

Chrysalis 871

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Chapter 871: Assault on Orpule Final

With the demons high overhead the only way the Colony could reach them was to unleash their best spells and acid blasts, doing everything possible to force the demons down, or at least drain them of mana so they were no longer a threat.

As I watch, it seems to be working. The demons use shields to block attacks as they move their stupid discs around, dodging the worst of the largely untargeted barrage, but there's just so much stuff being thrown at them that they can't possibly dodge it all.

As I lie healing I do my part to contribute to the struggle, hurling gravity bolts by the dozen at the demons, hoping to snag them and force them to come down to our level. At the very least it'll become harder for them to keep themselves in the air if they get heavier. Fairly soon, Tiny returns to my side and I don't waste any time repeating the order that I gave to Crinis to him as well. When Invidia pops up, worn out from helping my siblings shield themselves I tell him too.

[You are not allowed to die before me. That's an order.]

Invidia doesn't react outside of a slow blink and Tiny just looks confused, but that's fine. As long as I've given them the order, they'll have to obey it.

[Alright then Tiny, we have an issue that you can help me with. Invidia, try and help heal Crinis up, and grab her some Biomass... actually, hold on.]

"Someone go and get Crinis Biomass. She needs to regenerate."

...

"Is that-"

"Yes I'm talking to you, Protectant! Get it done! I'm hardly going to be going anywhere right now, am I?"

I waggle my broken legs in the air for emphasis. A few moments later I'm confident that they are gone.

[Alright then, here's the deal. I'm going to lighten myself and Tiny is going to throw me into the air so that I can bring the demons down to ground level. Make sense?]

[Master! No!]

[For all we know they are just holding their ground up there until they charge up another doom ball and obliterate this entire plate. They were surely going to blow up half of it with the last one! I can't reach them from down here, but from up there, I can.]

[How are you going to land?! I can't catch you again, and you're already injured!] Crinis protests vehemently.

[Bit of food into you and you'll be back to catching ants in no time,] I reassure her, [and besides, we have more help this time. Invidia can slow me down with barriers and Tiny can catch me in his big beefy arms, right?]

Tiny nods seriously and flexes. Invidia blinks once.

[See? No problem, I'll be fine.]

[...]

Crinis is obviously not convinced but I need to do *something* to bring this situation to a swift resolution. The more time passes the more advantageous this will be for the demons as they recover their energy and possibly wind up for another strike. Working fast I take hold of my gravity mana with my minds and get to work. Inverting spell patterns is a tricky business but there are a few cases where I know how to get it to work and the gravity bolt is one of them. I blast myself with the modified spell over and over again and notice with surprise how my antennae can feel the gravitational field around my body beginning to shift. This gives me rather precise control over how much of my mana I need to use.

After all, I still need to fall. If I get it wrong and start floating upwards I'll be in serious trouble. I'd rather not spend too much time drifting through the air in front of Brixin and her crew if I can help it!

Once I get the balance right I turn to Tiny and give him a nod. With a broad grin on his face, the giant ape slaps his massive hands against his chest to warm himself up before striding over and lifting me with a two handed grip. I can tell from the look on his face that I'm lighter than he expected, but it's still awkward to get a decent grip on me.

[Alright then Tiny. I want you to fling me straight up as hard as you can. Got it?]

[Hrm.]

[Don't forget to catch me when I come down.]

[...]

He'd already forgotten...

[Okaaaaay. Now!]

With a tremendous rush of force Tiny leans back and throws both his hands up, propelling me straight upwards into the air like an insectile missile. The force of the air pressure flattens my antennae back to my head and my eyes blur. Beneath me the plate plummets away, becoming uncomfortably small as I look down on the battle still raging there. Despite the insanity my minds are working overtime, preparing the barrage of spells I'll unleash the moment I reach the apex of my flight.

Holy moly I am going to come down hard... I hope those two are up to the task.

Probably the only entity more surprised than me to see a giant ant rocketing up above the plate is Brixin. Her face is a twisted mask of pure rage as I reappear before her in the air once again. It's tempting to reach out with my mind and say something pithy, but I suspect that she might use that link to obliterate my consciousness so I resist the urge. Instead I unleash a barrage of magic directly into the faces of the demons before they have a chance to act.

Condensed gravity bolts fly out with pinpoint accuracy at the same moment a domain snaps into existence, encompassing all three of the tier seven demons.

Down we go!

Taken by surprise they fail to dodge the initial barrage and once the domain expands to encompass them they find themselves suddenly so much heavier than they were a moment ago. I can practically feel the confusion that rolls through them as they encounter gravity magic for likely the first time. The bolts that hit them did no damage, but then this other strange effect? Do they defend themselves or not?

Their hesitation allows me to land a few more bolts before my upward momentum spends itself completely and I start to accelerate faster and faster toward the ground. With focused rage, Brixin extends an arm towards me that erupts in a jet of ashen fire that licks against my left-side carapace.

"YEEOUCH!"

Thank goodness for the Vestibule. I trigger my healing gland again as I continue to blast out gravity bolts, holding onto the domain as long as possible to apply as much pulling force to them as I can. The moment I drop out of range of Brixin's flame thrower the other two join in the party, flinging a horrendous array of spells at me which I find myself in a poor position to dodge, so I don't. Instead I once again pump my mandibles full of gravity mana, exhausting my reserves in the process, reach out to the three figures and YOINK!

Already so much heavier than they had been mere moments ago, the additional force of the mandibles pulling them has a much larger effect on the demons than they expected, staggering the powerful tier sevens atop their discs.

I manage to pull them down. Not that much, not nearly all the way to the ground, but as I sail downward out of their reach, peppered by the few spells that manage to find my falling self, I can tell that I've done enough. How do I know? Because of the absolute torrent of firepower unleashed by the Colony that sails past me as I fall. Suddenly the sky is alight with fire and acid that engulfs the demons above in a never ending stream of death that rises from over ten thousand mightily ticked off ants far below.

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Chapter 872: Landing Is The Best Part

Watching Brixin and her two chumps being bathed in the combined firepower of my siblings is certainly entertaining, almost entertaining enough to make me forget that I'm about to land in a world of hurt, but luckily I come back to myself quickly enough to roll over and look down at my waiting pets. To my joy and somewhat to my surprise, Tiny is looking up at me, arms out and face creased with concentration as he repositions himself to attempt the catch.

Please don't stuff this up, big guy, I do not want to end my second life scattered across the rock like an ant that got stepped on. I'm too young and certainly too shiny to go out like that!

Luckily Invidia is on the ball. The brainy demon spins together a series of shields, each one layered atop the other with a metre between. I can even appreciate that he's managed to adjust the strength of each shield so that I'll hit the weaker ones first before smacking into something stronger, thus bleeding off a little more speed each time. The ability of that eyeball to do this at the speed he did it... absolutely astonishing. Just another reminder that the distance between me and a truly dedicated spell slinging monster is rather wide.

Thanks to my efforts with gravity mana, I don't weigh half as much as I normally would, and I have far less force. Even so I crash through the first of Invidia's shields without even feeling them, but the following ones begin to get harder and harder, drawing out a wince of pain as I smack into them. To minimise potential injury, I roll onto my uninjured side and allow the carapace there to take the force, the inner-carapace plating doing a lot of work to disperse the impact. Despite all that, my HP still takes a hit, much like my insides, as I effectively run into wall after wall.

After a dozen of these the ground looms large in my sight and so too does the hairy chest of Tiny which I crash land into, sending the two of us tumbling over the stone. When we finally come to a halt, I've rolled out of the big ape's grip and come to a stop a few metres away. Tiny has a wide grin on his face and gives me a bold thumbs up, looking so pleased that it takes me a moment to realise his other arm is hanging uselessly by his side.

Why are you looking so happy when your arm is broken?!

With a sigh I spin together some more healing mana and apply it to the big ape. It'll be enough to get him through the short term and kick start the healing process. I'm not nearly as good a medic as someone more dedicated to the art.

[Thanks Tiny. And thank you Invidia. You both did great. Looks like we were successful.]

Above our heads the air is still packed full of explosions, acid, fire, ice, bursts of steam and all sorts of things as the irate Colony continues to unleash their wrath without holding back. To be honest, I don't think Brixin is even there anymore. She probably managed to lift herself above it all a little while back but being exposed to that barrage for even a second or two is going to strip the hide off even a tier seven.

In other words, I doubt she's dead, but wherever she is up there, she's not doing so hot.

Which is fine by me, I need a little time to recover. Becoming Anthony's flying circus not once but twice in a day was quite an unexpected event and I'm in no rush to repeat the experience. Around me the ants are beginning to move on from their unending assault on the air above their heads to conquering the city more generally. As the moments tick by, more and more of my siblings stop slinging their anger and ordinance upwards and begin to file into Orpule.

"Move in your teams! Follow the trails! Move quickly to secure your checkpoints! And somebody tell Vibrant to slow down!" a blast of pheromones billows out from nearby, stinging my antennae with their sharpness.

A few moments later the source becomes apparent as Advant walks towards me, her antennae still swinging wildly as she blasts out orders to the surrounding ants.

"I thought Victor was in charge here?" I say.

"She's further back. We didn't want to risk exposing our top generals to attack when we arrived on the plate. She should be up here before too long, so long as nothing else goes wrong. I take it that was you I saw soaring through the air?"

"I think you're imagining things."

"Right... just another story to add to the legend of the Eldest, eh?"

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Are you going to be in any state to move anytime soon?"

I flex my legs a little.

"Give it a few minutes and I'll be able to move about. Won't be all that fast, but I'll be mobile."

"That might have to do. We haven't finished dealing with Brixin yet. I believe she's been weakened, along with the two tier seven demons who are supporting her, but they aren't dead, not by a long shot."

Focusing upwards, I can see that the Colony is still hurling spells into the air, but visibility is slowly returning and so far I can't see the ruler of Orpule anywhere. *Former* ruler at this point I suppose. The Colony has flooded into the city by now and Vibrant has been running rampant in there, along with Sarah, for some time. If there's much resistance left in the city, it'll be in the plate beneath us which we haven't invaded yet. If Brixin wants to take this place back, she's going to have to nuke the thing from orbit, there's no getting rid of us now.

"Do you still think our plan has a chance to work?"

The steady soldier flicks her antennae.

"To be honest, I think the chance of it succeeding has improved rather than gone down. If anyone can pull it off, it's going to be you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I respond dryly. "All I have to do is face down three tier seven demons. Nothing at all."

She shrugs.

"It's not like you'll do it alone. There are thousands of us here, compared to that, what do they have?"

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Chapter 873: Less Than You Expect But More Than You Think

How does one tier of monster stack up against another? It's a difficult question to answer, contrary to the expectations of many. "Bigger numbers are better, surely" is a sentiment I have heard repeated far too often and from those who should know better. It's amazing how easily you can find idiots, no matter the field. Walk into the highest centres of learning in all of Pangera and I assure you that there will be a blithering idiot occupying one of their most prestigious seats.

This is why I seldom trusted any members of the Shapers circle who weren't prepared to go out into the field and put their knowledge to the test. Just because you trust in the theory doesn't mean you shouldn't go and put that faith to the test. That was my approach and though my fellow mages were proven correct ninety-nine times out of a hundred, I learned so much from that one nugget that my entire perspective was able to hinge around it.

So, a tier five monster fights against a tier six. Who wins? Well, that depends on so many factors that the question almost has no meaning. Perhaps the most important factor, the one with the greatest influence

over the result, is the respective strength of the cores. A monster from the second stratum can still defeat one from the fourth, even overcoming the tier gap, if it has a large advantage in core strength. The strength of the core reflects not only how much mana the monster has access to for spell crafting, or how much evolutionary energy was available to that monster, although both of those are massively important, it also speaks to how adapted to mana the monster's body is.

The core is not just a storage container after all, it's so much more than that. And the effect that it has within the body of a Dungeon creature is immense. Monsters are made from mana, it flows through them, strengthens them, moulds them. A monster who has more mana flowing through them has numerous advantages compared to one who is more deprived.

And that is just one consideration. The rest could fill a book in the telling.

- *Excerpt from 'Raising Monsters' by Granin Lazus*

For the next hour the advance of the Colony throughout the demon city continues to be unstoppable. More troops charge up the ramp and pour into Orpule, securing locations, moving down onto the second plate, subduing the local population. It was a huge concern of ours that there might be a non-demonic presence to be found here, one that might object to our management, or indeed our existence, but thankfully that hasn't turned out to be the case. At least not according to the reports I get whilst sitting and waiting. My legs have well and truly healed enough for me to be up and moving around but I've decided that just waiting here will be the best course of action for the moment, with my pets by my side.

Already the carvers have begun to move in and redecorate the place. Repairing the damage and securing ground around the pillar for the construction of a command nest in which the Colony safely occupy. When we take over a place, we really don't muck around. The previous rulers aren't even dead and already we're paving over their castle and building our own over the rubble. If we weren't insects, it might be considered rude.

The ramp itself will have to be taken apart rather soon. Not something anyone is looking forward to I wager. Just looking at the thing is absolutely gob smacking. Such a construction on Earth would have taken months, even when taking into account modern equipment. The sheer ludicrous mass of the thing, all that stone... my mind boggles. And now it all needs to get knocked down. It isn't as if we can just leave a walkway up to a city that we control, that throws away the best defensive advantage that the demon plates have!

I watch all of this activity happen around me, frankly a little bored as I wait for Brixin and her allies to appear. Perhaps I should have a little more tension about it, but I just can't summon the adrenaline right now. After flying through the air twice during the battle I feel as if I've bungie jumped from a helicopter that is itself attached to a bungie cord hooked to a rocket. I've been thrilled out, no excitement left.

Which is why I'm able to act so casual when the trio do finally make their appearance.

They come much as I expected, on a disc that they likely used to escape from the city whilst we were still busy hurling literally tens of thousands of MP worth of magic at the sky. They approach slowly, cautious, but not fearful, as indeed by the customs of their people they have no need to be.

We learned a great deal from AI when it came to demon wars and how oddly ritualistic and formal they are. It seems odd to me that the one type of monster I would expect to be ripping each other apart the most are the ones with the most rules when it comes to conflict. Supposedly it has to be this way since, once upon a time, shredding each other for any reason at all was exactly what they did. Just imagining the more advanced demons engaged in the same behaviour as their larval kin all over the stratum is enough to give me the willies.

As the three powerful demons approach on their disc I begin to feel a little trepidation. The three of them combined could quite easily blast me out of existence if they worked together.

[You sure they aren't going to attack me?] I ask AI as the fiery eye floats nearby.

[They will not. *Confident*. A formal war is not a fight to the death. There are separate rules for those.]

Of course there are.

I draw some comfort from the knowledge I gain through the Vestibule. As the demons draw closer the Colony has of course taken note and mustered a sizeable force to respond to the first sign of aggression. Thousands of ants are converging on my position whilst trying not to be too obvious about it.

While they are still some distance away, I feel a powerful mind reach out and connect to mine.

[I have received word that my assault on Roklu has failed. Since Orpule has also fallen into your hands then I can only declare that I have lost the war and my territory is forfeit.]

And it burns her too. Brixin is *not* the sort of demon who is happy to lose. In fact, her obsession is entirely based around conquest and expansion.

[The Colony is powerful,] I shrug my antennae, [far more so than you demons seem prepared to give us credit for. This will not be our last victory in the third stratum, far from it.]

The former lord of Orpule's eyes blaze with rage and *hunger* at my words, which is precisely what I wanted to see.

[That being the case, we find ourselves in need of a demon to partner with. One who would be willing to embark on assault after assault, leading demons to fight by our side and helping to administer to the cities that we conquer. As I understand it, most demon cities will not rest quietly without a demon ruler at the helm. Could you think of a potential city lord who would be willing to enter into a partnership of this type?]

Brixin positively burns with the strength of her obsession.

Hook, line and sinker.

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Chapter 874: Ponder, Ponder

The council had thought long and hard about the potential of bringing Brixin on as an ally. Whilst she was an enemy in one sense, that wasn't really how demonic society functioned. She was expansionist by her very nature, she needed conquest and control the same way Grokus had needed to stuff his face

and wallow in luxury, and if there was one thing I had come to learn about the demons it was that they were never looked down on or questioned for following their obsession.

A hunger demon might not exactly be happy to be the victim of a murder demon, but they understood it in a very pragmatic way. Murder demon gotta murder. By the same measure, Brixin hadn't been doing anything immoral in attempting to wrest Roklu from my family, she didn't see herself as our enemy, to her we were merely an obstacle. Being defeated surely rubbed her the wrong way though, but by offering the olive branch, we turned a potential rival into a powerful ally.

After all, not only did we recruit a tier seven demon who was more than willing to assist us in bringing more cities under our combined rule, we also gained the tier seven monsters who remained her allies. A powerful nucleus that we could build our own demonic legion around. It was unfortunate that the strike team she'd sent to Roklu had been wiped out in its entirety, those had also been potential recruits after all, but I was extremely glad to hear that the defence had gone as well as it had.

I'd have to give Leeroy a big pat on the carapace when I saw her again. She must have pulled out all the stops to win that fight. The fact that all of the Immortals had somehow managed to survive even this trial left me gobsmacked. They really were living up to their moniker.

Although for some reason, all the healers in Orpule spent about an hour howling with laughter after the messengers from Roklu had come in. I'd have to find out what that was all about.

The following few hours were fairly dull. Hammering out the details of our agreement with Brixin, she wasn't pleased we'd already knocked down her residence and started building an anthill on it for one, and laying the groundwork for the short to medium term strategy.

Right now, both Orpule and Roklu were severely depleted in terms of combat obsessed demons. Multiple wars and invasions meant that whilst both cities still maintained a healthy population of more reticent monsters, the out and out fighters were largely dead. Indeed, Orpule in particular was massively low on frontline demons, all of their remaining tier sevens were of the casting variety, which wasn't a bad thing overall but meant they lacked balance.

Overall, the demons had a rather relaxed attitude toward the death of their own kind. I mean, it was hardly surprising since all they had to do was lean out over the edge of the plate to see literally millions of infant demons ripping each other apart, desperate to ascend. Under population was a problem that was guaranteed to remedy itself given enough time. Which was what we demanded Brixin agree too.

The Colony had very much overextended itself recently, much as I'd told the council after the invasion of Roklu. We needed to continue our expansion, that was true, but the breakneck speed my siblings had been working at would only lead to disaster. Even now there was a mountain of work to do before we could properly integrate Orpule and the surrounding territories! Already tunnels were being excavated and infrastructure prepared to install a lift system to connect the second stratum above to the new city. Which meant expanding the encompassing defensive positions above. Which meant more outposts, possibly new nests, more scouting and patrols, which required more ants, which meant more hunting for Biomass and cores. On and on and on it went!

Time! We needed time!

Perhaps as much as a month, at least two weeks. Time to consolidate, to raise new ants and make use of the resources we had managed to acquire. We'd only just managed to expand into the third stratum and had done literally nothing to make use of that fact! Surely there was some incredible stuff down here that we could use, if only we gave ourselves a chance to find and experiment with it!

Gah! You'd think every member of the council had turned into Vibrant the way they were acting lately. After convincing Brixin of our timetable she had made her way back into the city to ponder her new circumstances and work out where the heck she was going to live. She'd gone from having no cities under her control to two in the matter of a few sentences, so I'm sure she has a few things to process.

[Hmmttttt? What's going on?]

[Hey Sarah. Welcome back to the world of the waking.]

The big bear rolled over before she jerked herself upright.

[Wait! What happened!? Is everyone okay?!]

Her panicked reaction to what she might have done while she rampaged tugs at my heartstrings. Imagine having to deal with that every time you came back to yourself. Just terrible.

[It's fine,] I assure her, [Vibrant led you around the city until you ran out of steam thanks to not fighting anything, then you collapsed and the Colony moved you over here. According to everything I've heard and seen, you did an incredible job and saved a lot of ants over this fight. Well done!]

The Asura Bear sags in relief, lying flat down on the ground again.

[Thank goodness,] she says.

I wander over and give her a pat on the back.

[Hey. Don't stress so much, we've got you. You might have been on your own before, but now you have thousands of us who are on your side. You'll be taken care of, okay?]

The bear rolls her head in muted embarrassment, bringing her paws up to cover her eyes.

[I can't get used to that,] she admitted, [turning toward the things that I avoided for so long and embracing them. I just feel so scared.]

[No need,] I say dismissively. [Say the word and we can get a hundred thousand beings, each one far more intelligent than I am, to help sort things out. Do you really think you have a problem so big that the Colony can't fix it?]

I wave my antennae at the city around us.

[... No,] she says. [I can't imagine what your family can't handle.]

[Oi,] I poke her with a leg. [OUR family.]

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Chapter 875: Old Friends

The air burned as Torrifex strode past, superheated by the seemingly endless energy that rolled off the massive demon in waves. Omen had not been able to determine exactly what species the tier eight monstrosity was, but it clearly had some root in a fire affinity. The demon had many other weapons he could deploy, Omen had witnessed this, but the oppressive heat that ignited the oxygen around his frame was enough to defeat some enemies alone.

[Keep up little mouse. I have no patience for your dithering.]

Omen stumbled as his indignation rose, but he forced down his ire to keep his thoughts level.

[I am not as fast as you,] he stated, [it takes longer for me to cover the same ground.]

The bigger demon snorted in contempt.

[You are the weakest servant our God has ever used. I do not know which is greater, the honour done to you, or the disgrace inflicted upon the rest of us.]

He wanted to retort that he did not ask to be contacted by that horrific creature, but he knew that Torrifex would likely take his head off for the insult. His carefully honed survival instincts weren't needed to deduce that much, his captor did not tolerate any form of disrespect towards his 'god'. Omen wasn't sure if he was prepared to accept that the terrifying being he'd encountered when evolving was divine, but he was certain that he never wanted to stand in front of it in his physical form. Such an experience was to be evaded at all costs, that's what his instincts told him.

At his lack of response the giant monster snorted once more before he put his head down and continued his breakneck run. He wasn't the fastest creature the reincarnated human had seen since his rebirth not that long ago, but he *didn't stop*. Torrifex seemed to be a boundless source of energy that needed no rest as he continued his endless journey. Odin did not share his bottomless reserves of stamina, far from it, he had crafted himself to be a burst hunter, capable of incredible strength and speed but only for a short, intense period of exertion. This marathon run was torturous to him.

[Where... are we ... going?] he managed to push out as he steeled his mind against the pain in his body.

The giant demon only turned to grin back at him.

[You will soon see, little mouse. We are almost there.]

The former assassin almost sagged with relief but wouldn't allow himself to show such a sign of weakness in front of his captor so instead he grimly continued to put one of his clawed feet in front of the other. After another twenty minutes of running, he began to make out something in the distance, something other than the constant, monotonous outcroppings of rock that jutted up from the stone all around them. This looked too uniform, too structured, to be a part of the natural landscape.

Indeed, the closer they drew, the more clearly the construction stood out against the rugged stone of this place. Walls, parapets, perhaps even a medieval style gate. This was the first sign of civilisation that Omen had come across in his second life and it surprised him how much the sight buoyed his spirits. Humans hadn't been kind to Omen in his past life, and he hadn't been kind right back to them, but to see something familiar, even if it appeared more similar to something he would have seen in a history book, lifted his spirit.

The appearance of the two demons didn't seem to have the same effect on the figures who occupied the distant fort. Even as he approached, he could see the flurry of activity taking place. Figures dashed across the parapets that loomed ever higher the closer they drew, enormous gates that on Earth he would have said were impossible to construct, let alone hold in place using medieval technology.

Before they drew much closer a heavy presence descended on them, threatening to press the young demon into the ground. He felt his mind broken into through means he couldn't comprehend before a voice thundered inside his head.

[BEGONE DEMONS! This place is forbidden to your kind! Leave, or feel the fury of the tower!]

If he hadn't experienced the impossible weight Arconidem's presence had exerted, Odin might have thought that the owner of this voice was truly powerful. Whoever had reached out to them was definitely stronger than he himself, but was nothing next to the demon 'god'.

[I go where I please, worm! Stand aside or face the wrath of Torrifex!]

The massive demon beside him erupted in flame, searing the air and sending a massive cloud of smoke and ash billowing from his shoulders. It wasn't clear if the creature was confident or just suicidal to Omen. If Torrifex wanted to charge headfirst into this garrison then he could do it by himself. Those walls must be over a hundred metres tall! Trying to be unobtrusive, he began to sidle away from his captor, utilising his Stealth Skill in a lowkey manner as he created some distance.

[Foolish monster. Do you really think you can storm these fortifications by yourself? The tower has held this ground for hundreds of years and has never fallen! Your arrogance will be your downfall!]

Omen concurred.

[Alone? Of course not!] Torrifex roared mockingly with his mind. [You have guarded this place for so long that you can no longer remember why. Pitiful!]

A nervous feeling stole over the weaker demon as he glanced toward the horrifying beast by his side. What did he mean he wasn't alone? Omen would be no help at all against a force such as this! Did he refer to something else? Mind spinning, the former assassin began to arrive at some horrifying conclusions. Unaware and uncaring of his companions' fears, Torrifex grinned a horrific grin before he clenched his hands in fists and brought them together in front of his face.

The face of the mighty demon began to furrow in concentration as his hands erupted in blazing fire. The flames roared brighter and brighter as he poured more energy into it until his fists glowed incandescent white, chasing back the darkness of the third stratum for kilometres around. The tongues of flame that burst forth writhed and licked at the air, rising as high as the tops of the mighty wall in the distance.

The sheer *heat* that boiled from him caused Omen to scurry to create distance lest even his demonic flesh be burned by it. The unbridled power of it was insane!

Whatever Torrifex was going, the garrison clearly weren't prepared to allow it to continue. Huge balls of light ignited on the walls before they were launched through some means, arcing high into the air before they reached the apex of their climb and began to fall towards the demon who ignored them, focusing all his attention on his two fists. Just before the spells converged on him, Torrifex brought both

fists above his head and roared, then he slammed them down, driving all the flame and heat directly into the rock beneath his feet.

The stone shattered as if impacted by a meteorite, shards of stone flying in all directions. A rolling wave of heat expanded out from the impact point like a shockwave before the stone around the mighty demon literally melted into scalding black lava that bubbled and hissed evilly.

[WAKE UP!] the force of his mind staggered Omen as he tried to flee, **[THE MASTER CALLS!]**

A moment later the magic launched by the garrison struck home, the impact powerful enough to knock Omen from his feet though he was now hundreds of metres away. He rolled across the rocky ground, scattering the ever-present larvae as he did so, his mind awl with frantic thoughts. Had his damned abductor survived? Was he free at last?

The air hung still in air as all parties waited for a sign.

It came moments later. The ground shivered, as if it feared what was to come, before a new aura began to rise, one filled with a boundless thirst.

[I COME!] a new voice roared within Omen's mind.

The ground rocked beneath his feet and he staggered to the side, halfway to rising.

[Come sister!] Torrifex roared triumphantly, **[there is much to be done!]**

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Chapter 876: Leisure Time

The origins of the mother tree are difficult to determine, even for us. Her children have been consulted on many occasions but not even the most talkative Grove Keeper was willing to spill even an iota of their parent's secret history. What we can say with certainty is that she was spawned somewhere between the third and fifth strata, most likely several hundred years after the Rending. As the interests of the Colony moved alongside her own, the tree and her people became something of an ally to the family, but even so there has always been a certain standoffishness to the mother tree that is not present in her children.

Despite the best attempts of the Diplomants, there has been little to no success in drawing closer to the tree herself, she seems content to exist in almost total isolation with only her children allowed anywhere near her actual body.

After she aided the Colony during the initial Legion War, more to spite her enemies than out of any genuine affection for ants, we have always been predisposed to her people and have had many favourable engagements with them over the years. The Eldest in particular seems fond of the Bruan'chii and famously makes a point of visiting every grove they come across, something the diplomatic wing of the Colony greatly dreads. The Eldest has caused many an incident with our enemies, and allies, with their casual 'visits', but curiously, never once with the Bruan'chii.

Despite the mystery that still surrounds their progenitor and matriarch, the folk of the mother tree continue to be a source of wealth and friendship to the Colony. We can only assume that this is in line with their parent's goals.

- *Excerpt from 'Notes on Dealings with the Bruan'chii' by Historiant.*

"Are you sure you aren't being lazy, Eldest?"

"Positive. I'm conserving my energy, storing it all up like water filling a tank. Nothing is being wasted here, I assure you."

"Stop slacking, Eldest!:"

"Oi! I resent that! I'm actually doing something right now!"

"Slacking!"

"Dammit! Don't you have things to be doing rather than throwing your scent-jibes my way?"

"We *are* working!"

"Ah. That's true..."

An unfortunate side effect of being ants I suppose, they can be working with their mandibles and have their claws full of materials but none of that stops them communicating through scent! Despite objectively being very busy, the team of ants working on construction in front of me are still quite capable of flinging their banter at me without missing a beat. Curse this extra layer of convenience!

Ah well, it's not really all that distracting in the end. With my plethora of mind constructs I'm perfectly capable of holding a dozen lines of thought all at once, so exchanging words with my siblings occupies merely a smidgeon of my vast mental capacity! It feels good to have such a powerful brain.

As I absentmindedly continue my conversation I focus much more of my attention inwards, towards the Vestibule. With thousands of ants within the city and more working above, in the second stratum, and below scouring the plains, the organ is awash with energy, the collective Will of the Colony feeding into my being after being magnified through the Nave. The thoughts and feelings, the desires and *drives* of all those thousands of ants fluttering within, a constant stream of them.

It's not something I often do, in fact it's something I usually avoid doing in a very deliberate way, but I can reach into the stream and take hold of a single drop, one specific sliver of thought, and experience that little wrapped up parcel of Will like a vignette. I've gotten much better at doing this lately, since I have been almost exclusively using this method to track Brilliant through the thoughts she unknowingly supplies me. Now that I have a little time on my mandibles, I've decided that it might be a good idea to actually experiment and play around with this ability.

So here I am, plonked down in the centre of Orpule as several teams of workers build and modify the city around me, poking and prodding away at the vast sums of energy pouring through me at any given moment. Guided by divine providence I reach within the flow with my mind and take hold of a drop of Will.

The Eldest really is slacking, but I suppose it's fine. It's the Eldest after all!

"HEY! Yes you, the soldier over there! I'm NOT slacking off! I'm testing some things over here! Alright?! Being the Eldest doesn't make it okay to slack!"

The ant in question jerks with surprise at suddenly being yelled at, almost dropping the chunk of stone she had in her mandibles. As I settle down and relax once more, the surrounding ants all scratch their

heads in confusion, turning to look at the poor soldier and then back to me. For her part, the soldier shrugs it off admirably and gets back to work, not thinking too deeply about what I'd had to say.

I know that because I checked on her through the Vestibule again.

Something odd occurred to me though. It was almost as if my siblings nearby reacted to me a moment *before* I'd jump up and start throwing pheromones at them. This isn't the first time either. The more attention I pay to the thoughts and feelings of the Colony, the more I start to realise that the Nave may have done more than simply amplify the energy I receive through the Vestibule.

It's almost as if the connection were leaking back the other way.

Which isn't a comfortable thought, I don't really want the Colony exposed to my thoughts and feelings, they're so much less productive than what they provide to me! The last thing we need is to have all of the ants struck by indecision, a lack of care to detail and an allergy to proper planning! It would be a disaster! I'll have to experiment more with this.

Pushing that worrisome thought to the side, I continue to practice monitoring the flow of energy, dipping into it to draw out a single 'piece' of it and letting that wash through me.

A mage ant who specialises in Earth Magic, her mind bent to shaping the stone in front of her, determined to shape a sturdy home for her people.

A scout running messages, her legs sore and aching from constant movement but a burning desire to help her family keeps her moving forward.

A general coordinating teams, ensuring she positions herself correctly in the grid to apply her aura buffs to as wide a radius as possible. So long as there are others working, she will remain in place to assist as best she can.

Vibrant is running! Fast, fast, fast, fast, fastfastfastFASTFASTFAST! If she moves fast enough, she might even catch up!

A core shaper looks across at her pets, who she carefully crafted when they were cores and then raised from the moment they were reconstituted. They are like her own grubs, but she will sacrifice them for the Colony should the need arise. Nothing is more important than her siblings.

Brilliant is thinking, scheming, her mind racing at a hundred kilometres an hour, like it always does. A rare opportunity where the Eldest has let her off the hook and she needs to explore! To learn! To seek out the truth! Constantly in the back of her mind the mana is spinning as she absent mindedly trains her Skills. She's on the verge of a breakthrough, she can feel it!

The ease at which she can handle mana is just unfair. Even here in a game world, talent is a real thing.

I keep reaching into the pool, taking out parcels of Will one by one, letting the experiences of the Colony flow through me.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 877: The Lesson

The history of organised religion on Pangera is a troubled one, though that could be said of many other institutions that exist on the planet. I do not seek to make excuses mind you, I am simply observing the universal truism that when groups of people of different, or even the same race, gather together, there is inevitable conflict. So few records exist of the time before the Rending, at least that are publicly available, and almost none of them speak of a church or faith, though there are hints here and there, basically nothing can be drawn from them that allows us to make a solid determination. Religion existed pre-cataclysm, that is all we can say.

In the post-cataclysm era, things are much more clear, though they are murky in the first two centuries following the turmoil. It is in this time that the Church of the Path begins its ascent. It isn't known exactly where or when the church itself was founded, though the church itself claims that the Prophet Yillian was the progenitor of the faith after he received a divine solicitation from the System itself in the mountains that came to be named in his honour. There is no direct reason to contradict this claim, there is simply little other supporting evidence.

It is also throughout these centuries that the hidden cults of the Ancients began to expand their influence within almost every society on Pangera. Although this didn't come to light until more than a century beyond this point, from examining the historical record we have been able to identify and track the spread of their influence. Though never large in number, the various cults have always managed to exert undue influence, despite most of them being purged every few centuries by the authorities they tried to infiltrate.

The other predominant faith based organisation is the Tower. Though ostensibly a place of learning and academia, the teachings of the scholars have taken on the weight of religious dogma over the centuries. Though they would vociferously deny the charge, the trappings of the Tower and those of a church are almost indistinguishable. As to the object of their worship? In some respects, they worship themselves, but it would be more accurate to say that the scholars and their devotees worship the potential of the collective civilisations of Pangera, as if the people of this world were each a seed of something divine.

- *Excerpt from 'Pangera and Faith' an essay by Elric*

There was certain weight in the air when Beyn communed with his flock. A solemn mood that permeated through the space around them as each member of his burgeoning priesthood lowered their head in silent contemplation of the glory that had been revealed to them. The words of the Great One, the ways of the Colony, it was a coda for life that each of these people had only touched the edge of, yet already found themselves in awe of it.

And so much more was to come. Beyn had been the first to evolve his Class and it had been a torturous decision, trying to weigh which aspect did he want to specialise in the most? It was as if the System had removed all his vital organs and then told him he could only have one back. How could he possibly live without the others? How diminished would his life become without the full range of possibilities that had been offered?

Ultimately, he had listened to his heart and made the selection that spoke most deeply to him, the one that he felt would allow him to best serve his people. The Antbishop Class had called to him strongly, the ability to radiate the dedication and peace of the ant had been like a siren song for his very soul, yet he knew he would be better able to work if he took a different path. The Antorator. Though he was a

humble man, even Beyn was forced to admit that his capacity for preaching was unusual. He could talk for days on end, his words flowing like wine and sinking deep into the minds of all who heard him. With this Class he would be able to spread the word of the new path far and wide, so long as he had an ant by his side.

"Is this going to take much longer?" a wave of pheromones jolted him from his thoughts.

He turned to see that his new companion had moved away from the wall and approached him directly. A beautiful creature of dark red chitin with wide, multi-faceted and intelligent eyes.

"Not march loonger," he clumsily produced the scent to reply, his Skill too inferior for clear communication.

She flicked her antennae in the gesture he now clearly understood as the ant version of a shrug and moved away again, giving the Antmancers the space they needed to continue their prayers. When the final hour of their eight hour vigil had finally passed, the gathered Antmancers rose to their feet before they bowed low in one unified motion. Only then did they step back and lower their hoods. For a long moment none spoke, each savouring the feeling of revelation and peace that came from such a deep meditation, but then a few murmurs were shared amongst the acolytes, then a few more, and finally some hushed conversation broke out amongst them as they shared their insights.

Beyn felt peace wash through him at the sight and sound of his brethren engaged so deeply with their faith. As one who trod the fresh ground of the new path, he could ask for no better companions on that lonely road than those currently in this room. A sentiment he should share with them more often.

"Give me your ear for but a moment my brothers and sisters," he invited them, his tone warm and a broad smile on his face.

The sound of his voice was almost magnetic, dragging the listeners' attention to him as it rippled throughout the room. So long as his friend Diplomant was nearby, his powers of speech were elevated to an unprecedented level.

"The time has come for us to embark on a new mission. No longer can we be content to be few. No longer can we be content to walk beside the Colony, our benefactors, secure and safe as they bear the risk of protecting us. This path will not be forged by being so timid, so tame."

He spat those last words out as if they were poison on his tongue. All around him his comrades wore similar expressions of disdain and disgust.

"I call on you all to *reject* security, to walk away from the peace and shade that the Colony provides and be the messenger that they deserve. We must walk *before* the Colony, *beside* the Colony and support from *behind* also. Whatever it is that they need, we will become! I ask you to be selfless in your devotion, as the Colony is selfless! Now is our chance to truly embrace what it means to follow in the Great One's steps, to be held in the mandibles of their light and heed the scent of their words!"

Such was the power of his speech that his listeners appeared almost drunk with it, although they were heavily inclined to agree with him even before he started speaking. His additional Class Skill that allowed him to release pheromones that would sway the mood of his listeners wasn't needed here to instil the devotion that had already taken root.

Before him all of his fellow believers were ignited in their passion and united in their devotion to the message. From here they would march out, not only beside the Colony in times of war, but across all of Pangera, proclaiming the glory of the Colony and inviting others to be a part of it. The coming of the Great One was incredible news and it would be horrifically, *unthinkably* selfish to hoard it to themselves.

All would learn of it in time!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 878: Adventure

"Look, it might not have turned out how you expected, but you've still done a lot for the Colony. You can't let this keep you down forever."

"..."

"I mean, is it really that painful? Being alive? You've given yourself a whole new opportunity to fight for the Colony and help your family. Think about all the difficult struggles and hard work that we have in front of us, you'll be able to be there and shoulder your part of the burden. You might even have the chance to face down an opponent stronger than yourself once more and... you know... die... again... over and over."

"Are you making fun of me Eldest?"

"Would I do that?!"

"Yes. The healers have been laughing at us for a week straight."

"Hey, I'm not like them, alright? I want you to be happy, I just don't want you to get killed trying to achieve that."

"What if that's the only way that I can achieve happiness?"

"Then too bad. You think we worked so hard to bring you up to tier six so you could go ahead and die after one battle? You must be outside of your head, Leeroy!"

THWACK!

"Ouch! Hey, weren't you trying to cheer me up?" she protests trying to protect her head from my vicious antenna.

Oh, right.

"It's hard not to get annoyed when I see you sulking. Your siblings are all working their butts off and you're lazing about feeling sullen because you're *still alive*! How ridiculous can you get?!"

"The Immortals just want to serve the family in their own way. We all agree on our perspective!"

"The issue I have is that you want to serve the Colony *once*. I made it clear to you soon after you were hatched exactly what I thought of that. Well, I suppose in the end you've got your wish, you'll be able to die for the Colony as much as you want now!"

Leeroy collapses back onto the ground again at my words, the way she's been ever since she and her fellow immortals realised just what they'd done when they evolved. I can finally understand the waves of hilarity that the healers have been experiencing since the news spread. The idea that these particular ants, more desperate to sacrifice themselves than any others, have instead made themselves almost impossible to kill, is just too delicious for words.

I actually took a look at Leeroy's core to take a glance at the specific organ that they purchased, the Phoenix Fire Organ. To be honest, it's a powerful piece of work, a very expensive gland to be sure. From what I understand they didn't buy it but instead were offered it as part of the evolution they chose. As a consequence of so much value being put into this one element, the rest of their evolution was fairly sub-par, most of the Immortals did the smart thing and poured their spare evolutionary energy into stats to compensate, making themselves tougher and stronger which went a long way to helping them stay alive long enough for the Phoenix Fire to charge.

It's not as if they can't die, they absolutely can, but due to their specific circumstances, they've made it so much harder. The only way for them to be destroyed is if they are defeated too quickly for the organ to charge up. It takes time to build the energy necessary to 'resurrect' them from near death and return them to perfect health, the organ simply can't remain that charged permanently, it'd break down in minutes. The other way is to put them down again just after they heal, since it'll take much longer for the Phoenix Fire to return to full power a second time.

The problem is both of those strategies rely on overcoming the absurd toughness of the Immortals. Their carapaces are all highly mutated and the vast bulk of their stats are in Might and Toughness, making them extremely durable. On top of that, the armour produced by Smithant only gets better as time passes, making it even more difficult to actually put a wound on these ants! Killing them twice? Not even a tier seven was able to do it!

Which makes it even more hilarious that this happened to Leeroy of all insects.

In the future, as they mutate and improve the organ further, who knows how difficult they'll be to defeat as they continue to grow? I never would have thought it, but the Immortals have actually turned into a powerful and useful force for the Colony. I expect them to see a lot of deployment when we start expanding into the third stratum.

"Look, I didn't come over to try and give you a motivational speech. I want you off your backside and back to work along with the rest of your group. There's a ton of work to do and soon enough there'll be more fighting to do. If you keep wallowing in your own self-pity then I'm going to pick you up and drag you around the third stratum myself. If I even hear from someone that you've been slacking off then I'll return from the edges of explored territory to whack you on the head. So pick yourself up and get back to it."

For a moment longer the soldier remains flopped on the ground, a dejected example of an ant.

"Fine," she says as she starts to pick herself up.

I watch her stand with a critical eye, one antenna still raised threateningly.

"By the way, I don't want you to warn the Immortals who haven't evolved to avoid this species that you've picked. Nobody can tell them what to pick."

"What? They'll end up picking this one for sure!"

I shrug.

"That's their fault then. I'm not saying they can't pick the one they want; I'm saying the exact opposite. They can pick whatever they want, without influence."

Leeroy fumes a bit but she can see where I'm coming from. She eventually nods in acceptance.

"Alright then. Go check in with Advant, I think she had something that she needs you to do. It'll be a little while before your new armour is repaired so you'll have plenty to do helping with building until it's time to fight again."

Having dealt with the Leeroy problem I finally release a deep sigh. The moment she and the other Immortals had arrived in Orpule they'd been a solid weight dragging down on the Vestibule, their misery sinking into me through the Will they provided me. I had to do whatever it took to get them moving and back on the go just to stop them distracting me! I mean, I didn't enjoy seeing Leeroy be so miserable either, but it's not like she didn't do it to herself. I probably could have cheered her up by promising that she could go and fight an ancient or something and get smashed to paste twice in a second, but I refuse to play into her stupid obsession! The sooner she gets over it the better!

All right then, where's the crew? I need to get Sarah, Brilliant and my friends together, it's time to get out and get levelling again. I won't rest until the latest champion of the Colony has risen to the point where she can contribute to the Colony!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 879: Suit Up

[So this is the full armour set, huh?]

[Yep, it's heavy, but it works very well.]

I didn't get a good look at the full suit during the assault but now that I can have a real sticky-beak up close I have to say that fully armoured Sarah is intimidating as hell. She is already a well-built monster in terms of mass, but with smooth, interlocking plates of armour covering her massive frame she has an altogether different level of presence. It's enough to make me start to consider what a full suit of armour would look like on me. Covering up my incredible, glittering carapace would be a total sin, obviously, but if the end result was this badass? I'd consider it for sure.

[What are you looking at?] Sara asks a little uncomfortably as I circle around her.

[Huh? Oh, I wanted to get the complete picture of how you look with the armour on. It's cool as hell, and looks like it does the job well.]

The fact that it's already repaired after the assault goes to show how little of a beating she took, surprisingly enough. There are still scratches and scuff marks all over the metal, but from what I understand all that needed to be done was replace a few plates and she was good to go.

[You sure you want to take it out with us?] I ask her.

[I really need to get used to fighting in it, so it makes sense that I take it out. The extra weight makes a lot of movements more awkward so I want to practice.]

[Fair enough. We should see plenty of action, so you'll get your chances.]

I have a quick look around.

[Alright then, I think we're all ready. Invidia, you can spit her out now.]

Revealing his wide, toothy grin, Invidia opens up and pushes the bedraggled Brilliant out of his pocket dimension mouth and back into reality.

"Is that really necessary?" she complains as she shakes herself off like a soaked puppy and starts fastidiously cleaning her antennae.

"We both know how little you want to sit about while we wait for everything to get ready. If you aren't happy that we needed to do this then examine your own attitudes," I tell her plainly. "Now we have one more evolution to achieve for you before we can stop power levelling and its time to go out there and get it. Have you made all the Skill purchases and completed all the mutations that you could do?"

"Yes," she says and I get the impression that she would roll her eyes if she could, "I did all that ages ago. Have you?"

I have not.

"Never mind that."

[How about you Tiny? Crinis? All ready to go?]

I get a firm nod and a thump on the chest from Tiny.

[Yes, Master. I've fully recovered from my injuries.]

[Great. Thanks everyone. Well, we might as well get going then.]

As I turn to lead the group to the newly installed lift that will carry us to the ground a giant eyeball flares into existence in front of me.

[HOLY SMOKES! Geez, Al! How many times have I asked you not to do that!?!]

[Many.]

[Yet you still do it...]

[I find it... amusing. I will join you on this expedition also.]

He couldn't possibly have said the word amusing with any less inflection on it. I also notice that he didn't bother asking... ah well. It's not like I could stop him from tagging along if he wanted to. Having a tier seven demon in your back pocket isn't something I want to turn down either.

[Fine. Try not to hassle me too much for information, alright? I've got some stuff I need to work on and I can't be telling you about middle-earth all day.]

With the group finally assembled we walk out onto the lift which hangs over the edge of the plate, exposing us to the frankly dizzying drop beyond.

"Let it rip!" I cheerfully wave to the group of ants operating the lift and they accommodate us, triggering the mechanism and starting the descent.

I'm not sure exactly how we power these things... but however we do it is going to get a workout on this trip. Invidia and Al can fly, but between Sarah, Tiny and myself we are packing a fair bit of heft. As we slowly drop I look out over the edge of the lift into the still-breathtaking view of the third stratum. It blows my mind even now that this much open space exists inside the planet. It makes no sense! Yet here we are, slowly lowering ourselves down into the world of blasted black stone covered in fire and ash. Also demons. Hundreds of millions of ankle biting demons.

I get the feeling it won't be long until the Colony comes down here and starts aggressively pruning the demon population in order to farm Biomass. They'll need to strike a balance between feeding the insatiable hunger of the family and allowing enough demons to rise to tier six to join the population in our controlled cities. I've no idea how they plan to manage that but I'm sure they'll have thought carefully about it. Perhaps we should even 'sponsor' certain promising young demons, make sure they max out their cores before they evolve to try and increase the quality of the demons that eventually join us...

That's actually a good idea... I was bound to have one sooner or later!

It takes an hour for the lift to reach the ground and we are more than happy to jump off by the time we reach it. Being cramped together on that small platform is far from comfortable.

[Alright, here we are folks! Since the Colony is going to chill out for a little while, we have a few weeks in which we can go explore, fight and conquer to our heart's content without worrying about anything crazy happening back here. First priority is to get Brilliant up to the next tier so she can finally count as a real monster and then the rest of the XP can be funneled into us! It's a long road to tier seven so we better get moving!]

I haven't forgotten the warning that Granin gave me, that I wouldn't be really safe in this stratum until I evolved once more. It'll be a long time before I manage it, but I'm determined to keep pushing forward until I'm strong enough to secure the future of my family. Tier seven is only going to be the start of that journey.

[Alright, we already did a ton of fighting in the tunnels to the west, so I think we want to head north and then see how things go from there? We all happy with that?]

A few nods from the group around me is all the affirmation we need.

[Nice. Let's get to it!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 880: The History

The Colony recoiled from the reprimand of its Eldest and most respected member as if it had been bitten on the antennae. It has not happened many times, when the Eldest directly criticised the actions and

decisions of its family, but each occurrence has resulted in great upheaval and a paradigm shift that changed the course of the Colony forever.

This instance was no different.

Warned of impending disaster if the reckless pursuit of expansion at all costs was not reined in, the council and the Colony as a whole drew back and began to reflect. With the conquest of the demon city Orpule newly completed, there was a tremendous feeling of momentum amongst us, one that we felt could lead us deeper into the Dungeon and catapult us into a large scale invasion of the third stratum as a whole. Only when we drew back, only when we focused inward, did the cracks begin to become evident.

The need for reconnaissance of the new territories had become great, too great. In order to cope with the vast swathes of tunnel and open Dungeon that needed to be carefully mapped, examined for resources and assessed for threats across both the second and third strata meant that older paths that had become considered safe were abandoned. Even those tunnels that lay between the main nest and the lands of the golgari had become criminally under patrolled and many a scout shuddered at the thought of what the Eldest might have said had they missed an invasion along those routes.

These irredeemable oversights were immediately corrected and maintaining the watch of all approaches to the nests became the highest priority, as it should always have been.

But the lapses did not end there.

So large had been the need and demand for metalwork, construction expertise and earth magic within the third stratum that progress on other projects had stalled, or even regressed. The best forged materials produced by the carvers had been used to create the chains and lifts needed to utilise the lifts to move materials between the second and third strata, which had significantly delayed construction of the gates required to secure the newly constructed nests. There too, a lack of attention and focus had nearly cost the Colony dearly. Desperate to push an overstretched workforce, the carvers had gone well beyond their tolerance, overworking themselves to the point of collapse, forcing the intervention of the unseen enforcers. Whole teams of builders had been lost to the shadows, not seen for days at a time as they were forced to recuperate and recover their peak condition, forced to suffer inhumane periods of relaxation and rest.

In this the wisdom of the Eldest was once again revealed. Nothing shamed the carvers and teams of construction ants more than poor craftsmanship, examples of which could be found everywhere in their latest work. As the Colony withdrew and consolidated, the carvers rededicated themselves to the pursuit of perfection, tearing down everything they had built with the slightest deviation and constructing it from the ground up once more. Filled with righteous fire at having to correct their own mistakes, the standard that they would seek to meet from that point on was established over this month.

Likewise the brood tenders were forced to regroup and reflect on their decisions. In the never ending push to fight and expand the territory of the Colony they had raised many grubs to become fine soldiers, scouts and generals. The boundless hunger of the Colony for workers to build and construct had encouraged them to evolve huge numbers of carvers. Critical for both of those endeavours, mages were also churned out of the antcademies in droves.

Yet the other castes had become under-represented. Healers were getting swamped under the workload, more and more injuries were left to recover on their own, with little but a scant helping of Biomass to speed the process. The core shapers had been used to plug the gaps left by the lack of scouts and soldiers in the upper layers of the Dungeon, but this had caused them to draw down their wide ranging core gathering expeditions, creating a shortfall in the Colony's supply. Worst of all, the brood tenders found that they themselves no longer had the capacity to support the demands of the Colony, having been so determined to meet the workloads of other castes, they had selflessly overlooked themselves.

A careful and meticulous review of all brood tender tasks took place over that month, before a restructuring and reinforcement of the caste was established. Never again would they fail the young charges who depended on them for care. There must always be capacity for the brood. This was paramount.

All across the operations of the Colony these errors and lapses were uncovered and swiftly rectified. Like molten steel the Colony purified itself over and over again, hammering out the imperfections and doing whatever was necessary to ensure that they would never repeat themselves. A feverish energy gripped each and every member as they realised how close to disaster they had come and the vast amount of work that was required to secure the future of the family without leaving any gaps for our enemies to exploit.

This was the true wisdom of the Eldest, the true lesson that lay hidden within the rebuke they had delivered. An immense amount of work was required to expand the territory and power of the Colony, it was true, but far more was needed to do so faultlessly, without leaving gaps that others could exploit.

In seeking to push ourselves and expand quickly, moving to take on what we saw as the greater challenge, we had in fact been shirking the true labour, being lazy.

Which could not be borne.

Also at this time the Colony completed its mapping of the tier four evolutions, a subject of thousands of hours of careful research. The evolution lists had been poured through, each organ and possible mutation investigated to see what best suited the needs of the Colony. For each caste, two main variations became the default evolutions where more specialist evolutions were not required.

The soldiers came in two main types, offense and defence. All soldiers were tough and strong, with thickened carapace, reinforced mandibles and extra muscle added to the head to power their jaws. Yet the defensive battles that the Colony had fought demonstrated a need for a hardier breed of soldier. Higher Toughness, regenerative plating, innate healing factor, magic resistant carapace coating, these ants did all that they could as they continued to evolve to harden themselves against all blows. The offensive soldiers, whilst not sacrificing their survivability, focused on enhancing the penetrative power of their mandibles, such that even the armour of the Legion wouldn't be proof against them should they fight again. Thickened muscles, sharpened mandibles, extending jaws, friction reducing mandible coating, acid hardened edges and strengthened legs. These ants were like the living sword of the Colony, determined to cut through anything that stood in their way.

The scouts split into two main variants, focusing on speed and long range bombardment. Although both remained swift, the faster of the two specialised in ranging far from the nest, engaging in rapid-response actions and using their streamlines profile and hyper-mobile legs to reach truly absurd top speeds.

Utilising chameleon carapace coating, they are stealthy and capable of remaining undetected via even magical means. Devoting their attention to a hit and run style of combat, the other main variant of scout dedicated themselves to accruing damage over time, employing their highly developed and potent acid alongside their pressurised firing organs to achieve stunning accuracy over long distances. Though larger than their brethren, these ants need never draw close to their enemies, spying and firing on them from great distances.