damage my dignity suffers I thrash my legs like a poisoned spider and shudder in agony. Without realising it, I've actually started to drag myself back towards the gate. Is *this* what Garralosh put up with for all those years? HOW?! It's not possible, no way.

[Master, are you alright?] Crinis asks, her voice thick with concern once she rushes through the gate.

[No!] I yell. [Not okay! Not close to okay!]

[Should we take you back to the other side?] she asks.

[Yes! NO! Just give me a minute here... ugh.]

Tiny stomps through the gate and, seeing the situation, he rumbles over and mimes picking me up again.

[No, don't throw me again you idiot! Just... don't let me crawl over to the gate. Alright?]

The big ape nods, though he looks slightly disappointed. You enjoyed throwing me that much eh? I silently endure the horrific and persistent tugging on my soul until it eventually becomes something like bearable. Honestly, it's worse than walking around with an inflated core. It's a pain I can't adequately describe. If it's like this on the third stratum, I can't even imagine how I'd feel going back to the second.

This sucks! There are still monsters on the third that are a higher tier than me! I refuse to believe they all trundle around enduring this sort of agony! In fact, aren't there tier *eight* demons beneath me right now? How are they exempt from this when I'm not? According to the Tree, this sensation supposedly means I'm 'qualified' or have the 'potential' to become the final Ancient, which means all these other monsters who are stronger than me don't possess that?

It's flattering to have my awesomeness acknowledged, I just wish that appreciation manifested in a different form.

Once I'm up and walking I head away from the gate and toward Roklu. If I'm going to find Granin, I'm likely to find him there. Increasing the distance from the gate is met with a corresponding increase in the yanking I feel from the Dungeon, but I grit my mandibles and try to endure it. This is seriously awful. I don't think I'll be able to last up here all that long unless I find a better way to cope with it. Once I evolve, will it get worse? Or can I mitigate it in some way?

Gawd I hope so.

Feeling utterly miserable, I drag my sorry carcass all the way back to Roklu. Sadly, not even the sight of the utterly enormous nest the Colony has constructed is enough to shake me out of my misery. Although it's impressive as hell. I wonder how on Pangera they managed to make something that big? Surely the weight of it would be enough to collapse the foundation. Unless there's some form of superstructure inside? Scratch that, I think they did manage to distract me.

I approach the foundation of the massive anthill and park my rear outside before asking a nearby worker to see if they can fetch the golgari triad. I'd love to crawl around inside this comically impressive construction, but right now I'm just not feeling it. What I *am* feeling is the incessant claws of the Dungeon pulling at me, demanding I head back down to the fourth.

Get stuffed, Dungeon! If I want to stay here, I will. Maybe, I'll head back to the second stratum for a stroll while I'm at it!

Oof. Or not.

It doesn't take long for the familiar, grumpy face of Granin to appear, thankfully, and he's flanked by Corun and Torrina.

[Granin you curmudgeonly boulder wannabe. What the hell have you done to me?]

The shaper huffs and folds his arms across his granite chest.

[What have I done? Given advice. Everything else that's occurred is on you. I hear you've been mighty busy down below, risking your neck and blowing yourself up.]

[On me eh? And how the hell could you know about me blowing myself up? Wait... you're distracting me. I won't be deceived! Explain this infernal 'Call of the Dungeon' that's yanking my chain. I'm not fond of it! Not fond in the slightest!]

Probably for the first time ever I get to witness surprise on the face of Granin. It looks weird. It's like I walked past a section of stone wall, then turned back to see a shocked expression on its face.

[You feel the call?] he asks.

Even Corun and Torrina appear stunned.

[Are you referring to the immense pain I feel as a result of existing on this layer? When I tried to come through the gate I couldn't even move my body. Having my body controlled by the Dungeon isn't what I signed on for. If this is what becoming an Ancient entails, I want off the ship!]

[Anthony, this is a great honour! Do you understand what this means?] Corun implores, his face ecstatic with excitement.

[Honour my glittering, golden commercial empire! By which I mean my bum! This hurts like crazy!]

[You idiot,] Granin huffs, though I can tell he's excited. [That's not the Dungeon calling you. That's the Ancients. You've got their eye now, boy.]

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 956: Ancients Shmaincients**

Corun, Torrina and Granin all stare at me with glittering eyes after they reveal that it's the Ancients who've stuck this hook in me rather than the Dungeon itself. At times like this I have to remind myself that despite their intelligence, these three are cultists who essentially worship a giant worm.

[So in your opinion, the fact that the Ancients have done this to me, rather than the Dungeon itself, should change my view of it?]

[Of course,] Torrina nods seriously, [these are the oldest and most powerful creatures in this world.]

[How could it not make a difference? Are you saying you don't care that you've been called by these god-like entities?] Corun entreats me, grinning.

I stare him in the eye.

[OF COURSE I DON'T CARE! Why the hell would it make any difference to me? Are you stupid? Is your brain a worm?! I swear on the Colony, if I ever become an Ancient I'll stick a hook in your guts and haul you around the Dungeon, we'll see if your opinion changes!]

Granin raises both his hands and tries to calm the mood.

[Alright, let's settle a bit. Obviously Anthony isn't thrilled at being in pain. That's perfectly understandable. I'm sure that you can understand why we might be excited though, right? You've essentially been touched by what we would consider to be omnipotent beings.]

[Granin,] I grate out, [even if I wasn't in pain, I wouldn't care about the Ancients. All they are to me can be summed up as 'threats to my family'. Outside of that they can take a long walk on a scenic trail.]

Corun almost winces.

[You really shouldn't talk about them like that, Anthony,] he tells me.

[Or what?] I sarcastically bite back. [Will they cause me discomfort and limit my movements? Wouldn't that be awful.]

I shift as the ache flares within my carapace.

[How are they even doing this?] I complain. [I can't detect any mana that's connecting to me. It's like this sensation comes from nowhere.]

[I can't help you with that,] Granin admits, [nobody has ever been able to figure it out, or what requirements are necessary to trigger the call. Some promising monsters begin to feel it early, perhaps even at tier four or five, but others never do, not even at tier eight. Other than a strong core, we have no idea what causes it to begin.]

Well that's *something* at least. Are they able to cause this sensation through the core somehow? It shouldn't be possible according to what I know, but these monsters have been alive for literally thousands of years. If they haven't figured things out better than I have in that much time, they're beyond hope.

[All right,] I finally manage to push aside my anger and try to be reasonable. [You can't help get rid of this, is there any way I can mitigate it? Reduce the effects? Right now I can barely operate on this stratum at all, I presume going to the second would be even worse. If the Colony needs help this is going to make it difficult to help them and frankly, I'm not a fan.]

Torrina nods, understanding where I'm coming from. She glances at Granin, who indicates she can answer before she speaks.

[We don't know how to lessen the effects of the call. We only know that when it is in effect, it will be constant. The only way to get rid of it that we've ever found is for the marked individual to ... ] she reaches for the right words, [ ... lose the interest of the Ancients. Once they no longer believe you are capable of reaching their level, the Call will vanish.]

So if I don't intentionally weaken myself during an evolution this is just going to continue? That sucks!

[They want another monster to reach their level and join their ranks, completing the circle of twenty. For that reason they've reached out and attempted to draw promising monsters to them,] Granin says directly. [It's a crude method, but they are attempting to drive you to descend further, evolve more, fight and survive in ever more difficult conditions. Only a monster who can overcome all of that will be capable of reaching them. That is what we believe.]

I'm about to tell Granin exactly what he can do with his beliefs when a familiar scent wafts against my antennae.

"You aren't being difficult are you, child?"

I turn toward the nest in shock. It can't be! But it is!

Emerging from the elaborate entrance carved into the base of the hill is a swarm of ants who posture aggressively, zipping this way and that as they rush forward to assess any threats. But underneath all of that swarming carapace is a form that I can't forget no matter how much time passes.

"Mother?" I gasp. "Weren't you in the second stratum?"

She'd been up there for ages, in the main nest! She'd even managed to get her guards to let her go out hunting and everything. I kind of thought that would end up being her retirement, in a way. She could go catch her own food, battle and lay eggs, everything she wanted in life. What the heck is she doing down here?

The giant ant steps gracefully closer to me.

THWACK!

Yeouch!

I rub my head with one antenna.

"Was that really necessary?" I ask.

"I felt that you were thinking useless thoughts," she replies calmly.

She raises her antenna again.

"Are you still thinking them?"

"No mother!"

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 957: Such a Pain**

Mother looks at me, a twinge of amusement in her eyes as her antennae continue to hover threateningly. I swear she gets far more enjoyment than she should by whacking me on the head. I'm not sure I've ever seen her hit someone else, to be honest. It's not fair!

"Mother. It's lovely to see you as always, I'm just surprised is all. I thought you were very comfortable in the main nest."

"I experienced some issues due to a lack of mana. It was tolerable and I was happy to remain, but now that a secure nest has been constructed in this stratum, there is no reason I shouldn't move down and take up residence here."

"The fact that the Colony is at war in this layer wouldn't have anything to do with it?"

The Queen isn't fazed by my question and replies forthrightly.

"Of course if my children are fighting then I should help. Isn't that normal?"

"I suppose it is," I sigh.

Though I doubt the rest of the Colony were happy with her decision. In fact, the guards crawling all around are throwing me dirty looks for agreeing with her. What do you want *me* to do? Nobody is going to tell the Queen what to do, least of all me! If I suggest she try and look after herself, all that's going to happen is I get smacked in the head. Still, I suppose I should try.

"Just... try to be careful? A bit? The family would be sad if anything were to happen to you."

"Of course, child. I do not intend to needlessly throw my life away, but I have the ability to help, so I shall."

She looks at me as if I'm a touch foolish to think that she would do anything else. I stare flatly at the guards who now pretend they were never glaring at me to begin with. You morons, now mother thinks I'm an idiot. That's what I get for trying to help you.

"Well, we've had word that there are tier eight demons beneath us. So we need to be careful. If they come up here, we'll be forced into a fight that isn't likely to go well for us."

"Good thing that I'm here then," the Queen declares. "The strongest of the Colony should stand at the ready to repel this threat. Isn't that why you are here?"

"Sort of," I scratch my head with an antenna. "I've got my own thing going on. We aren't expecting them to pop up here anytime soon, but fighting them without any tier seven members is going to be tough."

"Very well, then I will return to my hunt. Be well, child. Try not to cause trouble."

"What, me? When do I eve... yes mother."

Satisfied with my reply, the Queen pats me on the head once before she walks away, trailed by as many as a thousand ants who nervously skitter around her as if expecting powerful monsters to leap out of the air to assassinate her.

The Queen is always going to do whatever she wants, which is nothing less than she deserves after the service she's done for the family, but I wish she wasn't so comfortable risking herself. I know she doesn't



think of herself as irreplaceable, goodness knows how many queens we have now, but were she to actually fall in battle the entire family would be plunged into mourning.

Even the ants who've never met the Queen speak of her with such reverence. It's kind of strange to think there's so many members of the Colony who haven't laid eyes on the Queen. Or me, come to think of it. It doesn't seem all that long ago there were only a couple hundred of us and I had to shepherd my less intelligent family members to the surface to avoid the wave.

Now there's thousands and thousands. Maybe even a million? Is anyone even counting? Where's Accountant when you need her? Actually, an ant named Accountant probably *does* exist.

With Mother gone, I turn back to the golgari with a sigh.

[So there's nothing anyone can do about this and I just have to throw myself deeper into the Dungeon until I'm either dead or a high enough tier that the Ancients accept me as one of their own?]

[Pretty much,] Granin confirms. [There's a little more to it, I think, in terms of what evolutions you choose, and what path you emphasise. From what we understand of the Call, it won't stop until you realise your potential, 'ruin' it, or die.]

[Well that's just... great.]

This sucks. Big time. I'm not interested in being yanked about like a fish on a hook, but it doesn't seem the Ancients are interested in giving me much choice. Unless I can find a way to mitigate this effect, then I'm just going to have to learn to live with it. Learning to live with things is my speciality!

I've learned to live with being an ant just fine, and when I was a human there was that time with the legs. Those bones healed up alright, the pain when walking was less than the hunger pangs, and I dealt with those!

Actually, wait, no I didn't, I died from hunger didn't I?

[Look, kid, I'm sorry I didn't warn you about this. It's out of our hands whether or not this happens, and I won't say we didn't hope for it, but for what it's worth, I'm sorry.]

[Granin, this is too much emotion from you. Don't make it weird.]

Corun huffs a laugh behind his triad leader and even Torrina cracks a smile.

[None of this is your fault, I get that. This is largely a problem caused by me being too incredible and the ancients being gits. Hopefully at some point down the line it'll all work out in the wash. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go bite something.]

[Make sure you check back in with us before you evolve,] Granin reminds me as I turn to leave, [you're going to need a quick rundown. This one's going to be big.]

[You said that about the last one.]

I cut off contact as we get further from the hill.

[Master? Will you be able to fix this problem?] Crinis asks anxiously.

I can feel her wiggling about on my carapace back there, she must have been worried.

[No fixes in the short term, but we might be able to come up with something in the future if all goes well. Invidia, keep your eye open and see if you can find something that is causing me this pain. With your massive brain, you might be able to figure something out I've missed.]

The green eye flashes with glee.

*[Your painssssss, I will take itsssss!]*

[Don't take it, get rid of it, if possible,] I grumble. I wouldn't wish this suffering on one of my friends! [Make sure I check in with Brilliant when we get back down to the fourth as well. She might be able to pick up on something we can't, given that she has nine hundred different ways to sense information. She's like an ant shaped laboratory.]

Which was exactly what she wanted to be.

[Alright, let's go see if we can help the Colony and beat something up. We're fighting all over the place, so surely there's somewhere we can pitch in.]

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 958: That Deep Despair**

Deep within Pangera, things were stirring. Stone cracked, ice shattered, fire roared and winds howled. The monsters of this deep darkness revelled in the flood of mana that poured from the centre of the Dungeon, eyeing the rivals with whom they had sparred for hundreds, if not thousands of years whilst younger beasts stepped lightly, desperate to avoid the eye of their elders as they squabbled amongst themselves for resources. This is the world where no naturally born creature had ever set foot.

The final Dungeon.

True horrors lurked amidst the caverns here. Monsters so powerful and ancient that simply breathing in their presence would be impossible, so suffocating was their aura. Creatures who were born of, and soaked in rivers of mana, the rules of their existence warped and twisted by energy. In this place, nothing was as it seemed. That which was solid flowed like water, that which was liquid floated like air. Forwards could be backwards, up could be down and time could be anywhere and nowhere. The concentration of mana was so thick here, reality itself groaned under the weight of it, pushed to the brink of breaking.

Any creature born of such an environment, any monster that could thrive in it, was nothing less than an apex predator and amongst the most fearsome beasts in all of existence. Demons and Gods in their own right, these mighty beings were proud existences, pushing their fiendish intellects to the limit every day over centuries to survive.

And yet.

Something greater stirred now. The truly ancient. The real Ancients. How long had it been? The monsters retreated to their dens, cast glammers and wrapped themselves in shadow as the oppressive, all-encompassing wave of dread washed over them. Had it been so long that they had forgotten? Did

they grow complacent? Had they really dared to dream that perhaps now they measured up to the only beasts who still slept beneath them?

A foolish thought.

In a pocket of pure fire that burned like a sun, a being awoke. Though it possessed no limbs, no arms or legs to speak of, it *stretched*, and as it did so the flame grew yet more dense and hot, until the air, the stone, even the fabric of space and time began to burn. As if rising from a deep ocean, consciousness returned gradually until finally the Ancient broke the surface and awareness returned in a flood.

Fire mana *boiled* and condensed in the heart of the miniature sun, until it began to harden and solidify. Shards of red crystal, the most pure flame mana in all of the world, began to form. As they formed, cracked and reformed, a tinkling sound could be heard ringing out beneath the ever present roar of hungry flame, tiny flecks of crystal swirling through the inrushing air.

Old, older than the Rending itself, the creature surveyed its surroundings leisurely before expanding its mind. In an instant the monster's thoughts swept over thousands of kilometres of Dungeon, the weaker beings it sensed huddling low in their tunnels as they felt the gaze of a *true* apex predator touch them, ever so briefly. Fortunately for these monsters, it wasn't them that the Ancient was interested in; instead it reached out, beyond the caverns of unworldly heat that made up its domain and outwards, stretching further to circumnavigate the globe, scanning the entirety of its home stratum.

It searched for its peers.

Responses were mixed. The Demon God was close to waking, its thoughts could be sensed bubbling under the surface as it drew in the mana needed to sustain it. Hunger had awoken, unsurprising, given the way its appetite was never truly sated. The desperate need to eat would always ensure it was the first to return to being fully alert. Yet more had begun to stir, the slow eddies of their sleeping thoughts quickening as their cores basked in the rising mana.

The stench of toxins and death had begun to permeate the edges of the flaming caverns the Ancient called home. With a flex of will it sent purifying fire roaring throughout its domain, purging the corrupting mana. A necessary process when Decay's territory bordered one's own. The poison creeping beyond the boundaries was a sure sign that Decay too was rising quickly. It would not be long before almost half of them had awoken fully. How long had it been since such a thing had occurred?

Carriflare could not recall.

Another mind, terrible and great, reached out to it across the void. It was no easy thing when two Ancients connected to one another. Forces too great to exist in proximity could create unwanted effects if they were to draw close. This meant contacting each other was a delicate thing, the proper distance had to be maintained, lest their prodigious minds clash and unleash destruction across the Dungeon.

It took a moment for Carriflare to recognise the alien thoughts that had extended towards it, a being it had not spoken to for over a millennium. With care, the connection was established as Carriflare worked to withhold its power and its contemporary did the same. The tiniest thread of thought hovered between them, through which each could sense the ravenous power that lay beyond. Much of their exchange occurred as images and feelings, flashes of impression and intent. In the mix, some words were exchanged.

**[What hope this cycle?]** Carriflare asked.

**[SOME,]** Odren replied.

That was promising. Such words were seldom given from the Father of Monsters.

**[Are there any that you like?]**

The Ancient known as Odren was more aware of the goings on within the Dungeon than the rest of them, ever fascinated with the creatures known as Monsters in a way the others simply weren't. They cared for completing the circle, nothing more.

**[SOME,]** Odren replied once more, and Carriflare could feel the torrential glee roiling within the vast intellect beyond their tenuous link. **[INTERESTING BREEDS THIS TIME. FRESH MEAT.]**

A crude way to phrase it, but Carriflare understood the meaning. The Dungeon was producing new types of monsters, moving into a new phase in the cycle.

**[Is there time?]**

Nothing for a long moment. Then:

**[SOME. ENOUGH.]**

It would have to do.

The contact was broken and the Ancient settled once more into its own mind, its own domain. Yet more mana would be needed before it regained its strength, but for now it could engage in a simple hunt. It had been so long...

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 959: Adventures with Tolly**

*Hello my dear readers, it is wonderful to be able to share with you the next instalment of my adventures amidst the lands of the Colony! When last we spoke, I had been assured that a meeting with THE Queen was quite simply impossible, outside of a crusade of the most bloody sort to fight through tens of thousands of fanatical insect soldiers! I enjoy a good crusade as much as the next person, but I have to say that even I am not that eager to score an interview.*

*So with a great deal of reluctance I abandoned the idea of speaking to the Queen. I was, however, eager to continue to explore in the pursuit of finding the 'Great One', the Eldest! Exactly what had this ant done in order to secure such devotion from its Colony? Of course, my guide, Emilia, was replete with stories of this particular individual's excellence. Great battles fought, duels won, incredible feats of strength, cunning, bravery and derring-do!*

*I have to say, reader, that there could be a very good book in the telling of this ant's exploits. Might I suggest, this author's tenth best seller?*

*Naturally, I assume some level of exaggeration to be in play, but I am far too polite to push my guide for the exact details! That simply wouldn't do! It pays to be polite at all times, this has been my policy for decades.*

*My guards and I continued to enjoy the hospitality of the Colony within the second stratum and I must say the sights I beheld were quite beyond my expectations.*

*After the well regulated expanse in which vast fields of trees hosted the aphids raised by the Colony, we visited a mine. Emilia was quick to assure me that this mine was typical of those operated by the ants and I have to say it appeared to be a model of efficiency. A replenishing supply of Cold Iron, the brittle, freezing ore that can appear in the Shadow Sea, was being efficiently harvested by a rotating team of ant workers. The entire operation was conducted in perfect silence, a trait of the ants that I struggled to adapt to.*

*It's so strange! No matter how many of them are gathered in one place, the tikky tak of their claws is basically all that one can hear. Emilia assured me that the ants were constantly communicating and were, in fact, quite chatty, but without the ability to understand their pheromonal language, it isn't possible to partake in these conversations.*

*After visiting the mine, we followed the trail taken by the raw ore into Anthome itself, whereupon it was delivered into the largest foundry I have ever laid eyes on. The heat was so intense, even within this frozen stratum, that the viewing area we were taken to was lined with cooling enchantments on the walls. The air outside wavered and shimmered in the heat rising from the enormous crucibles of molten ore. At least a dozen of these literal melting pots could be seen from our position and Emilia took the time to point out the different minerals being processed and the final products they would be turned into.*

*Each crucible measured dozens of metres across, giant cauldrons into which tons and tons of material seemed to constantly flow, with waste product and separated liquid metals flowing from controlled outlets at the bottom. From there the precious metals were funnelled into gravity fed pipes and whisked away for further processing elsewhere.*

*The sheer scale of the operation opened my old eyes to just how vast the industry of the Colony truly was. How many mines like the one I saw would be necessary to feed a foundry like this? A hundred? And this was far from the only such foundry, I was assured. Hundreds of mines, thousands of tons of material that was fed to a literal army of artisans who crafted everything one could imagine, from arms and armour for ants, people or their pet monsters, to furniture, statues and kitchen implements.*

*The most senior and revered of all the craftsants, was Smithant, and I was especially pleased to be able to meet this individual hard at work at the forge.*

*"Smithant was one of the original smiths in the Colony and the first to craft armour specifically for use by ants," Emilia told me, a touch of awe evident in her voice as we stood to the side as the large ant beyond feverishly worked the tools of her trade. "It isn't often that she returns to this stratum, as she runs the Colony's largest armoury deeper in the Dungeon. She comes up to teach younger ants sometimes, or to check the quality of the more basic equipment produced here.*

*Nothing I saw in front of me looked basic. Even my guards were impressed as we watched the dark coloured ant shape the metal; the speed at which she worked was incredible, taking a raw ingot, firing it, and then using a strange, enchanted hammer to pound it into shape. Her six legs were constantly in motion, shifting, adjusting, firing the bellows, changing the angle, operating the hammer. It was almost dizzying to watch.*

*As she worked, I was able to see how she had adapted her body to her work. One leg channelled pure heat into the metal as she worked it, keeping it cherry red as she plunged one claw deep into the molten steel. In fact, she needed no equipment to touch or move her work, so heat resistant had her body become.*

*I was even more shocked when she leaned forward and clamped down onto a rod of glowing iron with her jaws directly! Sparks flew as she chomped several times in rapid succession, her mandibles acting as hammers to compress and fold the metal.*

*Nor did she stop the motion of her obviously enchanted hammer during this motion. The more I watched, the more I felt I wasn't looking at a smith, but an entity who had designed its entire being around metalwork. She had moulded every aspect of herself to better suit her chosen field.*

*Without a mage present, I couldn't speak directly to this remarkable individual, but Emilia offered to translate for me and I was most eager to learn more.*

*"Can you ask her what she's working on now?" I led with.*

*Always go for the safe questions first, readers!*

*To my eye, the ant before me didn't respond in any way, even after Emilia turned towards her and (I assume) began to speak.*

*"She is attempting to perfect a new archetype of heavy armour. Specifically, the Mark 10 Layered Armour, Immortal edition."*

*"Mark 10?"*

*"Yes. She has developed nine previous versions of this particular armour, I believe. I must confess, Ms Tolly, I am not too certain of the technical aspects."*

*"What specifically does she mean by 'Immortal edition'?"*

*"I can answer that. The Immortals are a particular heavy armour division of the Colony. They are famed for their durability, to the point that legend holds that only one has ever died in battle."*

*Every army in the world has these sorts of stories, but for some reason I always give them more weight when I hear them in the Colony. The ants do not seem to have the capacity to lie.*

*"Can you ask her why she decided to become an armour smith?" I ask. "I am most fascinated as to why she chose this path."*

*A brief pause as the two confer and then Emilia comes back to me.*

*"Armour is good, a carapace is also good, why not combine the two? Would it be possible to create a methodology that would make an armoured ant not a hindrance, but more than twice as durable?"*

*I blinked.*

*"Is it? Possible, I mean."*

*"She says, of course, that is what I did."*

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 960: Running Amok**

The first day in the third stratum was the worst. Along with Crinis, Tiny and Invidia, I rushed about trying to put out fires and help the Colony in every way that I could. We took part in the siege of a city, overrunning the defenders in spectacular style, leaping from a pillar that rose ten kilometres high. I left the duel with the city lord to our resident demon overlord though, I don't want to tangle with any more tier sevens if I can help it.

Bit of a silly thought considering there's even stronger demons running amok beneath us, but there it is.

Speaking of Brixin, I don't think I've ever seen a happier demon. With the territory that she controls expanding by the day, her smile was just as wide as her dial. The might of the colony was allowing her to indulge in her obsession for conquest and expansion to the fullest. It wouldn't last forever, or even much longer I think, but for the time being she was happy as a clam.

All well and good. With the city conquered, we didn't rest on our laurels, rushing back down and tearing off to find something else to fight. The Colony has continued to target demon cities that border along the area claimed by the Ka'armodo, which has only exacerbated tensions between us. Border skirmishes are becoming more common and both sides are exerting more pressure every day.

My family has been busy whilst I've been down below grappling with the termite menace. The number of cities seized by the Colony has reached twelve. Twelve! That represents a ridiculous amount of space within the Dungeon, a huge swathe of territory, along with the resources contained within.

The industrial arm of the Colony can be seen everywhere we go. Mines are springing up. Way stations are being constructed inside the mountain sized pillars that rise from the endless plains. Vast smelting operations are being established in the major hubs and every single city is getting its own nest constructed around the base of the pillar. None of them are quite as absurdly sized as the original around Roklu, the scale of that thing is utterly bewildering, but they are still massive.

If they actually get completed, I don't see how anyone is ever going to remove us from the land that we've taken. I mean, are you actually going to go inside those hills and fight us? You aren't coming out, I can guarantee you that!

No sooner we show our faces along the border than we run into a small patrol from the Ka'armodo side, two young lizards and their attendants marching back and forth on our side of the invisible line that separates our territory.

Obviously they would dispute that, but we've had enough of being pushed around by them. The proxy war that they've started on the fourth has put all of us ants on edge. We no longer are willing to tolerate their nonsense.

Despite posturing arrogantly, it doesn't take much for us to run this small squad off with their tails between their legs. A squad of tier six monsters is no joke. When all four of us reach tier seven, it'll take something pretty serious to prevent us from doing what we want, at least up here.

Thinking about it, will I even be able to stay up here when I evolve? I think the mana level would be fine, tier sevens are fine here after all, but what about the Call? As it is, I can't really tolerate it, not forever, but if it gets any worse... I may never be able to come back here.

BAH!

No negative thoughts allowed! The Colony has embarked on an unprecedented campaign of buttocks kicking and I shall channel that spirit! The Call shall be kicked, along with the Ka'armodo, the termites, the Ancients, and anyone else who wants a piece of this business district!

Anthony doesn't back down!

Except when the lizards come back with a patrol of ten Ka'armodo, several of them the older type with extra arms, and almost fifty Setsulah. In that case, I backed all the way down and high tailed it back to safety.

It's nice that they want to show they take me seriously, but do they need to bring out *that* many? That's overkill dammit! Even if I tried to nuke them with a gravity bomb, there's a chance that they'd be able to break it apart before it could detonate. Even if they couldn't, with that many mages they could shield themselves for sure.

Day one ended with me and the crew hunkering down in a still under construction nest to get some shuteye, something that was exceptionally difficult for me given the pain I'm in.

Eventually I manage to get a little open-eye, at least to refresh me a little.

When I shock myself awake, I take a moment to stretch out the kinks and clean my antennae. I really need to take a break at some point and look at my mutations and skills. I've fallen into a poor habit of not bothering to check my status page on a regular basis, but the upgrades to my important skills come so far apart these days, it's hard to work up the motivation.

I can remember a time when every skill point, every little crumb of Biomass felt like a milestone. Now I need to stack up hundreds of Biomass before I can achieve much, mutation wise.

It's depressing in a way.

But no matter! The spirit is strong and I shall overcome!

... once I get back to the fourth. Right now, I can't concentrate properly given the incessant yanking on my guts.

When we get out and about, it doesn't take long before we find some trouble to throw ourselves at. A scout returned to the nest whilst I was napping and reported suspicious movements from the lizards over the border. Perhaps they're going to pull something now that they know I'm here? A show of strength, of some sort?

Or maybe they just want to lure me out and kill me given the trouble I've caused them. I wouldn't put it past them...

Might as well go and find out.