

Chrysalis 631

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Chapter 631: The New Construct

The four rank five Skills were melting down and blending together inside my mind, forming a new pool of knowledge that was greater than the sum of its parts. Excitement was bursting inside my heart. What would come of this powerful fusion? My only fear was that it wouldn't reach my expectations. I was forced into grinding for this due to Gravity Mana speciality not showing up in my Skill list after all this time. Before I moved onto the next tier of magic and started grinding away at it, I wanted to secure the best possible foundation I could for the first tier.

A part of me still regretted that I didn't stick it out for the rank six fusion, but grinding for so many levels would take years, time I just didn't have. I could only hope that what I gained here would be enough to carry my magical offense until more powerful options became viable for me.

Judging by the information flowing inside my mind, it just might do! The sheer volume of what was entering and forming was indicating that this fusion was going to reveal something particularly juicy. All I could do was wait. Like pieces slotting into a puzzle, new knowledge slowly took shape, each passing moment making the picture that little bit clearer. When I finally realised just what it was that was forming, I couldn't help but clack my mandibles in appreciation.

Holy moly. This wasn't just juicy, it was a juice *festival*. This was a river formed by the pulping and squeezing of fresh fruits. No getting away from it, I was in juice town.

The fusion took a long time, a period of hours, but what was revealed was well worth the time investment. It was a new type of construct. Every construct was a fiendish, demon puzzle formed of mana that allowed raw, unattributed energy to transform into one of the myriad of types. Forming the construct, maintaining and operating it, consumed one of my brains most of the time. It was difficult work that required fine mana control and a powerful Will. It was like holding a squat, not for minutes, but hours at a time.

This new design that was revealed took the puzzles I had already seen and blew them out of the water. It was absurd, obscene even. This sort of thing would be censored in any normal society, it wasn't safe to look at.

It was like a globe within a globe within a globe, repeated down to the molecular level, each level inscribed on the inside *and* outside with intricate runes. The number of lines and layers of mana that needed to be formed would be in the hundreds of thousands! Taking in the sheer scope of the thing I can't help but cry out.

Damnit, Gandalf! What the heck is this thing?! Next time I evolve I'm gonna bite you right in the beard!

I could already tell it was going to take a lot of practice to even be able to form this construct correctly, let alone do so quickly under pressure. But for what it was able to do, it was worth it.

My four elemental Skills were gone, no longer did they clutter up my Skills list. Instead, a brand new Skill had formed in their place: All Element Mana Speciality (V) Level 1.

I wasn't sure what I expected, but this is good. That single construct, that monstrosity of a contraption, was able to produce *all* of the elemental mana types. All of them! The basic forms, the advance forms, *and* the combined forms!

Water mana? No problem. Ice mana? Done. Fire mana? Blue Fire mana?! Wind! Gas! Earth! Stone! Lava! Steam! Mud!

No longer did I have to hack together the combined forms by making the elements separately and forcing them together (something of a hack), an inefficient and wasteful method at the best of times, now I could form them directly! Not only that, the proper spell patterns had been imprinted in my mind along with the construct. It was as if I had been given the Specialities of each of the fusion types along with the knowledge of this new construct.

This would be incredibly valuable for me when fighting. If my main sub-mind was able to maintain and operate this construct then I'd be able to throw around three different types of elements at once using my other three brains. That would be huge! The flexibility alone. Not having to break down a construct and form another in order to change elements... the amount of mental effort saved during a battle would be massive!

The truly remarkable thing about this fusion was that its true strength wouldn't be revealed until after my next evolution. Once I was able to increase the raw oomph of my four brains and mastered mind magic to a sufficient degree, I'd be able to make use of the mind construct technique, stacking multiple minds in each brain! I wouldn't have just four minds then, I'd have eight, or twelve! And if each of my brains were to form and maintain this new construct... I'd be able to throw out eight or twelve different spells at a time and every single one of them could be any of the basic mana elements.

The very thought of being able to switch up my element of attack at a moment's notice was enough to make me feel giddy. Always the right tool for the job.

I'm super satisfied with this rank five fusion. Very satisfied indeed! It feels good to achieve goals like this. Now I suppose I need to look at what I need to be training and grinding next... practicing forming the new construct is a massive priority, and after that I'll need to focus on mind magic. I don't want to be lagging behind, when the time comes to evolve, everything needs to be ready!

Ah, an ant's work is never done.

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Chapter 632: Put through the paces

Obviously, my new Skill would be totally useless to me if I weren't able to make effective use of it, so all four of my brains were made to practice forming it. Early signs... weren't good. It was a nightmare frankly. The entire thing fell to ribbons in my hands, falling apart and vanishing into dust as I watch.

This construct is a fiendish mass of complexity, it's like a construct within a construct within a construct. Which.. I suppose... is exactly what it is. It's capable of creating twelve different types of elemental energy, basically twelve constructs in one! I'm not deterred though, thinking back to how difficult I found creating my first construct, I know that this is only going to be a matter of time. It's like playing an instrument, it takes time to memorise exactly how all the pieces fit together.

[Master?]

[Huh? Crinis? What's up?]

I feel my loyal eldritch terror shift on my carapace.

[How long are you planning to stay here, Master? I know you want some time to spend on your new Skill, but it's been several hours already.]

Oh, right. The war.

[Thanks for the time check, Crinis. We do have things we need to be about. Let's go.]

The last part I say to all of my pets and we gather up to return to the front lines. I toss the practice regime onto the sub-brains and let them deal with it whilst I go back to where the action is. I can almost feel my sub-brains shuddering with pain as the load of putting together this monstrosity of a construct lands solely in their lap. They can suck it up! I don't have the luxury to let them slack off.

It doesn't take long to return to the front, I didn't move that far and it's not like it would move that far in such a short amount of time. I do get a surprise once I arrive at the defensive line in the form of an unexpected visitor.

"Sloan! I'm a little surprised to see you out of the main nest. How are things travelling up there?"

The two generals of the council have been locked in the main nest managing the two sided conflict to the best of their abilities. We've been relying on them to be the organisers and decision makers when it comes to overall strategy, a heavy burden that I was only too happy to not be a part of.

She gives a weary wave of an antenna.

"Busy" she sighs, "very busy. Things are constantly changing and the Colony is now so large that keeping track of all the moving parts is impossible."

"Are we really growing that fast? Are the second and third nests operational now?"

She nods.

"Yes, and producing new brood at full capacity. The Brood Tenders have been in a frenzy, trying to ensure the academy handles the load. There are still teams out there expanding territory and securing resources for the hatchlings even whilst this conflict goes on. Making sure every area has the resources they need has been difficult."

That only makes sense. Nothing is more important than the brood and hatchlings, they're the future of the Colony after all. No matter what is happening out here, the Colony has to ensure that the next generation is cared for.

"What brings you down here then? Getting bored being locked upstairs? Keen to get your mandibles dirty on the frontlines?" I tease.

"Something like that," she surprises me. "Victor and I decided that we needed to get a better sense of what was happening so we each came to a separate battleline. This way we'll have a more direct understanding."

I think for a moment.

"Are you sure you didn't just get sick of feeling as if you were hiding in the nest and wanted to experience a bit of danger?" I accuse.

My antennae poke forward in an accusatory fashion, pinning the smaller general on the spot.

"N-no, of course not," Sloan plays it cool and waves away my concern.

"Hmm," I eye her with suspicion.

Is it possible that the selfless danger seeking instincts of the Colony are still this prevalent? My re-education campaign will be strict indeed.

"How are things on the other front?" I allow myself to get diverted by the question I really want to ask.

"Bloody. The fighting is much more direct there than here. Sarah has agreed to engage as well and with her help we've been able to take the fight right to the golgari for the time being."

I'm shocked.

"Sarah? Really?! I really didn't think she'd be willing... Hopefully she's alright."

It's hard to imagine that reserved and timid person fighting in a gruesome battle, even if she is a ginormous death bear of doom.

"Things on this front are downright boring in comparison to that," I shrug, "we've just been probing and retreating constantly."

The general gives me an odd look.

"What?" I ask.

"I'm just surprised you're being so patient and going along with what we asked, Eldest," she tells me frankly.

I'm tempted to deal out a THWACK for that... but it's too accurate. I've been biding my time waiting for the Skill fusion to occur, patiently grinding levels. I've no need to hold back anymore.

"That may change in the next battle," I answer and Sloan nods.

"We predicted as much. Victor thought you'd crack earlier, I'm the winner of this bet," she says, looking smug.

THWACK!

It isn't long until my newfound lack of restraint is put to the test. The Legion wants to push our lines back faster and faster it would seem, meaning the harassing core shapers have been pulled back and I, along with the more martial caste members, have been put back on the line of fire.

The overall strategy of the colony is still to give ground to the Legion, but I intend to make them pay a steeper price this time. You could say I want them to experience the gravity of the situation.

Gweheheheh.

So it is that when the legion appears before me, advancing towards us once more, I no longer trouble myself with flinging wind at them. Instead, I start powering up a Gravity Bomb. It's been a long time since I tried to harness this level of energy, but my minds work together once again to bring that dark purple mana out of the Gravitational Mana gland and begin to compress it into the miniature sphere of crushing power that I've come to know and love.

As the mana becomes more dense and compressed, more unruly and wild, I see a response from the enemy lines. As I thought, with this level of mana being gathered, it doesn't take them long to be able to detect it. I can't even put any attention towards trying to disguise the build-up, since I want all of my mental muscle dedicated to creating the biggest bomb I can.

The reaction is fast from the other side. The Legionaries stop advancing and brace their shield line. From where I stand I can see their mages move to the front, preparing shields and readying themselves to break apart my spell once I unleash it.

As if I would let it be that easy!

[Let them have it!]

[Ssssshall I take everythingggg? Even their sssssouls?]

Invidia sounds delighted to be let off the chain as his eye begins to shine with a dangerous light.

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Chapter 633: It's da bomb

My minds are pushed to the breaking point once more. Containing this level of energy isn't easy, and it doesn't get easier. One might think that my increasing stats and levels would make this process more manageable, but in fact, all it does is allow me to push further and make a more destructive gravity bomb! What sort of moron would keep the power of the spell the same? That would be madness. Madness!

As I continue to squeeze and crush the mana together, squeezing my minds to the breaking point as I do so, Invidia floats forward, delighted to be finally let off the leash. Not just a little let off the leash either, totally free of my many restrictions.

He's a powerful monster in his own right, this little demon, I only managed to defeat him based on a superior knowledge of jumping. Now all of that power is directed towards the defensive line of the Legion as they await my spell.

It starts with explosions, as it usually does. The tunnel is suddenly rocked with detonations that shake the dust from the stone roof and pierce the oppressive dark with light for just a moment.

BOOM! BOOM!

The little ball flits gleefully in the air, his two long, stick-thin arms dangling down past the wide Cheshire-grin that appears beneath his body.

[Even if you want to keep it. I wantssss your life!] He purrs.

His eye flashes bright with green energy as mana begins to accumulate within the orb. Explosions continue to burst against the shield wall as the envy demon prepares his most powerful attack. The speed he pulls it together still puts me to shame, as his eye is filled to bursting with mana before I'm even close to completing my Gravity Bomb. One more evolution and I'll show you! Damn eyeball.

Ignorant of my own envy, Invidia grins widely before he darts forward and unleashes a terrifying ray energy. The eye beam of death lives again! Even focused on my own growing ball of doom, I take particular interest in watching the Legion deal with this situation. The mages brace hard, more barriers springing to life even as they reach out with their minds to break apart the magic. The beam travels so quickly, they don't get much time before it impacts their shields, shattering one after the other until it crashes into the front line of soldiers.

They brace hard, each one supporting the Legionaries around them, their defensive shields coalescing into one defensive line. The green ray hits home and tries to drill through, a piercing whine rises in the tunnel as the two forces contest each other. Finally, the beam scatters across the face of the shield wall and disperses having failed to break through.

His eye exhausted of its strength for the time being, Invidia returns to flinging detonations toward the Legion as their mages attempt to reinforce their barriers. The little demon doesn't give them time to gather themselves, working magic as quickly as only a hyper-specialised monster can.

"Bring the artillery!" I call to the ants around me, causing them to shift.

The Legion is still outside the range of most soldiers, but the scouts who've evolved for range will still reach with their acid at this point. Anything we can use to put the heat on them will help, even if only a little. In a few seconds time, the acid barrage begins to fly over my head, forcing the Legion to defend against the sizzling liquid as well as Invidia's magic.

I don't have the minds to pay attention to them anymore, all of my focus is invested in the slowly rotating sphere of gravity magic. It has darkened almost to pure black as I pour every last drop of mana I can get into it until I feel as if I'm trying to squeeze a brick inside another brick, or a thought into Tiny's mind.

All four brains are aching, screaming even, but I keep forcing. I need this one to be big, I've no doubt that the Legion will be more capable at repelling magic than even the Kaarmodo and its servants. Once I can't take anymore, I open my mandibles wide and unleash the beast.

I immediately get a surprise. Turns out even the second strata can get darker. When the ball of magic appears, that familiar, spine tingling shriek fills the air.

HOOOOOOWLLLLLLLLLLLLL!

All the air in the tunnel is pulled into the sphere as it travels, vanishing into the impenetrable depths as it goes. Drained as I am, I can see the wall of Legionaries concentrating as they tighten their defence to prepare for the storm.

Prepare all you like, if that thing hits home, you're going to be in trouble.

The moment I release the Gravity Bomb, I feel the tension rise in the enemy. They could feel the build up of the spell, they could tell what sort of thing I would be throwing their way. But I highly doubt they could have predicted just what the bomb can do!

I grip the floor tightly with my claws, making sure I'm not sucked forward and Tiny has to reach out a hand to snatch Invidia out of the air, lest the demon be dragged into the maw. The pull of the sphere is so strong, and it hasn't properly detonated yet!

I'm almost a little fearful of the effect.

Almost as if to allay my fears, I feel a host of minds reach out to break down the spell, ripping into the mana and dispersing it as best they can before it slams into their ranks. Good luck to you, I know as well as anyone how hard it is to break apart compressed mana. Still, they manage more than I expect in the short amount of time they have. They frantically tear away at the gravity bomb, reducing its power by half when it finally impacts.

There's a flicker in the darkness and the ball is gone, replaced with a large sphere of slowly rotating pure black that begins to try and drag in everything it can touch. It lasts for only ten seconds before the mages manage to break it down and disperse the spell, but the damage is done. When the bomb is gone and some light returns, we can see the Legionary line is in shambles. Heavily wounded soldiers are being picked up and dragged away as quickly as they can manage whilst others step forward to brace their shields towards our position.

I'm almost tempted to try and launch an offensive as they retreat, but I resist the urge. We aren't prepared for that, no need to snatch a defeat from this victory. The Legion pulls back to nurse their wounds and adjust their strategy as the Colony clack their mandibles. They won't be so bold as to advance right into my face without properly accounting for my spells now, which means a slower advance, which means more time for the Colony.

I'll take it.

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Chapter 634: Mind Games

The following day proves that the Legion is being more careful with their approach. I received two experience notifications from the first gravity bomb, giving me another level, but the next assault isn't as bountiful. More mages, tighter shield walls with more layers. It means they can't spread themselves out as thinly as they did before, and their overall forward progress is slower, as they have to sit and wait whilst the magical barrage is underway.

The extra time means a lot to the Colony. Every day, thousands more ants graduate from the academy to reinforce our numbers, our Skills improve and we draw closer to cracking the many technological challenges that we face.

The only issue is that we're running out of territory. The Legion has pushed at us hard, and even if they slow down now, eventually they'll be knocking at the gates of the nest. The more I see of them, the more convinced I become that there isn't much a tier three ant is going to be able to do to these Legionaries. Even in tremendous numbers, I worry that the Legion would be able to cut them down just as fast as they appear. With enough ants, we'd drag them down with us eventually, but I'm not happy

about engaging in a strategy that will result in so many deaths. This is my family we're talking about! The lives lost already is too much!

"Eldest, are you ready?"

"Huh, what?" I snap out of my thinking to find Ellie looking at me.

"Are you coming to the meeting? Sloan wanted to talk to us before she leaves."

Oh, right.

I follow along in her wake, my pets and baby-sitters trailing behind. A minute later we come to a hastily dug out chamber to find the council members present on this front in the room, along with Wills, who appeared over the last day.

"What's happening people?" I wave an antennae to them as I enter.

Sloan looks confused for a moment, then shrugs and ignores what I said.

"Thanks for coming, Eldest. Are all ready?"

Present in the chamber are Sloan, Vibrant, Ellie, Bella, Frances the healer, Wills and myself. Not a bad showing, all things considered. Each of us nods and settles in for the discussion.

"I wanted to check with you before I head back to the nest and start making decisions about how to deploy our forces. The main idea I want to hear from you on, is a change in our overall strategy on this front."

That gets my attention.

"A change, in what way?" I ask.

"In my opinion, we need to be less passive," she says, "we haven't been able to slow them as much as we wanted, and so far we haven't seen any sign of them being worn down by our harassment. If things keep going at this pace, we'll be forced into a battle at the gates of the nest without getting the full measure of our opponents."

"It's too risky!" I protest. "So many ants would perish if we did that!"

Isn't this exactly what I was thinking about before?! How come I came to the opposite conclusion that Sloan did?

There's silence for a moment, except from Vibrant, she's bouncing from side to side clacking her mandibles in a rhythm.

"Eldest, we have to accept that there will be casualties, no matter what we do. There's no way for us to fight against this Legion without putting our lives on the line."

"Sure, I get that, but we aren't talking about just a few, here. If the Colony goes hard at those Legionaries, it's going to be a one sided massacre!"

All of the ants shift on their legs.

"Eldest... You're being too protective of us," Ellie tells me gently, "you can't fight all of our battles for us, you need to step aside and let us do what we need to do."

Geh. Are the children all grown up? No! Papa refuses to accept it!

"I hardly think you're giving me credit. Plenty of our siblings have fallen already! Too many!"

"That's what we mean," Bella backs up her sibling, "the conflict has hardly started. We never expected that we'd be able to defend the colony without significant sacrifice, not this time. The enemy is just too strong."

"Why can't we just go all in when they reach the gates?" I stubbornly refuse to give up. "We have every advantage there and they'll be stretched further than before, more fatigued. I don't see why we need to start attacking them now."

"Weeeeeell," Vibrant butts in, "I agree with Sloan-Sloan. My generals are getting all worked up, wanting to fight! Have to keep telling them no but they don't like it! When they found out the other front is all fighty-smashy, they got super sad and asked if we could go there. We could make it pretty fast I think, we're all super-fast! But I thought we should stay here with the Eldest. I think I was right. Was I right?"

"You were right," Sloan assures her, and cuts in to ensure she stops talking, "we need our best and most powerful soldiers here to ensure that as many ants survive as possible."

She turns to me.

"That's what we want you to do, Eldest. We want you to do your best to make sure that as many of us survive as possible. But we can't hold back and not fight any longer. Our original strategy just isn't giving the results we hoped for."

The rest of the council members present all nod in agreement and my mood sinks. What's worse is that I know they're right. The Vestibule doesn't give me anywhere to hide when it comes to the desires of the ants. Their will is whispered into my being constantly, urging me to act as their instrument. The Colony members don't want to employ this slow retreat, tiring and wearing down their enemies. They want to swarm and bite and tear until nothing moves anymore!

"Fine," I sigh, "you win. If this is what you want, I won't say no. Just... let's try and be careful, alright? I really don't want to see hordes of us fall at the hands of these damn invaders. I want us to preserve our strength if we can."

The conversation continues after that, but the main topic of conversation is dealt with. When Sloan returns to the nest, we'll employ a more aggressive stance towards the Legion. This is going to be chaotic.

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Chapter 635: A New Way Pt 1

Beyn was troubled in spirit, something he had rarely been during his life. He remembered his time in the seminary, training to serve The Path. Even at that young age, his spirit had burned with certainty and divine purpose. He had risen long before the sun and slept long after it had set, devoting his every

waking moment to the scripture, his meditations and the development of his oratory skills. It had been a simple time of purity and growth, one that he was fond of.

But the measure of his devotion in those years would pale in comparison to the blaze that would awaken in his later life. With the loss of his arm, an even greater purpose would be revealed to him, a deeper truth! And yet, he was unable to serve as he so desired!

"Priest Beyn. How are you feeling?"

He was dragged from his thoughts by a voice and he turned to see one of the true believers, Margaret, approaching him with concern.

"I am fine, sister," he assured her, "my symptoms have abated at last and I make haste to the temple to join our brethren."

A look of relief flashed over the middle aged woman's face.

"That is a relief, Priest. We feared the worst when you were returned to us."

Beyn tried to hide a grimace at the unwanted memory. He'd been unwilling to leave the nest to the point that he had suffered severe Mana Sickness. A gross oversight on his part. When the illness had started, he'd assumed it was due to an oversaturation of joy, but alas. Without the intervention of Coolant, he might have died down there, but he was saved when he was dragged to the surface by a soldier that gripped him around the waist with its mandibles. Almost all of the brethren who'd joined him in the nest had to be removed in this way, though his symptoms were by far the worse.

The fact he'd been forced to be removed from the nest at such a crucial time was the source of his disquiet. As much as Coolant had wanted to keep it quiet, he knew of the great challenge that faced the Colony at this time, how could he not sense the tension that was in the air? More than anything he yearned to lend his support, to aid and abet the great Colony and the Great One as they fended away the evil that threatened to snuff out the miracle of their existence.

He was filled with impotent rage! Bursting with fervour and zeal with nowhere to direct it! If he didn't find a way to channel these emotions he felt as if he might just explode on the spot.

Margaret joined him on his walk through the streets of Renewal as he walked toward the church. Many people called out to him and he waved back to them with his remaining arm, stopping to exchange a few words here and there with the faithful.

"The people have responded well to the word, haven't they?" Margaret noted with obvious pride. "I was worried that the newcomers wouldn't be willing to receive our teachings."

Beyn only smiled.

"How could they deny the truth when it was right before their eyes?" He gestured to one side where an ant was currently helping carry stone blocks for a new construction. The law court would be impressive when it was done. In Beyn's eyes this would be largely due to the way the building incorporated the Colony, with viewing hatches built into the walls, wide doors to allow them to enter and the ant designed seating Beyn had witnessed in the nest. In his mind, every building in the town should be able

to accommodate the people of the Great One. It was they who illuminated the path for the community after all.

No matter how pleased he was to be amongst his flock once more, Beyn did not allow his feet to tarry and Margaret had to hurry to keep up with him as he strode toward the Church. The feelings of helplessness he experienced during his convalescence had built within him and he needed to be amongst the devoted once more to seek relief. Perhaps together, they would find a way they could assist their saviours. There had to be something!

The closer he came to the looming stone building, the faster he moved until he had almost broken into a run, his eyes filled with the grand edifice that fronted the church. They had been truly blessed when they awoke one day to find an ant crafter had risen from the nest and taken an interest in their work. The congregation had watched with bated breath as the Colony member had inspected their own humble carvings, including the statue of the Great One that featured prominently inside. They were never able to communicate with this mysterious individual, but they must have passed muster, as the blessed creature had spent a week working on the church, carving with mandibles and magic with equal skill to transform the once austere and square building into a magnificent work of art.

Even laying his eyes on the structure was enough to soothe the pain in his heart and he struggled for a moment to restrain the tears that threatened to fall as he took in the sheer beauty before him. There were always people who gathered outside the building to admire it, but Beyn had no time for them today. Normally he would stay to speak, perhaps even preach, but not today. He moved through the people, barely acknowledging their presence as he rushed to the door and pushed it open.

Inside, a circle of the devoted were already gathered, wearing their ropes and attached antennae of glory. As one, they turned to the door and when they saw who had arrived, faces lit up with joy. Heart soaring, the priest rushed forward to greet his people. There was no need for words between them. These were the people who had experienced the deeper truth of the Colony and its majesty. Within the nest, they had experienced much together, and had their eyes opened even further (something he had not thought possible). These were the people whose feet were most firm upon the path.

Without speaking, they once again formed a circle in the centre of the church and communed with their spirits. They all felt the same pain, being unable to reach out and aid their saviours in their time of need. All around the walls, the Colony looked down on them. The statues of the Great One around the wide room looked at them with patience and wisdom in their eyes.

There had to be a solution, there had to be a way forward. There was always a path!

Together, the congregation communed and prayed. There was anguish in their hearts, but also hope, as well as something new... As time passed, they could feel it building within themselves, and alongside it, excitement grew. Minutes turned to hours, but not one of them moved to leave. Instead, their resolve only grew. Nobody spoke, nobody moved.

A great change was coming.

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Chapter 636: A new way pt 2

How could a person describe their connection to the System that governed Pangera? It moved through them, existed within them and all around them. It had been part of their lives from the moment they were born. Only those sapient beings who existed at the moment of descent could have told you the difference between the before and the now. It was an inescapable, unchosen overseer that applied its rules to all creatures it chose to invest itself in. Yet there were times when the System responded to the people, rather than the other way around. It was an entity of adaptation in many ways. When the world changed around it, it shifted to better represent the circumstances it found itself in.

This change could come as a response to technology, equipment or tactics. The Abyssal Legion is one such example, their members undergoing such drastic changes and using such specialised arms and armour that numerous new classes became available to them. Many other cases were known, and many more unknown, across the societies of the world.

What was more rare, was the System responding not only to circumstance, but to *will*. Those few occasions when the Sapient people of Pangera were able to effect change in the System based on their desires, altering reality to better suit themselves, rather than the other way around. This phenomenon was so rare, no scholar would be able to find a reliable example of it occurring throughout recorded history. Such things were simply not written down. It was too personal, too *spiritual* for that.

Such an experience took place inside the Church of the Great One. That indescribable feeling, built within Beyn and his closest followers. They could feel a powerful emotion building within. An uplifting, a changing, *a becoming*. Each of these humans felt the same thing, but none of them could describe it. How could someone find the words to discuss this feeling? It was as if the hand of god reached down to alter their DNA. As if the fundamental pieces that made up their existence were altered by an unseen force.

And then it was done.

[You have met the conditions for a new Class: Antmancer. You can change your Class through the System prompt.]

All of their eyes flew open at once to stare in shocked incredulity at the person opposite to them, only to find that person looking back with the same expression. In an instant they knew that each of them had received the same message from the System. In the next second all eyes flew to Beyn.

He was frozen. He felt as if he'd been struck by a bolt of lightning. His nerves wouldn't respond, they were jammed. He couldn't even think about wanting to think. So immobile was he, no breath moved in his body, and he slowly began to turn red.

Then the tears came. Slowly at first, they dripped from his eyes and into his lashes, but soon gave way to a raging flood. When they saw this, the congregation joined him in an instant, each of them openly sobbing with joy. When recalling later, Beyn couldn't say at which moment he had changed his class, and neither could the others. Somehow during the outpouring of their emotions they each accessed the System menu and switched their Class without even stopping to consider the benefits and drawbacks of such a change. In fact, they didn't care. This was a miracle. Another one. Truly this was the heavens assuring Beyn that his feet had not strayed from the path that had been laid out before him!

The first they knew of the Class change was when they smelled something odd inside the church.

"Lazy," it said.

Beyn was so shocked he fell to one side and tried to put out his hands to stop his fall, only to realise at the last second he only had one hand and face planted on the ground. With pain racking his body, he looked up from the cold stone floor to see a member of the Colony on the wall, watching them.

"Don't you have work to do?" The ant huffed before turning around and skittering away.

The priest watched it go, completely stunned, as did the congregation around him.

"Priest.... Beyn... did you... hear? Or... smell? What I just ..." brother John stammered.

From the floor, Beyn's eyes slowly bulged out of his head as he realised he hadn't imagined what just happened.

"I did," he said. Then he roared.

"I DID!"

It wasn't easy for a one armed person to leap quickly to their feet, yet the priest managed it with alacrity and surprising grace before he sprinted out the door. The others followed after him, filled with energy just as he was, even if they weren't sure what he wanted to do. Beyn frantically scanned around the church before he found what he was looking for. Nearby, an ant was seen looking in the window at a potter who was busy at his craft. Without hesitation, he ran forward and threw himself on the ground before the startled insect.

"Speak unto me of your wisdom!" He cried. "Instruct me so that I might better serve!"

There was a heavy pause as people nearby turned to look with strange expressions at this eminent figure in their community throwing himself into the dirt and trying to speak with an ant monster with his voice. The Colony member, a carver, looked at this strange, robed human and the ones who came after with a steady eye for a moment.

"These humans need more to do. Too much rest is driving them crazy."

So saying, the ant flicked its antennae and turned back to watching the strange human art of shaping clay with their... hands.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 637: A new way pt 3

Emotions ran high amongst the congregation for some time and it was difficult for any of them to articulate their thoughts as they waited for the emotional high to leave them. Every time they came close to being able to hold a conversation, an ant would appear, tell them to get to work and the mere fact of being able to process the Colony's pheromone language drove them once more into paroxysms of joy, driving away all rational thought.

Beyn himself experienced waves of euphoria so powerful he nearly lost consciousness several times before he was able to make a break for the interior of the church building. His flock rushed to follow him and they huddled in a corner out of sight until they were able to calm themselves to the point of holding a whispered conversation.

Beyn raised his face to look at the barely controlled expressions of his brothers and sisters in faith and tried to contain the roaring of his spirit. He needed to be calm in this moment and provide leadership. He was trained for this, he was the closest thing to a System expert in Renewal and the creation of a brand new class in this place was an extraordinary miracle.

He cleared his throat and began to whisper to his people.

"Brothers and Sisters," he began, "what has occurred today is a miracle."

He paused to gather himself.

"A miracle," his voice came out a little stronger this time and the others watched with bated breath as their leader stopped once more to master himself.

"I apologise. What has occurred here today... IS A MIRACLE!" He roared, his face instantly flushing with excitement.

Once unleashed, his spirit could no longer be contained.

"A MIRACLE! A MIRACLE! A MIRACLE!" He drew a deep breath and thrust his remaining hand to the sky.
" A MIIIIIRRAAAAAA... "

The others watched with wide eyes as Beyn became more and more red and his voice higher and higher in pitch until the priest's eyes rolled back in his head and he fainted dead away. Brother Thomas leapt forward to catch the fallen clergyman's head before it cracked into the stone floor as several others stepped forward with expert timing to lower their leader to the floor. With long practiced precision, they rolled him onto his side and made space to allow him to breathe as they patiently waited.

After a few minutes, Beyn regained consciousness and sat up immediately, causing his head to spin.

"I'm sorry everyone, I've disgraced myself again."

The others frantically waved their hands to indicate he shouldn't worry about it. Beyn accepted their feelings with gratitude and tried to speak once more.

"We have witnessed... something very special here today. I can tell you that as someone trained in this knowledge. It can only be said that our powerful desire to aid the Colony, combined with our fervour, has been recognised by the System itself and given us a path forward. Let us commune and confirm the details of our new Class."

For the next few minutes the flock spoke in hushed tones, unwilling to lose themselves to emotion in this critical moment. Together they were able to make note of the abilities their new class gave them and check to see that they were all identical.

The name of the Class: Antmancer!

It suggested to Beyn that it was a type of mage or support class, specialising in ants somehow. The stat gain per level was an interesting blend of three main stats rather than the high priority given to two that most classes experienced.

Per level, +2 Toughness, +2 Cunning and +3 Will. A gain of seven stats is more than respectable. Beyn could only think that this was the power of a newly formed Class. The stat gain was an important clue to the purpose of a Class, Beyn knew as much. It was a signpost. Even without considering the Skills that were gained, he could tell that this would be a mental focused Class that required endurance.

Toughness and Will, the defensive pair were emphasised here. The Cunning would provide power to the Skills they had.

The all important Skills. It took some time for the group to whisper to each other before they were confident they understood all that the System was telling them. The Core Class Skill was a magical passive that allowed them to understand pheromones at rank one. Beyn told the group he thought it highly likely that as they ranked up the Skill it would allow them to communicate back. To produce pheromones of their own, through mana, and speak with the ants as easily as they spoke to other humans.

Each of them only received one other Skill upon accepting the Class: Formica Sapiens inspiration. By utilising it, they would be able to provide powerful bonuses to both ants and other humans. Once they'd confirmed the description, the nature of this glorious happening became clearer to the one-armed priest.

Their purpose was made yet more clear. They were to be the bridge between the ants and those around them. They would allow the humans of Renewal to fight alongside the Colony, for only when they battled alongside *both* would the Antmancers level.

"We must prepare," Beyn whispered, "for the crusade."

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Chapter 638: A New Way pt 4

Enid was tired, yet energised. She found herself constantly in this state as of late. There were never enough hours in the day for all the things that needed to be done, which meant she was constantly on the run, difficult for a woman of her age. At the same time, she was enthused every day to rise to the challenges of her new home.

From the tragedy that Garralosh had inflicted on the people living on the frontier, they had brought about a miracle of rebirth with the help of the Colony. The town of Renewal grew every day at a pace that could only be described as dizzying. If someone had told her how well the people would be able to grow a new community as quickly and with this level of harmony when they'd started, she'd have refused to believe it.

She'd returned to the community after negotiations had been completed with the representatives of Rylleh. They'd bargained as hard as any merchant in the end, a testament to what people with their backs against the wall were capable of. With the threat of Colony behind her though, there was little they could do to enforce their bluster. The terms were settled to the satisfaction of the nest and for the most part the city was satisfied.

"Mayor," a voice called her back to the present.

Enid turned to see her assistant, Ruth, approach from across the room, a rather worried expression on her face. Usually a steady young woman, it was a rare day that she looked so unsettled. Enid could immediately guess the root of the problem.

"What's he done this time?" she sighed.

How the hell that damnable priest had managed to screw something up so quickly, she could only imagine. When she'd checked on him yesterday, he was still convalescing from his mana poisoning. He should be barely out of bed!

"He and the faithful have gathered in the square, he's really preaching up a storm down there."

Enid frowned.

"Sounds like normal behaviour to me. What's the issue?"

Ruth hesitated.

"It's just... some of the claims being made are quite extraordinary. The crowd is really being whipped into a frenzy. Half of Renewal is down there already."

"*What?* What are they saying?"

In the square, a large crowd had gathered to listen as the Priest spoke to the miracle that had occurred, his booming voice captivating the attention of everyone who heard it.

"THE TIME HAS COME!" he orated, "TO RISE! TO STEP FORWARD AND BE COUNTED! OUR SAVIOURS, THE COLONY, BATTLE FOR THEIR VERY SURVIVAL BENEATH THE GROUND. THEY SAVED OUR LIVES, REBUILT OUR HOPES AND DREAMS AND GAVE HOPE TO THOSE WHO HAD NONE!"

He took a breath before he continued with even greater fervour than before.

"I KNOW HOW YOU HAVE FELT! TO STAND ON THE SIDELINE, POWERLESS TO GIVE AID! I TOO, HAVE EXPERIENCED THAT CRUSHING DISAPPOINTMENT. NO LONGER! NO LONGER! THE SYSTEM HAS HEARD THE PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL AND OUR PATIENCE HAS BEEN REWARDED!"

Beyn was never more in his element than when addressing a crowd. His Skills in this area were high level and more than that, his experience over years of delivering fiery sermons had honed his instincts to a fine point. He could already sense the restless energy building in his audience, getting ready to reach a fine crescendo.

"WITH OUR NEW CLASS, THE ANTMANCER, GRANTED TO US ON THIS VERY DAY, WE SHALL BE ABLE TO STAND SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH OUR ANT SAVIOURS AND REPAY OUR DEBTS!"

The rumbling in the crowd grew stronger as he continued to exhort them with this great miracle. Beyn possessed a stellar reputation for honesty and good dealings within the community, there were none who would doubt his word. Even in matters of the Colony he was strictly factual (according to his worldview). It's not like he had to make things up to impress on people the good works of the Colony.

"REMEMBER EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU!" He thrust forward an accusatory finger. "THE PEACE YOU EXPERIENCE NOW, A PEACE THAT THE COLONY FOUGHT AND DIED TO ACHIEVE, IS FALSE! EVEN NOW THE WAR CONTINUES BENEATH OUR FEET!"

Some shifted in the crowd at his words. Love for the Colony was strong amongst these people, they weren't happy that their saviours were forced to fight whilst they themselves were powerless to help them.

"TAKE HEART AND PREPARE YOURSELVES, MY PEOPLE! WE ARE PREPARING TO LAUNCH A GREAT CRUSADE INTO THE DUNGEON! WE WILL FIGHT ALONGSIDE THE COLONY AND ENSURE OUR FUTURE TOGETHER WITH OUR OWN HANDS! GATHER TOGETHER ALL WHO ARE WILLING! ONLY TOGETHER CAN WE -"

Beyn's mind was razor focused on the audience and his own speech. They were his instrument and modulations of his powerful voice seized their attention and didn't let it go. His presence demanded their attention, they were razor focused on him. Similarly, speaking in such a precise, weaponised way was draining on the priest. His focus on the crowd was absolute.

Which is why nobody saw the book flying through the air until it slammed into the side of his head.

WHAM!

Both the audience and Beyn were stunned as he stumbled to the side and fell to the ground. After he gathered his senses, he turned to see Enid storming towards him from the council building.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING YOU IDIOT PRIEST?!" She roared when she got her hands on him.

Beyn looked up at her, shocked.

"I'm spreading the word of our miracle and calling the people to action. What else was I supposed to do? We need to help the Colony, Enid!"

The mayor leaned down to glare at him from point blank range, the fire in her eyes burning bright.

"We're talking about people's lives, Beyn! They'll die! Remember that!" She hissed.

"I am prepared to die for the Colony!" he said.

"I don't care about that! Any idiot can die! Are you willing to raise the orphans who will be left behind? Are you willing to do that?! Are you willing to bury the dead and speak solace to those who grieve?! You should have brought this to the Council first! We would have been able to find a way to do this and keep it safe! Now we have no control, you've whipped them up into a frenzy. If we're lucky, they won't be rushing down into the Dungeon by the end of the day!"

Only then did Beyn realise the folly of his actions. His powerful Skills in oration were a heavy responsibility, his ability to persuade was almost magical. What's more, he had a responsibility to this community as its priest! He'd been so eager to spread the word of this new miracle, he hadn't paused to consider the best way to do it.

Frantic, he looked out over the crowd only to see the intense energy he had generated in them hadn't decreased, if anything the opposite was true. Men and women were shouting and cheering, hoisting

weapons into the sky. Already some had found nearby Colony members and were kneeling and praying before them in readiness. The euphoria that he had felt only moments ago faded away with the grim reality of the miracle that had been granted to them. Fighting alongside the ants meant dying alongside them. It was something to be celebrated, but also mourned.

But nothing could stop it now. The humans were coming.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 639: The Churn

Titus stifled his grimace as he walked from the battlefield. To others who looked at him, he was as stone faced and unshakable as ever, but inside, he was tired. High stats and the superhuman abilities of a powerfully levelled Legionary were able to sustain him for a long time, longer than almost any other type of soldier on Pangera, but not forever.

A few days ago, by the Legion, only a few days? A few days ago the ants had escalated the conflict, no longer content to delay and cede ground. The rise in intensity had required that Titus and his troops match their fervour.

"Are you alright, commander?"

Titus recognised the voice of his daughter, and the concern that she had. She knew better than most that he hadn't rested in almost a week.

"Fine," he replied.

He heard a doubtful snort from behind him and nearly smiled. Morrelia had not learned grace as she aged, much like her mother.

"I didn't expect that you would need to fight so much yourself, isn't it a bit overkill for you to show up?" she asked.

Without turning, Titus gestured for his daughter to walk by his side. After a moment she was there, her hands resting easily on the hilts of her blades. Although she looked relaxed and confident on the surface, Morrelia's emotions were far from settled. Battling against the Colony was still something she couldn't bring herself to do, and fortunately, she hadn't had to up to this point. Even though Titus had entered the fight, even as one of his assigned guards, she simply didn't have any opportunity to fight, her father destroyed every ant he could reach.

The Colony had adapted quickly to his appearance on the field and began to avoid combat the moment they realised he was around, something Morrelia was more than grateful for.

"Time is against us in this campaign, daughter," he told her, "the insects are being careful, trying to force us to expend our strength and waste our time. Every day that passes, our supply lines grow longer, our Legionaries more weary, and for what? Are we even killing the creatures faster than they are replacing themselves?"

The Commander's hand gripped tight around the handle of his axe for a moment before he relaxed again. The spirit trapped within raged without end but he crushed it with his will after a brief struggle. Whenever he grew frustrated, angry or tired, the foul beast would attempt to break him. Laughable.

"Unless we gain access to their nest and kill every Queen we find, we won't be able to make real progress. Once that's done we can take our time to hunt down and extinguish every individual."

Morrelia was silent for a moment.

"It doesn't bother you at all that they're sapient?" she asked, finally.

Titus raised a brow.

"No."

He placed a hand on the armoured shoulder next to him.

"They are monsters, born from mana. They are the children of the Dungeon and it is that which they serve. I'm surprised that I would need to explain this to you, of all people."

The young Legionary beside him didn't reply immediately and Titus continued to walk back towards his own lines at his usual long stride. Behind him, several squads were in the process of making meticulous checks over the defences the ants had just abandoned. No matter how many times the Legion foiled their traps and ambushes, the blasted bugs never stopped trying. He knew they didn't even expect them to work, they just wanted to slow down and exhaust his soldiers.

It would have worked too.

"I suppose I'm just not used to fighting monsters that can think and feel," Morrelia sighed, hiding her true feelings within.

He nodded. This was something every delver who achieved the strength to reach the lower strata had to deal with. Though rarely would anyone encounter it in the second strata of all places. Monsters became more intelligent, built societies, traded and formed relationships.

But it didn't change what they were, fundamentally. When the cataclysm occurred, the old Legion records showed that these supposedly 'peaceful' creatures had rallied behind the Ancients and helped lay waste to the surface. The Legion never forgot and never forgave. For them, the war had never ended.

"Not to worry," he told her, "you'll come to see the way of things, in time. Follow in the footsteps of the veterans and you can't go wrong."

He didn't notice the slight sigh his daughter released behind her helmet.

"I suppose so," she said.

When they returned behind the lines, Titus waved her away as he went to consult with the officers, leaving Morrelia with some precious time to her own thoughts. Though it didn't last long.

"Hey Morr!" called Myrrin who approached enthusiastically, "how are you?"

The berserker smiled to see such a friendly face.

"Tired," she replied, "where are you getting your energy?"

"Just got off break," the archer grinned, "rested and ready to go! They put five hundred of us back in camp for some shuteye. Seems like they want to make a big push before the reinforcements come."

Caught in the middle of nodding her understanding, Morrelia froze.

"Reinforcements?" she said.

"Yup," her friend cheered, "about time too! I heard the commander put the request in pretty much the second we landed here. Not sure how many are coming, hopefully another Legion at least. Then we'll be able to smash our way through these bugs."

Myrrin sounded particularly fierce by the end of her statement, revealing the depth of her antipathy toward the Colony, taking Morrelia aback.

"I didn't think you were so eager to kill them." she said, a little stiffly.

She got a 'are you crazy?' look in return.

"They're *monsters*," Myrrin said, "and my squad has lost two people to them in the last few days. Why wouldn't I want them dead?"

It was true. The fighting had grown more intense and even though the ants were being killed, the Legionaries were too. The grim rage within the Legion camp had only grown higher with each passing day as more of their members fell. The cumulative effect of her doubts and this new information was enough to make Morrelia feel ill. She needed some air.

"I'll catch up with you later Myrrin," she said, "good luck out there."

Myrrin tried to catch hold of her friend, but she evaded her grasp and slipped back amongst the rows of tents and out of sight. The young woman stared for a moment, a worried expression written on her face, but turned back to her duties after a moment. Morrelia was tough as nails forged from larger, tougher nails. Whatever was bothering her, she could handle it.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 640: it's progress, I suppose.

Nearly... there... just a bit more... I need to just... get this bit.. No! Stupid sub-brain, hold that bit steady! GAH! Other sub-brain! What the hell are you doing over there?! Just hold it steady, dammit! Cursing at my own minds whilst my other minds grumble back at me is confusing enough, but the four separate brains manage to steady the ship once more and I worked frantically to slot the final pieces of the construct into place.

Once the last frame was put in place I nearly winced, expecting the thing to explode in my face, but to my surprise, it held together, suspended in my mind and maintained by my main sub-mind. Mind you, just holding the thing in place was exhausting to that mind. The damn construct was so complicated I don't think the one sub-mind could even operate it whilst holding it together.

Maintaining a construct isn't as easy as just holding a ball in your hand, after all. It's more like keeping the molecular structure of the ball in mind at all times, as if it were your will that held it together, rather than physics. Which is exactly what's happening here. The construct will only hold together so long as I actively hold its shape. Without that conscious effort, it would dissolve like snow in an oven.

But FINALLY! It's complete! It took so much practice I thought I was going to go mad, but it's finally in place! This thing has been such a pain in the thorax to put together, it better live up to the effort that I put into it! Lousy magic. Why can't I just wave my antennae around and clack my mandibles a few times, eh?

Not wanting to push too hard, I get one of the smaller sub-minds to carefully feed a little mana into the construct. Ever so slowly, the mana seeps out of my core and is then directed into the all-purpose opening. Once the mana is inside, things get a little more interesting. Since the unattributed mana can take any of a dozen paths throughout the structure, it takes fine control to navigate the desired route and produce the element I want.

My sub-mind strains hard to maintain such a delicate grip on the energy but eventually the construct rotates and spits out a tiny amount of fire mana. Enough to heat a sausage. It's pathetic, and not nearly as much mana as I can produce from the fire construct with half the effort. Even so, I'm still happy with the result.

This represents progress! With more practice, I'll be able to form the construct without having to commit all of my minds to it, then I'll be able to operate without so much effort. Like any instrument, only diligent practice will allow me to operate the construct without having to consciously think about every little piece of it. Eventually, I'll be able to spit out as much of whatever type of mana I want.

Since I have the construct up and running, I decide to continue practicing with it, directing my two smaller sub-minds to operate it whilst I go about my business. Even with the constant regeneration provided by the Colony within range of the Vestibule, I won't be able to maintain this level of effort continuously, but I should be able to hold onto it for a few hours.

[Have you succeeded, Master?] Crinis asks.

[I have! Finally!] It's hard to keep the pride from leaking into my tone.

[Congratulations, Master! I expected it would only be a matter of time.]

[Why thanks, Crinis. I appreciate the vote of confidence! How goes your own magic practice?]

[I continue to focus solely on shadow magic. I have been able to make progress, but it's been slow.]

[Don't forget to work on your mind mana,] I remind her, [with enough brain power, you'll be able to make use of the mind constructs. Once you can do that, your training speed in other areas will multiply.]

[Of course, Master. I'll rededicate myself.]

No-no, I think you're plenty dedicated... rather, don't you dare get any more dedicated than you are now!

My pets and I are huddled in a side tunnel, getting some mandated rest whilst the scouts are out with the core shapers, trying to get a sense of the Legion's next move. Not far away, a steady stream of wounded continue to be taken from the forward field hospital to a more robust setup closer to the nest. Healers skitter about, anxiously tending to the much larger castes in their care. Since the healers are too small, it generally falls to soldiers to grip their injured siblings in their mandibles and carry them with care whilst the healers run alongside, ensuring they remain stabilised.

Those with minor injuries will heal themselves at the front with regenerative fluid and Biomass. Those injuries would heal in a few hours on their own. The more seriously injured, those with missing legs or large chunks of carapace sheared away, will likely take days to be combat ready again.

As I'd warned, the fighting had grown brutal once the Colony had made the decision to challenge the Legion. A flood of reinforcements had arrived from the nest shortly after Sloan had returned, sent to help us brace the line. Even with our vastly superior numbers, it was just way too difficult to bring the armoured tin-cans down. My pets and I were able to help sway the fight tremendously wherever we were, but we just couldn't be on every battlefield at once.

Thank goodness I never ran into the axe wielding demon again. I was quite happy when the others adopted my suggestion to just abandon whatever field he turned up to. We'd have to face him down eventually, but until we were forced to, putting ants in front of him was just throwing away the lives of our family. Unacceptable!

"Working hard, Eldest?"

"You've had enough rest haven't you?"

"If you don't hurry, we won't leave any fighting for you to do!"

The passing ants, even the injured ones, call out to me as they go, their spirits undaunted by the challenge before them. I give a wave back with an antenna as I watch them go, their voices whispering within the Vestibule. If anything, the mood of the Colony has only been rising the harder the fight has gotten. Giving away territory without fighting over it had gone against the ant nature of my family and now that they were permitted to, they leapt into the battle with joy and ferocity.

[Fight?] Tiny rumbled, as if sensing my thoughts.

I'm about to tell him to sit on his big hairy butt and wait when I spot a general rushing through the tunnels turn towards us.

[Seems so,] I tell him, [rest time is over.]

A massive grin splits the face of the ape, his eyes darkening to a deep shade of red as the anger kindles in his heart.