

Chrysalis 1101

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Chapter 1101: The Deepest Lore

Let it be written here and in no other volume. In these pages, find the collected wisdom of the Cults on the subjects of our reverence.

This page deals with the domains of the Ancients and what little is known. Though none have seen these hallowed places with their own eyes, shards of information have been gathered in other ways, through interrogation of monsters who may have some connection to the Great Ones, through examination of ancient documents or forensic inspection of records provided by our founders.

Despite the best efforts of our collective Cults, by far the best source is the interpretation of dreams.

Through the centuries, high ranking members across Pangera have experienced strangely detailed dreams of the Ancients and their domains. Only when networked together did we arrive at the realisation that these may be more than just figments conjured by imagination, but rather glimpses at a reality we should never see.

How or why these visions occur, there are none who can postulate a valid theory, yet it is the view of the collective Cult that they are real. Here we record for posterity and the eyes of the Hierophants what we have learned, and the holy names bestowed on the domains of the Ancients.

Yarrum the Eternal Worm

In the realm of Yarrum, there is only the worm.

Theorazzn of the Decaying World

A sense of the Decaying World can be seen in the fifth stratum, which, for unknown reasons, the Ancient coloured with its touch many years ago. That blighted place is inimical to life, yet the realm of Theorazzn is beyond even that, a nightmare realm where the air itself drips with deadly toxins. Without proper protection, living creatures are melted to nothing in seconds, decaying into bones that last less than a minute before rotting away.

Syssernix the Dark Spear

Evershade, a realm of almost total and perpetual darkness, is where Syssernix holds domain. Teeming with sightless monsters of terrible power that swim through the shadows like fish in the sea. In the deepest and darkest pools, Syssernix makes her resting place, a coral fortress that none dare enter.

Morribolg of the Fetid Earth

The Living Bog is the realm in which Morribolg makes its home. Saturated in Water and Earth mana, the Bog is bursting with life, and death. The roots of trees curl around bones of long dead monsters, locking them away from reclamation by the Dungeon. Deep in the centre, Morribolg dwells, a living mound of mud that will never let go of anything it touches. Anything that lives within this realm suffers under the suffocating pressure the Ancient exerts.

Carriflare the Hell Flame

Dreams of Carriflare are dangerous. Even in sleep, several members of the Kindling Cult have had their eyes burned out, a terrible price to pay for a glimpse of this god. Within Allfire, Carriflare holds domain. A place of eternal flame, there is nothing within the place that does not burn, even mana. All monsters in this place have adapted to be either creatures of fire, or to survive whilst perpetually being seared by their environment.

Rigorite the Mountain Breaker

A world of metal. Iron mountains, steel rivers, tungsten trees, platinum grass, and other, rarer metals infused with mana make up the realm of Rigorite. A mountainous beast of irresistible strength, the Ancient cuts through its realm like a knife. None of the monsters, the most physically resistant in all the Dungeon, can resist the power of Rigorite. Named for the material of its construction, Metalforge breaks, but is never broken.

Tarriflyx the Hunger

A brother who glimpsed the realm of Tarriflyx awoke screaming to find they had gnawed off their own arm in their sleep. The aura of dreadful starvation that emanates from the Ancient has warped reality itself in this place, creating the Crag of Famine. A blasted wasteland of rock and rent stone, no monster who dwells within can ever be sated. They must fight and eat, always, lest their own stomachs gnaw them from the inside.

Within a crack in the earth, Tarriflyx dwells, ready to drag any who come too close into its dreadful maw.

Arconidem the Demon God

Arconidem resides within the Demon Palace, a grand edifice in which he sits on his living throne, surrounded by his court. Powerful demons each and every one, his court is sustained only by their proximity to the god, for they cannot hope to contest the monsters who spawn within those hallowed halls.

Zothoth Who Feasts on Sanity

All who have dreamt of the realm of Zothoth have gone mad. What little we know has been gathered through the dedicated work of the Cult of Asylum, interpreting the gibberings of those blessed with the vision to piece together a picture of this place. Described as Mind Spike, this realm is a twisted vision of madness. Ever shifting, ever warping, nothing remains the same for long. Atop the Spike, Zothoth makes her home, causing insanity to fall like rain.

Torra the Dread Dog

Wild and unbound, Torra roams the Hunting Grounds when awakened, an oppressive aura of pure terror gripping all unfortunate enough to come near. Dreamers who glimpse the Ancient are known to live in terror for the rest of their lives, screaming and flailing their limbs at the smallest bark. Torra is a solitary hunter with no pack, for no creature can remain in its presence without succumbing to the terror. Even the Hound Cult has no real clue what Torra looks like, since none can look upon it directly.

Gon the Sightless Freak

In the presence of Gon, none may see. Not even in dreams.

Yolesh the Ever Dying

The Ancients' Graveyard is home to Yolesh. Whether the Ever Dying was once defeated and turned into the heart of Undeath it has become, or if that is how it has always been, is unknown. The Ancient's all-consuming aura of death fills the Graveyard. Nothing can die in this place. Not truly. A dreamer saw a vision of himself battling a horror, losing a hand in the combat. The hand animated itself and skittered up his leg, attempting to choke him. In the presence of Yolesh, one would die forever, without ever finding true rest.

Lerrewyn the Grasping Tree

Visions of a lush, ripe, yet rotting forest surrounding an enormous willow have haunted the dreams of the Hanging Cult for centuries. In truth, these visions are a lie. The Willow is real, for that is Lerrewyn herself, the desiccated corpses of monsters drooping down, coiled in her vines. It is the forest that is the lie, for that is also Lerrewyn, her roots having forced their way into the plant monsters of her domain and enslaved them. The Creeping Forest is not an easy place to leave.

Horgran the Butcher

Arising from an ocean of blood, Horgran has raised the Fortress of Flesh. A place of endless gore, the monsters within delight in butchery, but none so much as Horgran. When awake, the Ancient stalks the cavernous halls, hacking apart whatever crosses their path. The Butcher seldom even eats, satisfied with the slaughter alone.

Perrianon of Blood

Winding, narrow veins connected to larger, blood soaked arteries tangled together into a maddened knot form Clotted Heart, the realm of Perrianon. A place of both life and death, the monsters of this place are warped by the contradiction at the heart of the Ancient who dominates them. All bleed, at all times. No ichor, blood or life sustaining substance will remain where it should be.

Kygar the Storm Bringer

The realm of Kygar is known as Stormcloud, for that is what it is. A roiling, boiling cloud charged with such power that anything drawing too close is blasted with lightning as thick as a tree trunk.

In the depths of the cloud, Kygar drifts, surrounded by a hurricane of lightning that follows the Ancient wherever it goes. Powerful creatures hunt within the storm, able to withstand the intense strikes or so swift that they can dodge them. Yet none can approach the Storm Bringer. Even asleep, Kygar is protected.

Ruminominex Shaper of Earth

The Great Mountain claimed by Ruminominex is always in flux, the stone bones deep within shifting according to the Ancient's will.

Even when asleep, dirt and rock will mould themselves around Ruminominex, without any conscious effort on their part.

For this reason, the Great Mountain is a treacherous place to call home. There are no permanent roosts, or caves. At any moment, any tunnel can collapse upon its occupants with the force of a falling mountain. Only those who can survive the extreme pressures live here.

Braxxin who Froze the Sky

The titan known as Braxxin scrapes the roof of its own domain as it stands. From the crown of ice that rests atop the Ancient comes an aura of cold so powerful it permeates the entirety of the Ice Lands. Nothing may move within this realm, save Braxxin. There is no heat, there is no energy, even mana may freeze, falling still within the veins of the Dungeon.

What monsters live here have specialised to the environment, creatures of ice who lie dormant for centuries at a time, waking to hunt only when the Ancient sleeps.

Odren the Father of Monsters

The Cult of Odren, known as the Dungeon Cult, are responsible for the creation of this tome. It is we, who follow the Divine Call of the First, that have stitched the Cults of Pangera together into this, tenuous, cloth.

For that is His will.

To those few who Dream, Odren has appeared in many forms, no two the same. To some, he is a ravenous, enormous beast, feasting on his children through all of time. To others, he has appeared as a wise old man, exhorting them to fulfil his purpose.

The Father of Monsters dwells within the Beast Heart, from which uncounted monsters spring in a never ending tide, pouring into the higher levels of the Dungeon to fight and kill in Odren's name.

They enact his will, as will we.

Always.

- Excerpt from 'Tome of the Hierophants' by Unknown.

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Chapter 1102: The Third Goes to Hell pt 6

I really need to mutate my stomach. After powering through the remains of two tier seven demons, I'm absolutely stuffed. Without my capacity upgrades, it would have been impossible to fit them both in. It's a little saddening that my efficiency upgrades give me absolutely no benefit when eating another monster of my own tier, but such is life. Those mutations exist, but I've gotten far more value from my higher Biomass gain from lower tiered food.

As I flop on my side, still surrounded by my gravity domain, I groan and rub at my distended gaster with my back legs.

"Might have gone a little overboard there," I mumble.

With such Biomass-rich fare on the table before me, it's not like I could possibly hold back. Like a bloated uncle at Christmas time, I kept going back for more until it was all gone.

As I flop, I idly check on my mana and Altar and am delighted to find that my resources are barely going down at all. With my increased gravity mana generation while using gravity mana, I can sustain the domain almost indefinitely. I will eventually run out, but with this spell alone running, I can sustain it for *hours*.

There's enough of the Colony in range to keep the Altar running steady as well. The net result is that I'm able to take some time to digest, undisturbed by the rest of the horde while my three comrades battle fiercely.

It takes them over an hour to finish the fight, but eventually, Tiny, Crinis and Invidia make their way over to me when no more demons remain. Bruised, battered and low on resources, the three of them look absolutely spent.

I stretch my six legs, clean my antennae and stand up.

"Great work, you three!" I congratulate them.

Protectant materialises beside Tiny, looking similarly spent. Her antennae have a definite 'I'm annoyed at you' tilt.

"And of course, great work to you twenty as well!" I say enthusiastically. "A hard fought battle is the best way to rank up your Skills and gain experience. You guys may as well bank some Biomass, and then we'll make our way back to the Colony."

Looking at the field of carnage around us, there should be plenty for all of them to eat.

"Though, I think you need to move quickly...."

If there's one thing that isn't short on the third stratum, it's hungry mouths. Demon larvae are boiling up from beneath our feet constantly, and they aren't picky eaters.

Tiny is already shovelling food into his maw, flicking the little demons off his chosen meals with his salami-thick fingers.

After he evolves again, those fingers will need an even larger food item for comparison... ham, maybe?

All of them rush around the field, stuffing their faces as quickly as they can until they're all full and we depart the field. It's time to get ourselves back up to the Colony.

Invidia and I lift the group up, since climbing isn't all that feasible right now. I have to strain much harder than normal, due to all the extra weight we're carrying, but eventually, we reach the top and crawl into the tunnels.

All of us are feeling lethargic as we digest, so the fighting is sluggish and sloppy to say the least. Thankfully, the demons we meet aren't the strongest and I can swat them away when they get too close.

When we climb up onto the plains of Leng, I feel a sense of safety roll over me. I wasn't truly threatened on our hunt, outside of my fight against the tier sevens, but there's a vast sense of comfort that comes from being back in the lands of my people.

The scent of pheromones is everywhere, trails and markers tingling against my antennae. The Vestibule thunders with energy, the collective will of hundreds of thousands pouring into me in a constant torrent.

[Alright, gang. Let's chill here and digest for a minute. I might as well do a little mutating while I'm here. Crinis, make sure you're prepared for emergency shielding.]

[I'm ready, Master.]

[I can always count on you.]

Tiny snorts loudly.

[And you, Tiny.]

Invidia blinks, slowly.

[And you too, of course.]

Geez. Since when were they all so sensitive? Here in the safety of Colony controlled land, and with the dignity preserved by the dedication of my loyal shadow monster, I dive into the menus and see what I've got going on.

+35 is the maximum I can manage at my current evolution and I've got nothing hitting that prestigious mark at the moment. I think my first order of business should be to ramp up my stomach. After stuffing myself silly, I'm reminded of the importance of ensuring my stomach is as prepared as it can be to accept Biomass.

The question is, what do I improve? So far, I've got a combination of capacity increases and penalty reduction mutations. Either one would be an effective choice right now. I mean, it's hard to go wrong, really. Of the two, the penalty reduction is the most generally applicable, there isn't always enough food to stretch me to capacity, after all.

I flick through the menu, idly scanning for anything else that might be impactful. I mean, I've been through this list a thousand times, so I don't... really... expect to... find... anything?

What the hell is this stuff?!

There are choices here that I've never seen before, I'm sure of it! Why in the hell would new options be popping up now? Some of this stuff looks good, too.

Pocket Dimension stomach, increasing capacity whilst also tucking the stomach away out of the body and in its own space.

Chambered Blitz stomach, adjusting the digestion process to be both faster and more efficient.

Synthesising Stomach Acid, creating additional Biomass from consumed material.

I mean. What the hell?! This stuff is amazing! There's a host of new options, each with crazy, multi-part effects, or new, more potent applications.

I mean, Synthesising Acid? Does that mean I would be like... partially producing my own Biomass?

Wait. Does this mean there are other, new options for my body parts that are available to mutate to +35? Burning with curiosity, I whip open the menu for my carapace and start flicking through it.

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Chapter 1103: The Third Goes to Hell pt 7

Well.... This is going to be interesting.

As it turns out, there *are* new mutation options... crazy ones. Holy moly. What's this all about? Have I ascended to a new stage and at tier seven, you get funky new mutations? Is it the insane level of mana saturation I've been living in lately? Is it the Biomass rich diet of more highly evolved monsters?

A combination of all of the above?

Whatever the case, there's some seriously sweet selections, ripe and ready to be applied to my carapace.

Repelling Carapace - Projects an anti-gravity field around the carapace, pushing foreign objects away.

A literal repellant built into the carapace. It'd be cool, but would likely make it difficult for Crinis to attach herself to me. I don't think selecting that would be good for my health.

Double Carapace - Thickens the carapace. After multiple selections, this mutation will create a complete second layer of your carapace.

That's just stupid! Would anything on Pangera be able to get through that?! Not to mention the cost efficiency. This is effectively giving me an entire new carapace without having to spend evolutionary energy on it! That's just madness!

Trouble is, I'd be way too heavy with that on. My current exo-skeleton weighs tons. I don't mean 'a lot', I mean literal tons.

Mana Infused Carapace - Draws in ambient mana to reinforce and thicken the carapace over time.

That is as sweet as blueberry jam. I wouldn't even have to do anything and the carapace would just strengthen itself. Nice!

I continue to flick through the list, looking at the bevy of new choices and drooling over their incredible effects.

Which to chooooooose? Argh, they're all so good!

I could, of course, go back to my menus and focus on other things, but now that I've seen the incredible power of these new mutation options, I want to get as many as I can.

Eventually, I manage to settle on one that I really like. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it.

Light Holding Carapace - Uses the power of gravity to slow the light reflected from it.

Just delicious. First, it uses the power of gravity without me having to cast a spell, meaning my carapace will always actively be channelling gravity, secondly, the effect is way too cool.

I'll be turning myself into a mini-black hole!

What makes a black hole black? Famously, they have such powerful gravity that not even light can escape their grasp! How does an eye work? Light bounces off stuff and enters the eyeball, which the brain then interprets. What this mutation will do, is make it take longer for the light to bounce off me and enter an eye.

Meaning what people will see when they look at me, is literally an afterimage. They'll be attacking a ghost! Combined with my future-sense and reflexes, I'll be dodging so quick they won't even realise they missed before I'm running off somewhere else!

MUAHAHAHAHAHA!

It's disgusting. It's so powerful, it makes me feel a little sick inside. I love it.

Of course, with just the one mutation, I won't be holding onto that light very strongly. The afterimage effect will likely be a tenth of a second, if that. But if I make it to tier eight, or even nine? After doubling down and then enhancing this mutation, it'll increase the delay. Will it last half a second? Not being able to see me for that long would be insane. I can get a lot done in half a second these days.

Of course, it's not invincible. This is only effective against enemies with eyes, or who use sight as their primary detection method. Mana senses will still be able to pick me out, but I can influence that with my existing Skills, masking my own mana signature. Other, more esoteric methods will also still work, like heat, or heck, even my own gravity sensitive antennae.

With that selection made, I swap over to my stomach again and keep flicking through until I find an option that I like. As much as I want to muck around with other body parts, the stomach is fundamental, the engine that powers the Biomass industry. It *must* be next.

Grav-Compression Stomach - Uses powerful muscles infused with gravitic energy to compact food to a smaller size and density. Increases stomach capacity, increases Biomass gain, increases digestion time.

Heck yeah. Oddly enough, this mutation comes with a downside, but I don't really care about it all that much. I usually feast on the battlefield, which means packing in as much as I can and getting the heck out of dodge. This mutation allows me to pack more in and then get more out of what's in there.

It's perfect.

Of course, the next organ to get the +35 treatment is going to be my inner carapace plating. It makes sense to upgrade it and the carapace at the same time.

Just as with everything else, there's new mutation options available for it once I bring it up to +35. Never-before-seen applications and variations that all do interesting and powerful things.

But I'm not satisfied. If I want to ensure that the Colony is safe against all threats, and if I want to chomp the Ancients down there for putting this hook in me, I can't be satisfied with immediate boosts. I need something that's going to get more and more powerful as I evolve. Something that will really shine after I mutate it two or three more times.

My plating already does the job I first purchased it for exceedingly well. It absorbs shocks and impacts, making me extraordinarily resistant to slam attacks and the like, as well as healing any damage my carapace receives from the inside.

It's amazing!

In addition, it also has the new effect of compressing gravity mana around me, meaning any spell or gravity effect I create gets that little extra boost. That stuff is all amazing, but I'm wondering if there's anything I can do to enhance the effects of the crystal flesh that my plating is now formed from?

Poking through the list, I eventually find something that I'm happy with.

Crystal Kinetic Displacement - Allows the Crystal Flesh to absorb kinetic energy and then shunt it to a nearby space.

Basically, I can absorb kinetic energy, then blast someone else in the face with it from close range.

These mutations are the best.

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Chapter 1104: No Way, No How

Delicious, delicious mutations. Horrible, horrible itch.

How could I describe the itch I experienced when I locked those three in and confirmed them with Gandalf? I'd expected it to be bad, obviously. The moment the wizened, gruff tones of the grey one faded away, I had braced myself for the worst.

It turns out, my understanding of 'worst' was appallingly incorrect.

I felt as if my itches had itches of their own. The first itch, unaccustomed to the sensation, took out its rage and discomfort on me, by itching ever harder. My carapace and plating cover my entire body, so this feeling covered every inch of my outside.

The moment it started, Crinis shielded me from the world, and I flung myself to the ground and engaged in a vigorous rolling session. It did not help.

I tried to use mind magic on myself, to overwhelm my senses with false impressions so I couldn't feel it. That didn't work either. Ultimately, I was forced to surrender to my fate, and thrash uncontrollably until it was over.

The intensity of the itch is related to the sophistication of the mutation, I've known that for a long time. Having my antennae sense the future was a heck of a lot more itchy than having them sense heat. These new mutations are crazy, involving powerful forces and weird dimensional stuff. It stands to reason that having my body change to house these new effects would be an intense experience.

Should have thought of that before I'd done it....

Too late now! Having dealt with that, I check my remaining Biomass and find there isn't enough for much more significant mutating. I'd love to upgrade my Nave and Altar, but without enough to significantly boost the two of them, I'd run the risk of not properly considering them as a pair.

Better to wait and then mutate the two of them in tandem. The more I use the new Altar, the better I understand what it can do, and what I want it to do better. There's no rush, especially when I won't get

a second shot at these mutations. The Altar is already made of a top tier material, or at least, as top tier as I can afford. It's unlikely I'll ever reset it.

With that done, I race over to the main nest beneath Roklu to have a word with my favourite three rock-coated people in the world. I really need to know what's up with these funky new options.

[You're pretty much on the right track,] Granin rumbles, scratching at his cheek with one granite covered finger. [Mana plays a part, Biomass richness plays a part. The main thing is your core. A Mythic core can sustain a more powerful and demanding body than a weaker one. Your monstrous form is constantly absorbing and draining mana in order to keep yourself... doing anything, really. Unlike a natural animal, you're totally dependent on mana to keep yourself alive. With the abundance of energy flowing through that fancy new core of yours, you can sustain much more demanding mutations.]

[Then why do they only show up at +35?] I demand. [I had the core already, so why couldn't I pick them from +0?]

[Because only a tier seven monster can get to +35,] Granin harrumphs impatiently. [I can't explain it any better than that.]

Fair enough I suppose.

[How are you finding your current evolution?] Corun asks, eager, like an eight foot tall, ore covered puppy. [You're a mythic monster now, so you should notice a significant jump in power.]

I scratch at my head with one antenna.

[I guess so. Using my new... abilities, I've been able to fight pretty evenly with the other tier sevens I've run into. Though I'm not sure if any of them were mythic.]

[They probably weren't,] Torrina shakes her head. [Basically every tier eight monster is a mythic, but not many tier sevens are. Without a strong enough core to fuel their evolutions, they end up outpaced and defeated by monsters with more concentrated cores. If they'd had the same level of evolutions as you, then I think you might have found them a little more challenging.]

[How many did you fight out there?] Granin asks, curious. [I'd heard you'd smashed one when rescuing the Queen, but what about on this trip out?]

[Three.]

Granin nods, looking a touch impressed for once.

[I'm surprised you found that many and fought them in one outing. Your evolution is paying dividends already.]

[At once.]

....

He looks up at me. I look down at him.

[What do you mean, 'at once'?] he growls in my mind.

[What do I mean? Is... is there another meaning to the phrase I'm not aware of? Where are you getting confused?]

[You're telling me that you fought three tier sevens at once?]

[Yes.]

[Tier seven demons.]

[Yup.]

[And beat them?]

[... Would I be alive if I hadn't?]

[You could have run away!]

[But then I wouldn't get to eat them!]

After a moment, Granin manages to calm himself and shares a significant look with the other two. They seem solemn all of a sudden. Dammit. I should have kept my mandibles shut.

[Nope!] I exclaim over the mental link.

[What do you mean, "nope"?] Corun asks, surprised.

[I refuse to be an Ancient, thanks, baiiiiiiiiiii!]]

I turn and run. No way, no how am I getting dragged into their shenanigans. All I want to do is keep my family safe. Everything else is meaningless if you ask me.

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Chapter 1105: Beyond Projections

The Cults have competed for thousands of years, attempting to craft the most superior monster, one with the potential to become an Ancient in its own right.

Such a thing was a dream within a dream, yet it is our purpose. I myself strove for over a century at this very task. I am proud of the work that I did, and the monsters I created were strong, surprising a number of my peers with their capabilities.

A key argument, and one I have listened to and participated in many times, is which sort of monster makes the best base. Should we be using beast archetypes from the first stratum? Or taking advantage of the many special properties shadow monsters possess? Perhaps demons, with their inherent advantages and mana rich bodies, are a better starting point?

Ultimately, the discussion boils down to the simple realisation that the deeper in the Dungeon a monster starts, the stronger it is at tier one, and therefore the stronger it will become as it evolves. Therefore, if you aren't trying to craft an Ancient from the very best materials, ie, the most powerful monster from the deepest layer of the Dungeon you can find, then you are wasting your time.

Yet I now believe we were chasing shadows. I often considered my peers to be foolish in their beliefs, but I rarely considered the same true of myself.

The ant, Anthony. From where does he gain his unique strength? What made him such an incredible specimen?

My theories to this point have been well documented in other places, but now I wonder if there is more to it. Perhaps the act of descending is a key component of his development. Would he have become as strong as he did, if he had not powered down through the layers as he had?

All monsters are compelled to descend by the increasing demands of their cores, but usually, they would do so slowly, as slowly as they could. Better to dominate the third as a tier seven or even tier eight, holding on as long as possible, only then descending to the fourth in relative safety, than rush headlong into danger.

Yet Anthony always rushed headlong into danger. He descended too fast, before he was ready.

The Dungeon rewards such actions. He soaked in more mana, and richer Biomass, at a lower point of evolution than any monster raised by the Cults. I've no evidence to back up this theory, but I put it forward nonetheless.

- From the writings of Granin to the Cult of the Worm.

The three golgari shapers stood in silence for a moment as the giant ant rushed into the distance, followed closely by his entourage of overly powerful pets.

It was easy to forget how large Anthony was now. He'd evolved twice since they'd first met him when he was a tier five. Back then, it had been easy for Granin to look him in the eye; the golgari was close to eight feet tall, after all. Now, the ant towered over him, not to mention his length, which vastly outstripped his height.

"Did he say what I think he said?" Corun wondered.

"He must have had help," Torrina said hesitantly. "With Tiny and the others, he would've been able to fight on par with three tier sevens...."

Granin shook his head.

"Not here. Let's get back inside and discuss in the office."

The Colony was understandably sensitive about their Eldest. He and his triad were tolerated because Anthony confided in them and because they provided a valuable service, sharing their research and knowledge freely with the ants. But standing out in the open and running their mouths about Anthony would be a severe faux pas.

The three made their way inside in silence, moving through the wondrous, carved halls and impossibly graceful stairs until they reached their allocated rooms toward the top of the nest.

"I still don't know why they worked so hard on this section," Torrina shook her head, "the ants themselves basically never see it."

Granin shrugged, but Corun agreed with her.

"I've seen the interior sections they use. They're nowhere near this elaborate."

The outer layers of this nest had been built for... non-ants. Humans and humanoids, as well as one portion designed with the ka'armodo in mind... just in case. The craftants had lavished the many floors set aside for anyone else to use with the very best of their attention. It was ridiculous that they even had artisans with the Skills to produce such works. They hadn't even been alive that long!

They filed into their office and Granin closed the polished wooden door behind them.

"If he'd had help, or relied on the other three to help him, he would have said so straight away," Granin declared firmly.

The other two considered for a moment, then nodded. If he could divert the attention or acclaim onto someone else, then he surely would at the very first opportunity. They'd known Anthony long enough to understand that.

"Which means..." Corun led.

"That he fought three other tier seven monsters, demons, and defeated them in battle, at the same time, by himself."

Which was... absurd.

"That's... not how it works," Torrina said hesitantly.

None of them believed the giant ant had been lying to them, though, so obviously, it *did* work that way. They just didn't understand *how*. They'd determined that ants reaching higher tiers were rewarded with powerful evolutions, but they were still handicapped. The boost they received from their above average evolutions should have helped to even the playing field, not let them blow straight past the competition.

"I'd projected Anthony to start pushing ahead of his peers in another evolution, maybe two," Granin said slowly. "With the bonuses he's been stacking up, and the rare mutations he's obviously been taking, it hasn't taken nearly that long. He's already a powerful mythic monster and he's not even tier eight."

Yet.

"If he can do this now. What will he be able to do then?" Corun wondered.

The three let their imaginations run wild for a moment before Granin called their attention back.

"Things are starting to accelerate out of control," Granin said. "Anthony is a candidate for the twentieth Ancient. He has the potential, he has the backing, and he has the approval of the Ancients themselves, evidenced by the Call. He's already become something extraordinary."

"We need to inform the Cult," Torrina said.

Corun hesitated.

"Are you sure that's wise? Wouldn't we be betraying Anthony's trust if we start advertising his strength all over Pangera?"

"We're likely already too late for that," Granin remarked drily. "Our scaly friend is likely to have informed the Red Truth the moment he got home. But that's irrelevant," he waved a hand to brush off that concern. "The stronger he grows, the more danger he will be in. The Cults can help alleviate that.

We are all over the world, after all. A monster with this kind of potential only comes around every few hundred years. We need to ensure we put all of our resources behind him.”

Chrysalis

Chapter 1106: Crouching Demon, Hidden... Demon

Odin skulked amongst the larvae that covered the ground. Now knee deep, the newborn demons were even more frenzied than normal, hacking and tearing at each other with wild abandon.

He'd been one of them not that long ago, it was difficult to remember that sometimes. Weak, having to climb up over his own kind in order to survive. Just like his life as a human.

Idly, he wondered just how many larvae were spawned across the entire stratum in an hour. Billions? Trillions? Breaking a few eggs to make an omelette was one thing, but the inefficiency in this process was almost offensive to him.

Loss of life was something Odin could relate to, given his previous line of work, but each death was supposed to be significant. It should mean something, when a creature dies. Most of these larvae wouldn't make it past tier two, and none would remember them, or even notice their passing.

Getting melancholic. Focus on the job, he admonished himself.

Lowering his frame, he turned his head from side to side, imitating the sweeping hunter's gaze that evolved demons adopted on the plain. Despite appearances, he only had eyes for the ants.

They were everywhere. *Everywhere.* Groups combed through the larvae like gold-hunters with metal detectors, every now and again snatching up a specimen and examining it. The lucky, or unlucky demon was either placed back with the others, or stowed carefully in a bag, thrashing like a wild... demon.

Ants travelled in huge lines, thousands of them, following trails just like an ant on Earth would, except these were even more orderly. They carried all sorts of things; metals, ores, Biomass, cores, shipping materials from distant parts of the Plains and pouring them into the gigantic nest that loomed in the distance. It was as if that immense structure were a monster itself, all the wealth and resources that could be gathered for kilometres around were flooding toward it in a ceaseless flood.

Odin was sure he could see them scuttling about on the roof overhead, though what they might be doing up there was beyond him.

Every time a group seemed as if it might come nearby, he would shift his direction, moving away from them without seeming to. A cold, tense feeling coiled around his monstrous guts, a sensation that he had felt only a few times before.

When he'd been ordered to infiltrate the Mariachi gang, he'd posed as a travelling guitarist doing roof repairs to make ends meet. With his sombrero and ladder, he'd made his way into their compound and found himself surrounded on all sides. The ranchera of death drifted from every window and each time light flashed on a sequined vest, he'd felt he had breathed his last.

That same feeling gripped him now. He was deep in ant territory, within the seat of their power. To reach even this seemingly innocuous position, he'd been required to slip past numerous patrols, several mines, six construction projects and what appeared to be a tea plantation.

All in pursuit of that ultimate power that might set him free.

To overcome the demons who had claimed him, and the grip of Arconidem on his soul, Odin needed help. He wasn't accustomed to needing help, but here, in this world, where the rules weren't fully understood, he needed to adapt. If that meant clutching onto the leg of a powerful ant, then that's exactly what he would do.

Over there!

As he swung his head in that sweeping gesture once more, he caught a glimpse of what he'd been hoping to see. Easy to pick out, even when surrounded by others of the same species, the giant ant moved over the plains like a King. Or Queen, probably, considering the norms involved.

Closely in tow were the three monsters he had seen following the creature before. Each was powerful, stronger than he, maybe, but they were nothing compared to what he saw in the one they followed.

There was a gravity to that ant that pulled him in, an unspoken authority and strength that grabbed hold and refused to let go. He could see it in the other ants as well. When the giant one passed them, they would turn, ever so subtly, to watch it go, before straightening and going about their business.

Backed by a society as powerful as this one, this was exactly what he was looking for.

Odin stalked carefully across the plains. Calculating the path of the monster, he angled himself carefully to intercept, but not too closely. This group of four had quite the appetite from what he'd seen. Every strong demon they came across was obliterated in a matter of moments. That would be his fate, if he wasn't careful.

As he moved with perfect nonchalance, every inch the prowling demon looking for prey, he watched the group's movements, and considered his next steps.

There were several ways he could play this, depending on the outcome that he wanted most. If he could devise a way to bring the ant and the demons who plagued him into a direct confrontation without revealing himself, that may be for the best. If the ant was victorious, then he would be free to go about his own business without owing favour.

He could attempt to intervene more directly, reveal himself to the ant and guide it into the conflict. Posing as the helpful messenger, he could reveal the danger and provide advice. The issue with this approach was that he lacked mastery of the magic that allowed him to converse with others. If demon speech existed, he did not know it, so how could he speak to this ant?

Would it even be interested if he did? The ants worked with some demons, that much he knew from observation, but it was a giant risk to take.

No.

Better to play it safe and remain in the shadows, that's where he, Odin the feared assassin, was most comfortable. Decision made, he nodded to himself and then glanced about.

The ant had drifted close, too close for comfort, he would need to adjust his angle. The small demon hovered over its dark carapace, along with the black blob of... something. Good, they hadn't gone far.

Wait. Where was the ape?

Odin reacted just in time to block as a lightning-covered fist smashed into his side. The electricity ripped through his body, causing his muscles to spasm and lock even as his demonic bones creaked from the force of the impact.

Too careless!

He should have been focused like a razor's edge, not considering the future! An idiotic mistake that would cost him dearly.

The giant ape looked surprised that his target hadn't evaporated after that punch. After a moment of consideration, the massive beast's expression shifted to one of eager joy as a broad grin split his features and he pounded his two fists together.

A battle fanatic. Odin had fought this type before. There was only one thing to do.

Acting swiftly, he rose up to his full height, revealing his blades, letting the shine ripple across the bone-swords. As the ape took one bold step forward, Odin gathered strength in his legs and leapt.

A mighty leap!

He flew through the air majestically, covering dozens of metres in one bound, twisting and drifting like an acrobat armed with a dozen blades.

He landed perfectly, directly in front of the giant ant, kneeling on the ground in supplication, his demonic face pressed into the burning rock.

The ant reared back slightly in surprise and Odin felt a flicker of joy as a mind reached out to his own.

[What in the heck?!] a surprisingly young voice rang in the assassin's mind.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1107: An Unexpected Visitor

The demon glides through the air with such exquisite grace, only to land in a perfect kneeling posture in front of me. I'm surprised, to say the least, and reflexively lash a bridge together so I can communicate with this odd specimen.

[Are you *bowing*?] I ask after my initial exclamation.

This seems very much an Earth thing to do. I can't recall seeing demons bow to each other, regardless of the circumstances. Unless this is some as yet unseen custom of the denizens of the third stratum, then something different is going on here.

[I wanted to speak with you, so I drew close, too close. I gathered the attention of your... associate... and have been forced to reveal myself in order to preserve my life.]

Something about the way the demon spoke, a calm, deep and somewhat quiet voice, told me that he didn't necessarily believe what he said. As if he actually thought he would have a chance against Tiny.

[You think you could take him on?] I say, flicking my antennae to the grumpy looking ape approaching from the side.

[Of course not,] comes the immediate reply.

Again, the tone I got seemed to imply something entirely different. I'm half tempted to throw the demon into a fight with Tiny right away, just to show him what for, but I decide against it. That isn't important right now.

[You are speaking only to me at the moment,] I assure the still kneeling demon, [so you can speak freely. I have to ask... this wouldn't happen to be your second life, would it?]

I watch closely for any reaction, but the demon, with his face pressed into the ground, gives nothing away. Not even a twitch. Fortunately, his body language isn't the only way for me to gain information. The mind bridge connecting us is more than just a channel for communication. As my skill at handling this particular connection and mana has grown, I've been able to glean more from even a simple bridge such as this.

What I detect in that mind is a rapid, lightning fast churning of thoughts as the demon considers how to respond. He's cycling through possible responses like a computer, weighing options, considering outcomes and trying to find the best possible course of action with least risk.

This guy is seriously working his brain right now! I'm surprised I don't see steam coming out of those ears.... I'm kind of befuddled, to be honest. What is he so worried about? I decide to make it easy on him.

[I was originally from Earth,] I confide to him in a hushed whisper, [died and was reborn here as an ant. I presume you experienced something similar? And were reborn as a demon larva?]

If anything, the bubbling churn inside that mind *increases* rather than the opposite. His thoughts are practically boiling in there! I goggle at the back of the demon's head as he keeps it pressed into the ground. What the heck are you thinking about in there?

Almost involuntarily, I raise an antenna high into the air and bring it down swiftly. A good THWACK will teach this demon to straighten out his mind!

Except, my blow doesn't land as I intend. As if he has eyes in the back of his head, the demon slides back rapidly, using his blade arms to get himself out of the way. A magnificent dodge, especially considering he couldn't see me, but things don't unfold quite like that.

Gifted with foresight, I know the dodge is coming and instinctively adjust my aim.

THWACK!

The demon seems stunned to have been hit, lifting his head up for the first time since that remarkable leap, but I don't give him any time to think.

[Stop twisting your thoughts around in your head and answer the question honestly! Sheesh. Your mind is so crooked, it's like you were a legendary assassin or something.]

The demon grows still.

[You... can see my thoughts?]

I realise then that it may be considered a breach of privacy to peer into the activity of another person's brain-zone. A little too late for that epiphany.

[Not really. A bit. No. Sort of.]

Silence....

[I can sorta sense how your mind is moving through the bridge that connects us. I can't see your exact thoughts or memories or anything of that sort.]

[You... can't... see my memories?]

[No! Of course not. I mean... well... I *could*, if I used a mind spike and invaded your brain... but I'm not going to do that! So you can relax. I shouldn't have hit you, and I apologise for that, but I could tell you were looking for the most advantageous answer. Just give me the real one, and we won't have any problems.]

The demon eyes me for a minute, and I can sense his thoughts moving in slow, deliberate circles until finally he nods.

[I was a human,] he admits, [from Earth, like you. My name is Odin Malum. I was reborn here in this place... not that long ago, I can't tell how long. I'd rather not talk about my last life if I can help it. I want to focus on this one, if possible.]

Immediately, my heart warms to the little demon and I scuttle forward to tap him on the shoulder with one supportive leg. Man, he must have had it *rough* on Earth. I mean, my situation wasn't ideal, but I get a feeling this Odin chap had a real hard time.

[I get you, man, I totally get you. Supposedly, the Dungeon only picks out people who had a sucky life and went a bit crazy on Earth anyway. Don't feel too bad about it. Apparently, normal people don't really cope when thrown into the Dungeon.]

[So... there are more of us? Is every monster a reborn human?]

[Heck no! We're super rare. You're like the... fifth I've met? There's me, Sarah, Jim, the Mother Tree and you. And, uh, Garralosh, I guess. I'm sure there are more of us out there, but I haven't come across them.]

There's a lot there to take in, but the demon seems to latch onto one piece of information in particular.

[How do you know the Dungeon only takes in crazy people? Where could you have learned that?]

[From Gandalf.]

He looks at me a little oddly and takes a slow step away, letting my leg fall back to the ground.

[Hey! Oi! That's what I call him since he won't give me a name. When I evolve, I get a little window of time to exchange words with him. Haven't you experienced something similar?]

Sarah hasn't evolved for literally decades, so who knows what her experience will be like the next time around. The Mother Tree sure isn't going to talk to me about her time evolving, so I'm super keen to hear what Odin's is like.

He shivers. Which isn't a good sign.

[No, I didn't speak to any... wizard. I spoke to Arconidem, the Demon God. He... took over my mind. I can feel him now, battering at me, trying to dominate my will.]

Oh. Snap.

[You spoke to Arconidem?! The Ancient?]

I better not let any of those Red Truth lizards find out about this guy. They will lose their cold-blooded minds. At least he hasn't spoken to Yarrum. Granin would be sprinting over here already, having somehow sensed the name of his great and glorious worm... god... thing.

But right now, there is something much more important. I lean forward intently.

[Odin Malum. Tell me. Did you speak to Arconidem?]

He shudders once more, but then, the demon nods. This is good.

[The next time you evolve, I need you to do a favour for me. When you come face to face with him, there's something you have to say to him for me.]

The demon looks a little bewildered by this request. I can tell going face to face with the Ancient again isn't exactly what he wants to be doing.

[W-what do you want me to say?]

I click my mandibles decisively.

[Tell him... that he's a butt.]

Odin stares at me. I stare back.

[A butt.... You want me to tell the demon god... that he's a butt.]

[Yes please.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1108: The Demon Way

Among demonkind, there are as many different species as there are tunnels in the Dungeon. As with any distribution among a monster-type, some are common, while others are exceedingly rare.

The reasons for this are worthy of a dissertation of their own, but in brief, some species are more stable, leading to a higher survival rate, some are weaker at earlier stages of evolution, leading to a lower survival rate, and some require a unique inclination within the monster itself to come about. There is also a great deal of nuance between Demon species that not all delvers appreciate.

A Murder Demon and a Slaughter Demon are superficially the same. Both are Obsessed with death and must fight and defeat others to satisfy their obsession. A short moment of consideration will reveal the differences, and which is more dangerous. A Slaughter Demon is never satisfied, its obsession never fulfilled, and is therefore much more dangerous to be around.

The most deadly of all demons are those that are rare, with obsessions that drive them to endanger others.

War Demons are a common tier seven Demon that is feared for good reason. They seek conflict always, never happier than when they are engaged in a large scale battle in which they rule.

Far more terrifying is the Massacre Demon. Evolved from the Slaughter Demon, this species is truly monstrous in its methods.

The Sanguine Demon, an evolution of the Blood Demon, is exceedingly rare, and incredibly deadly, able to exert power over vital fluid in any organism that draws close, even monsters.

Perhaps the most deadly of all demons, is the line of Ash. From the Burning Demon at tier five, to the Ash Demon at tier six, and then the Destruction Demon at tier seven, these monsters embody the power of destruction that hides within the ash of the third stratum. Even being near them can cause a monster to begin to break apart.

Needless to say, they are best avoided by any delving team.

- Notes for the Union Third Stratum guide book, provided by Odessus.

Odin didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to *think*. He had seen the Demon God, and it was clear that Anthony had not. Almost against his will, the visage of that horrifying monster flashed in his mind.

Arconidem was huge, massive beyond all sense of proportion. A larval demon larger even than the ant before him, its fang-filled grin flickering red from the light cast by the burning pools of lava. His two long arms were tipped with claws that smoked from the heat burning within. The Demon God rested atop an enormous throne that radiated with power, formed of bone and flesh. For that was no simple chair, but a part of his body, the four legs shifting, clawed feet shredding the ground every time they moved.

He hadn't been physically present at that time, so it was hard to say just how large Arconidem was. If Odin had to guess, he would say the Demon God sat fifty metres from the ground, the back of his throne reaching far, far higher.

Closer to a building than a monster.

And this ant wanted him to say *what!?*

[I can tell what you're thinking,] Anthony said.

Odin recoiled internally, though he showed no outward reaction.

[I thought you weren't reading my mind.]

[There is absolutely no need. You think I'm an idiot, and that you would be an idiot to do what I suggested.]

That was true.

[You have to agree, though, he's a massive butt. Just look what he's doing to the demons!] The ant swept an antenna in a wide loop, indicating the mess of larvae around them. [Well, he's doing it to you, too, come to think of it. The whole point of the demon monsters is to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their obsession. That's all they want in life. But are they allowed to? No! Arconidem is raining on that parade and forcing you to do what *he* wants. That defeats the entire point! Hence, he is a butt, and someone should tell him so.]

Odin just stared.

He didn't understand most of what the ant said, though he did understand that Arconidem was exerting control, somehow, on an entire species of monster. After long years working in the shadows, Odin had developed certain habits, habits that kept him alive. Right now, he had to battle those instincts, because they wanted to prevent him from getting the answers he needed.

Don't expose weakness! Never reveal ignorance!

In the darker places of Earth, sharks circled above, waiting for the first hint of blood. Then they would descend on the smaller fish, which never ended well for the little guy. For his entire life, Odin had refused to let them get a sniff. Asking a single question would have been a death sentence in certain company.

He hadn't been able to get much information from the powerful demons who had pulled him around, but here in front of him was a font of knowledge about this new world that he could take advantage of. For whatever reason, he felt as if this Anthony would talk until his jaw dislocated, except he didn't have one.

Come on, Odin. You're safe. He isn't going to kill you.

And... somehow... he believed it. He *was* safe. Despite everything, his experiences in his past life and this one, he didn't think Anthony would hurt him.

[...] he forced the words out, almost choking on them as he pushed them from his mind. [... I don't know much about this world. I haven't been here long, and I've been fighting since the moment I was... born.]

[Spawned. You're a monster, champ. You were spawned. Hey, no problems, man. I've been here for what... a year? Do I know everything? No. But do I know enough to fill you in on a few things? Sure.]

[Tell me about Arconidem,] Odin asked.

He needed to know his enemy.

[That butt....] Anthony grumbled. [He's an Ancient. There's nineteen of them, apparently, and they really want there to be twenty. Basically, super powerful monsters who are stuck in the middle of the planet because they need super concentrated mana to survive.]

[So, we're safe from them?]

[Oh, heck no. Wave is coming. When the mana rises, everything is going to go straight to heck.]

That didn't sound promising.

[Stay cool,] Anthony patted him on the shoulder again. [We can keep you safe.]

[Even against Arconidem?] Odin was doubtful.

[Give us a little time. We're quite industrious like that.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1109: The Enemy Within

Tungstant brushed her antennae through her elbow joints, using the fine hairs there to cleanse and refresh her sensitive feelers. After a stressful day on the job, nothing relaxed like a good clean. She revelled in the sensation that spotless antennae gave, that flawless connection with her sense of smell, but only for a moment.

She didn't want to be accused of slacking....

Although, she *did* need to rest sometime soon.

"How long since my last torpor?" she wondered.

Work in the fourth stratum had been going at a furious pace, preparing the fortress for the Eldest's evolution, then for the upcoming wave. The list of jobs that needed doing was never-ending. With all of the new building techniques that were being implemented in this project, there had been several large-scale components that had needed to be torn down and done again. The end result had been a thorax-breaking schedule that had pushed every ant to the limits of their endurance.

"I think I rested yesterday?"

She wasn't sure, which wasn't a good sign. Her thinking was getting a touch sluggish also, another indicator that she lacked rest.

Wait. Were the shadows getting darker?

"Yes! I definitely rested for eight hours yesterday!" she declared boldly, with entirely false confidence.

"Ah... I feel so refreshed. I can't wait for my next torpor!"

The darkness began to recede, much to her relief. Then...

"*Don't lie,*" came a whisper of scent, directly above her head.

"I'll go rest! I'm going now!" she cried and collapsed on the ground, clasping her forelegs together in a pleading gesture.

She couldn't afford to be taken now. There was still so much to finish before the fortress would be ready. With a wave bubbling away in the depths, there was limited time! Surely, *they* understood that and would grant her a little leeway....

They were not known for granting leeway.

When Tungstant looked up, carefully examining the ceiling above her, there was nothing there. The inky blot that had hung, unnoticed, a moment ago, had vanished. *They* actually *were* going to cut her some slack?!

This was unheard of.

Unwilling to let this chance slip, Tungstant determined to sleep immediately. She could get four or five hours in, then be back to work straight after. If *they* took her away, she'd be gone for at *least* eight, and that was time she couldn't afford. *They* may have let her go for now, but if she didn't get at least *some* sleep, *they'd* grab her for sure.

When did they even get here? she wondered.

Crews had been vanishing on the job for days now, in unprecedented numbers. They returned, of course, looking carefully groomed, well rested, and somewhat traumatised by the experience. Members of the Colony had long learned that such things should not be mentioned.

Eyes unseeing. Antennae unsmelling.

The inside of the fortress proper had begun to take shape around the hardened inner core that had housed the Eldest. Wide, clear tunnels with distinct and well-marked lanes swept in graceful loops around the centre, allowing easy access to the districts, each housing grand, interconnected chambers dedicated to every pursuit the Colony engaged in. Which was many.

Exiting the side passage she had been working in, Tungstant made her way onto the main thoroughfare and found a place on it.

"Keep working hard!"

"Don't let up now!"

"Eight hours. Never forget."

"Digging and building, that's the carver way!"

She greeted her castemates, giving them the 'antennae slapping greeting' as the Eldest called it as she passed by. Words of encouragement and endurance were exchanged as they each went on their way.

Many were missing, though. More and more had succumbed lately, vanished into the darkness. It was disrupting work crews and hindering progress. Working tired *did* produce more flaws, so she understood it was a trade off, but she still felt frustrated.

Then a thought struck her.

Hundreds, if not *thousands* of workers had been taken in the past day. She knew the routine and had experienced it herself several times. A comfortable resting place, carapace wax and shine, careful grooming and a tea service were normal parts of *their* routine.

To do all that, to house thousands of ants at once, would take a tremendous amount of space.... Think of the storage needed just for the tea and biscuits. All of the beds... the individual chambers....

It had to be close also. Vanished ants returned close to eight hours later. That meant very little time was used to transport them to and from the resting chambers. Which meant....

They were *inside* the fortress.

Immediately, a dangerous flare of anger sparked inside the little carver's carapace. Meddling with her design?! Adding walls and chambers where none should exist?! This threatened to jeopardise the integrity of the entire project!

Who knew what nooks and crannies *they* had added to the original design without properly understanding it? How *dare they*?

Her legs halted as the horrific implications rattled around in her mind. She caused a brief delay in the flow of traffic, but the ants behind soon began to climb over her and continue on their way as she fumed.

This could not stand!

She turned, shifted to a different track on the ring, and began to rush to the build headquarters. The place was bustling as usual, covered in workers going crazy, the air thick with the pheromones of a hundred different conversations taking place. In the centre of it all, Cobalt was directing traffic, taking in what she needed to and dispensing instructions decisively.

It was always a comfort to know that her sibling and fellow Council member was every bit as capable as she was. So long as one of them was at the helm, the project would be delivered according to their exacting standards.

Cobalt looked surprised when Tungstant rushed into the room and approached her.

"Tungstant? You're finished in the lower tunnels already? I thought you'd be going for a nap right about now."

"I was going to, but then I realised something that we have to talk about *right now*."

The other carver wagged her antennae vaguely in confusion.

"Okay... what is it?"

"Not here," Tungstant hissed, "we don't know who might be listening."

"Okaay."

Glancing around, Tungstant pulled her sibling from the centre of the chamber, shooing away those who went to follow them. Eventually, she managed to squeeze the two of them into a side chamber where they could have some privacy. The room hadn't been finished yet, even the lighting hadn't been installed, shrouding the space in shadow, but it was private.

"We have a serious problem," Tungstant began.

"You look frazzled. When was the last time you rested?" Cobalt asked with concern.

"That's exactly the issue! *Them*."

Cobalt grew still.

“What about... *them*?” she asked quietly.

“Why did I never realise this before?” Tungstant said as she began to skitter back and forth. “So many ants, vanishing and then reappearing so quickly. It wouldn’t be possible without a level of magic that the Colony doesn’t possess, or a network of passages and chambers within the structure itself. They’re here, now, meddling with our design, interfering with the integrity of the fortress! Who knows what they’ve done, what flaws they’ve introduced!”

“Whoa there. You need to slow down a little.”

“I can’t! Why aren’t you more upset about this?! You know just as well as I do how much damage they could cause if they interfere with the construction! If they tunnel through the wrong wall, or thin out the material too much... this entire fortress could collapse around us! We can’t allow this to continue. *They* have to be stopped!”

Cobalt tried to soothe her sister.

“Surely *they* thought about those things. Our designs and instructions aren’t exactly secret, any of the carvers out there could be working on *their* behalf. Everything we don’t want touched, they would know. The models, the diagrams, the design papers, it’s all there to be seen.”

“It’s not enough,” Tungstant mumbled. “Just because *they* can see the design doesn’t mean *they* understand it. The two of us have the highest level Design, Architecture and Construction Skills in the entire Colony. The only way they could ensure they weren’t breaking our plans would be if one of us checked it for them.”

A horrible realisation bubbled up in Tungstant’s mind.

She turned around to find Cobalt staring at her, silent and unmoving.

“But... it’s not possible, right? Neither of us... have seen their modifications. Right? Cobalt?”

Her scent carried a hint of fear at the end, just enough to make her sibling flinch back and avert her gaze.

“You really should have gone to sleep,” Cobalt said softly.

“Wha - “ Tungstant began to say.

Then the black took her.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1110: Rumbings Below

“Look, I said I’m sorry.”

“Don’t talk to me.”

“You’re being silly.”

“Oh am I? The traitor doesn’t like my attitude to their betrayal? I find myself not caring very much. Weird.”

At the word traitor, Cobalt flinched back but her determination didn’t waver.

“*They* were going to build all over the place even if one of us wasn’t involved!” she declared, antennae waving wildly. “Someone *had* to get involved to make sure there wasn’t any damage to the overall design!”

“That’s fine! I’m not worried about that! I assume *they* approached you a long time ago, probably when we were building in the second stratum?” she made it a question and Cobalt nodded. “And you’re right, someone *did* need to make sure the integrity of our projects wasn’t compromised, I’m not upset about *that*.”

Cobalt made an odd figure. She still lay in the ant ‘bed’ tucked in under a rest-promoting enchanted blanket with a soft plushie resting under one leg. Interestingly, it didn’t appear to be the one of the Eldest which Cobalt had seen most often, but rather of the guardian, Tiny. Clearly *they* had decided to branch out with their plushie range.

Despite her gleaming carapace, impeccably brushed antennae and alert eyes, Tungstant looked anything but relaxed. She was irritated, and worse than that, quite hurt by the behaviour of her sibling.

Cobalt squirmed a little. She’d hoped, naively, that this day would never come. Of course Tungstant would figure out what *they’d* been up to. It had only ever been a matter of time.

“Then what *are* you upset about?” she demanded.

Tungstant kicked off her blanket, eyes blazing with outrage. She maintained her grip on the plushie.

“I’m upset that you kept it from me! Why wouldn’t we do this together, just like we do everything else!?”

Her compound eyes glared a thousand times at her sister, who ducked her head in shame.

“I... I thought you wouldn’t... want our work compromised like this. If I took the burden on myself, then you wouldn’t have to worry about it.”

Tungstant swished her antennae dismissively.

“That’s nonsense,” she declared. “If we worked on the adjustments together, then it would still be our work. *That* is why I’m angry.”

Understanding where her sibling was coming from, Cobalt could only apologise once more.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have kept this from you.”

The other carver leaned back into her bed and pulled her blanket up once more.

“As long as you understand,” she huffed. “Now go away. I’m supposed to relax for another hour and you have a lot of work to do.”

“Alright, I will. I’ll see you when you come out?” she asked hopefully.

“Maybe....” came the reply.

It would have to do. Cobalt turned to leave, exiting the chamber and into the pure dark corridors that *they* preferred to move in. She felt better that she’d been able to mend the bridge at least a little with her sibling. They did all their major projects together, and working with Tungstant was the highlight of Cobalt’s day. The thought that it wouldn’t happen anymore after this... betrayal, had been terrifying.

She received a few greetings from *them* as she moved through the tunnels but she didn’t return them. Rather than a fully fledged member of the organisation, she’d been an unwilling collaborator at best. From now on, Tungstant likely would be as well.

They wouldn’t mind. In fact, they’d be delighted to have both of them working on the modifications together. Despite everything, Cobalt believed wholeheartedly that *they* had the best interests of the Colony at heart.

Even if they were... terrifying.

Emerging into the normal sections of the nest, she shook off her negative mindset as best she could and marched back towards the design headquarters. Mana thrummed through the air, rising in density every hour, and the wave would break sooner rather than later.

They had to be ready.

An overwhelming wall of scent buffeted her antennae the moment she stepped into the chamber.

“Cobalt! We need your advice on the south gate mechanism....”

“The digging teams....”

“Construction delays....”

“Materials shortages are making....”

“Spawns in the tunnels....”

“Steel reinforcement....”

“Dungeon vein removal....”

A cacophony of scents washed over her like a wave. Any normal ant would be left gasping by the onslaught, but she was used to such things. After a second to think, she was in amongst them.

“I’ll meet you by the schematics in five minutes, go.”

“Have the digging coordinator report to me as soon as possible.”

“Don’t talk to me about delays, talk to me about the causes for delays.”

“Get in touch with our suppliers in the third stratum and have them provide an inventory. Our knowledge of available stock is out of date.”

“Increase the soldier patrols, I want them at least doubled. Speak to Advant.”

“Have you consulted our manuals for the steel technique? Don’t ask me a question you can get from the plans. Or else.”

“Dedicated teams are performing that work. If they’re behind, ask them why and then let me know.”

Calm and collected, she moved through the crowd, giving direction, advice, technical expertise, and often sent them scurrying for more information. She met with group after group, using their diagrams and technical drawings to explain issue after issue, detail after detail, until each representative understood well enough to take what she had said back to their teams. Once one group was dealt with, another three arrived, and so she was quickly drawn into the never ending cycle that always formed when working on these big construction jobs.

She hoped Tungstant was resting well... she’d likely need a stint with *them* after another few days.

It didn’t take long to fall into the groove, problems finding solutions over and over again as the grand design continued to take shape. She was deeply in discussion with a carver over the engineering involved in their retractable drawbridge project when someone shook her rudely.

“What the heck?” she turned to see a breathless scout with a claw still on her carapace.

“Report from the lower tunnels,” she said, “heat signatures have been detected growing in the walls. The wave will start in just a few hours!”

Cobalt stood stunned for only a second before she snapped to action.

“Have the other council members been notified?”

“Yes!”

“I need you to escort my runners to the dig teams. They need to be out of the lower tunnels in ten minutes. Go.”

She got a quick salute and then the scout was gone, vanishing with her enhanced movement and speed-related skills. Cobalt turned to her own advisors.

“Change in priorities,” she said, “with the wave breaking, we have to ensure the central ring is as secure as possible. I want every available set of mandibles working with the vein removal teams. Once that task is done, we switch antpower to securing gates and wall reinforcement. Every other project is dropped as of this second.”

She glared.

“That means no carvings, engravings or statues. If I find Michaelangelant out there scratching at something, I’ll have her thrown out of the fortress myself. That includes any of her disciples.”

Deep below them, they could feel a vibration building, like a tidal wave rising from the centre of the Dungeon. Soon, it would break and crash into them. They’d either be washed away in an instant or hold their ground.

She would always bet on her family.