

Chrysalis 881

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 881: Finger Pistols

Isn't it incredible how quickly time flies when you're having fun with your friends? It seems like only yesterday that we set out from Orpule to scour these new hunting grounds for delicious, delicious prey. By the by, I don't want to give the impression that demons are tasty, they certainly aren't. Their hides are tough as steel and like everything else I've been forced to eat since I was spawned in the Dungeon they have a truly disgusting flavour. I'm starting to forget what good tasting food was even like! Perhaps there never was something such as 'tasty', perhaps that was just a lie that I've carried over from my previous life. Certainly it doesn't seem likely that I'm going to find a monster that is anything other than disgusting to consume.

No, the taste wasn't good, but the Biomass points sure were! Even if we are hunting monsters of a lower level of evolution than ourselves, with the stomach mutations that we have, the penalties are as reduced as they can be and the creatures of this stratum are so *rich* compared to even the shadow beasts of the layer above. It makes sense when you think about it, the spawn rate of monsters on this level is *insane*, and it's not even a wave right now. All those demon larvae ripping into each other, it all has to go somewhere right?

When they get up to tier four and five, these beasties have had a right ol' feast, and then, stuffed full of Biomass they retreat to these tunnels to try and hunt down others who had the exact same thought that they did in the hopes of pushing through to tier six and achieving 'true' demon-hood. That's when they run into us. Gweheheheh.

It took over a week to power level Brilliant all the way to level forty and by the end she was able to be genuinely useful to the process. Her offensive output is still questionable, but her ability to shape magic continues to develop at breakneck speed. Once she unlocked light and shadow magic she continued to play around with them as much as she possibly could, to the point it was frequently annoying. Several times I had to dispense some THWACK justice when I was suddenly blinded by a lightshow blasting out of her antennae. It was often so bad that the little ant appeared to have a disco ball flashing atop her head, beaming rays of light out in all directions.

If there was a positive to the process it would be that it encouraged the rest of us to lift our game in terms of practicing our magic skills. I've been grinding obsessively all week, far more than I usually would, with Crinis and Invidia following along the trend. Even Tiny has gotten involved! As we've hunted and fought I've frequently seen the big ape pointing his fingers and zapping sparks of lightning all over the place. I thought it was adorable at first, the massive bat-faced gorilla wanted to join in the magic practice, but the more he did it, and the more time passed, I actually think he did get better, more accurate and quicker, when releasing his lightning. A totally unexpected event!

But now the time has come for the hatchling... although I probably shouldn't call her that considering she's about to hit tier five.

"Alright then, Brilliant, you've done it, achieved level 40."

The little ant puffs up with pride.

"Was there any doubt I would?" she boasts.

THWACK!

"With all of us helping you get experience from monsters who would rip you up and tear you apart with one hand claw tied behind their back? No, there wasn't any doubt. You might have *just* started to make yourself useful in this hunt, but once you've hit tier five, you'll be a far more valuable contributor."

"Ouch! I was just expressing a little confidence!"

"You aren't lacking confidence, nor have you ever lacked confidence. Humility and gratitude is the thing I'm looking for."

I give the no-longer-hatchling a hard stare with all ten thousand lenses in my compound eyes and she wilts a little under the heat, but not much. She might have no achievements under her carapace at this point, but Brilliant is certain that they will come with time. Is this some sort of inbuilt attitude that all champions get in order to push them to leadership roles? Vibrant was never this overly arrogant, but she never had a shred of doubt about her either. Now that I think about it, pretty much none of my siblings have ever expressed much in the way of doubt. Perhaps this lack of questioning can be attributed to the nature of monsters? No idea. I'm not usually the reflective type myself!

"Alright then, you know the drill. We've maxed out your core and tossed in a rare core to boot. Mutations are maxed. Make sure you go through all of the possibilities with a fine tooth comb and pick the option that you think melds best with you. There's no need to rush, so take your time."

"I'm going to have to go into the mouth aren't I?"

"Absolutely. You want to just hang out here in the open while you evolve? That's madness!"

With a tired sigh the little ant climbs into Invidia's mouth and promptly vanishes from this dimension in order to evolve.

[Make sure you spit her out if she gets too big, Invidia,] I warn the demon, [we don't want any accidents.]

[*I knowsssssss. No worriesss.*]

That's precious cargo right there, the second champion born to the Colony since it was created. We've only seen a glimpse of what she's capable of so far and I suspect there are great things in store for Brilliant in the not so distant future.

[Now that Brilliant is ready to evolve, what are we going to do?] Sarah asks. [Is it time to head back or are we going to keep hunting?]

[Keep hunting!] I declare. [Now that the little pest isn't going to soak up so much of the experience, it's time for us to get our rightful share! The other thing I want to do is head deeper into the tunnels and see if I can get a gander of the next level down.]

[Oh! That would be interesting. I've never heard how many layers there are to the third stratum.]

[I've no clue either,] I shrug, [but there's one way to find out.]

Chrysalis

Chapter 882: A Whole New World

Hello dear readers! Tolly here, once again reporting on my ongoing adventures in the lands of the Colony! The town of Renewal and the surrounding farmlands were a picturesque and inspiring sight that told a tale of the strength of the living spirit. People who had risen up and rebuilt their lives after a devastating disaster at the hands of monsters with the help of, of all things, monsters. Getting to know these people and listen to their stories was a powerful experience that went a long way to diminishing my fear of the ants, which was likely why I felt compelled to make my request when I was already deep within the grand nest known as Anthome.

"You want to meet the Queen?" Emelia blinked.

"If at all possible," I smiled politely as my two guards emitted an intense 'oh no, not again' aura.

A look of amused confusion flickered across my guide's face as she considered my request.

"I'm... not sure that you'll be allowed, I don't think anyone has asked to do that... ever. You understand that we need to go deeper into the Dungeon to do as you ask? The Queens don't live this high up."

"I assure you I am no stranger to the Dungeon," I gave the poor girl a pat on the shoulder, "and if I might be pardoned for a moment, did you say Queens? There is more than one?"

"Oh, yes. There are hundreds of Queens, possibly in the thousands, the Colony is very protective of them and don't like to talk about them extensively. You'll need to give me a moment and I'll find someone we can ask."

Emelia walked off a short distance to communicate with a few ants whilst I waited with a wonderful feeling of excitement and trepidation coiling in my belly. There really is no better way than plunging head first into danger to help one feel young. I recommend it to all my readers! In moderation, obviously!

A few minutes later Emelia returned with a rather large ant, nearly as tall as I was by her side. I felt the creature reach out to my mind and I allowed the contact. A chance to speak with the ants directly?! How invigorating!

[You wish to see a Queen?] the touch of the monster's mind was alien, almost cold in the lack of strong emotion.

On the other hand, I could feel how calm and efficient she was, a creature of logic and reason. It was reassuring to say the least!

[Yes please,] I asked, (never forget your manners, readers!), [I would consider it a great honour to lay eyes on the Queen.]

[The Queen?] she repeated back to me and I realised that there was a distinct difference in the way we used those words. [It will not be possible to see The Queen, she is very deep right now, but I believe we can facilitate a visit to the Queens who are staying below us. I will warn you that you will be guarded very closely during this visit. Are you still willing to go?]

What a thrill!

[I am,] I nodded, [and I am sincerely grateful for the opportunity.]

Emilia smiled widely when we concluded our discussion and clapped her hands together in excitement.

"I haven't seen a Queen in over a year," she beamed, "what a wonderful day!"

My two guards looked positively ill.

- *Excerpt from volume eight of 'Traveling Tolly in the lands of the Colony' published in the Monthly 'Pangera Gazette'*

Well I be darned. There really is a whole 'nother level just like the first in the stratum. I mean, I didn't really have any reason to doubt it, I was given the information from reliable sources after all, but I just couldn't help but refuse to believe until I'd seen for myself. Perhaps it's still the Earthling in me. One giant open chasm inside the planet is unbelievable enough, but two? One right on top of the other? It makes no sense! How can this possibly be real?!

And yet, there it is.

[That's a long drop down,] Sarah observes and I can't help but agree.

[Sure is.]

We both poke our noses off the edge of the pillar and stare downward at the plate city below and the plains that stretch endlessly through the smoke and ash which swirls even thicker here than above. The mana down here is noticeably more dense than in the area above, not nearly as large as the difference between stratum, but enough that I was able to sense it. Once we decided to head down, it only took a few hours for us to reach the bottom of the tunnels. From there it was a matter of finding a path that led to an opening into the space below, which we eventually found and now are staring down a whole new pillar, with an unsuspecting and vulnerable demon city awaiting conquest.

There sure as heck was a lot of lava in those tunnels though, particularly at the bottom. It felt like I was digging for diamonds the rate at which lava kept flowing from each and every direction. I can still see it now, pouring out of the stone tunnels above and falling the vast distance into the plains below. In fact, there are hundreds of such lavafalls I can see from here. Is the third stratum equivalent of rain?!

[Should we go down, do you think?] I ask.

[Oh no. What if they were hostile? I couldn't possibly escape. In fact, how would I even get down?]

Good point. Bears might be good climbers, but they weren't designed for a kilometre vertical climb on stone. Not even close.

[I wonder who's in charge down there, you have any idea AI?]

The giant eye flares at my question.

[I do not. I am most curious to know.]

[Well why don't you head down and take a look about? You can scratch your itch and then come up and tell us. I'll even trade some information without being a pain about it.]

I thought the demon would leap at the chance to pick my brain a bit more but to my surprise he doesn't, wavering in indecision.

[Something wrong?] I ask him.

[It may be dangerous for me in this city. I have passed through it before and my reception was... unpleasant. I am reluctant to return.]

[Huh.]

I stare down at the city below for a little longer before I shrug.

[Ah well, if we can't find out now, it isn't a big deal. It's not as if they're going to launch an assault on the layer above or anything. We can go back into the tunnels and keep hunting until the hatchling... I mean, Brilliant, is done evolving. I've been getting some decent levels and I'm keen to keep that wagon rolling!]

The big bear nods.

[Me too! To think I might actually reach tier seven, I never thought it would be possible in the past.]

[Hopefully we can still last in the second stratum once we manage it,] I sigh. [To be honest I almost prefer the cold to this incessant heat.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 883: Use The Force

[Gah! Another ghastr! Who's turn is it?]

[It's mine,] Sarah replied grumpily, [I'm willing to give it away though...]

Tiny immediately shot his hand up, an eager expression on his face.

[Settle down you big lug. Sheesh, you don't even get to eat 'em when they're done. Are you this greedy for experience as well now?]

The big ape gives me a long slow nod before extending a sombre thumbs up.

When it comes to hoarding things for myself, I'm always greedy.

I can practically hear the thoughts running through his head and it irritates me no end.

[We're going to do this democratically. I'm not handing you any more freebies just because I'm feeling lazy.]

[I-I would like the chance to hunt it, master.]

[Crisis? Got the hunger for levels I see! Good! How about that Tiny? Already another contender in the ring.]

He looks down at the black patch on my carapace, the pain of betrayal shining in his eyes.

[Get over it, you drama queen.]

Visible confusion ripples across his face.

[No I'm not explaining it.] I turn to Sarah, [are you sure you want to give this up? They reward a good chunk of experience, you know?]

The big Asura Bear shudders, a comical sight to say the least.

[No, it's fine. They're just so creepy. I'm happy to give up on it.]

[Alright then. Invidia? Are you in on this?]

...

[Okay! I thought I should be polite and ask rather than just assume... you know what? Fine. Next time we'll just put you straight in the draw. No need to glare at me like that.]

I mean, I know he's an envy demon but I felt it'd be rude to just throw his name in the hat without bothering to ask. The look he gave me though... ouch.

[I'm also going in on this one, so that means all four of us are in. Don't grimace like that Tiny, did you think I was going to sit them all out? You all know the drill, get ready, three, two, one!]

Tiny played rock, he always plays rock. The shadowy goop on my back stretched out to make scissors, Invidia formed a coloured barrier of paper and I formed scissors out of the ground beneath our feet.

[Who wins in this situation? I can't remember...]

[Master...]

[Maybe we do best two out of three?]

After a few more rounds we determine that I'm the winner. By which I mean, I determine that I'm the winner. Gweheheheh. The experience will be mine! I've been meaning to test a few new things anyway. I've been diligently practicing my force magic over the last week and now I think it's ranked up to the point where I can do some real damage with it. I have a few new spell forms up my carapace and I genuinely think that the oomph I'm able to pack into even the basic force bolts is enough to cause some real damage if I use them in the right way.

Compared to the limp wristed slapping they were when I first started using this particular affinity, they've now upgraded to a solid right cross.

Heheh, stupid ghost, you're in for it now. My minds spin into gear, winding up the force mana construct and spitting out the energy I need before I start shaping it into the required form. The moment my spell is ready, I fling it out at the unwary ghastr, catching the demonic remnant by surprise.

The mana slings out in an open loops that catches around the monster and snaps shut around it, locking it in like a vice. Hah! You might be an ethereal douche-bag, but you sure as hell can't slip through a net made out of mana! The moment the spell takes hold, the hideous creature spins toward me and tries to reach out with its dreadful claws but instead finds itself bound tight. With an almost contemptuous attitude, the ghastr begins to flex its might, aiming to break free.

Foolish monster. I find you're lack of faith... disturbing.

With the many brains I have at my disposal, a number of spells have already been in the making and they are unleashed one after another on the helpless foe before me. Condensed force bolts slam home like hammer blows, buffeting the beast and buying time for me to close the distance. As I prepare my dash, I send out another, more potent force bolt. Unlike the others which travelled in straight lines, this one curves through the air, striking down at the monster from above and smashing it down to the ground.

Filled with rage, the ghost finally breaks free of the cage I imposed on it, but it's far too late.

DOOM CHOMP COMBO!

With a few devastating snaps I shatter the final remnants of resistance within my enemy and its energy begins to dissipate as I start to read over the notifications from the system. Oh yes, give me that juicy XP. I need to many damn levels before I evolve again, I can hardly wait!

Man, it hasn't even been that long since I reached tier six and already I'm yearning for tier seven. Evolving is addictive as hell.

I'm so caught up in the moment of my victory, of thinking of the future and the short and sharp battle that I just participated in that I almost miss the tiny thread of thought that wriggled through the air, seeking out one particular member of our group. So faint, less that a whisper, practically just a breath, but even so it manages to snag my attention, but only barely. If I hadn't been practicing my mental skills so thoroughly then it may have slipped past entirely.

Insidious and careful, the thread of mind magic drifts through the air as I try to focus on it, to grasp it with my mind but it's so quiet I can barely sense it, and it moves like a leaf on the wind, drifting here and there on an unseen wind until finally it connects to the giant bear patting Tiny on the back as she comforts him for missing out on the fight. The moment it touches her she stiffens and sits up straight.

[Sarah...] it whispers.

[Jim?!] she gasps.

And then I'm there.

[BROOD KILLER!] I roar as my minds descend on that thread like a pack of wolves, herding the thread from all sides until I can strangle it in a vice grip. [TRAITOR! Your flesh will feed a thousand grubs for what you've done, worm! You hear me!? Do you think the Colony will ever forgive?! You can't slither away from us forever!]

[I can try...]

Like gossamer, like a spider web, the thread of mind mana falls apart in my grip, dissolving into nothing no matter how hard I try to hold on. Desperate to trace it I cast my minds out wide, hunting for any sign of that mana but there is none to be found. That punk worm must have worked his non-existent butt off to achieve this level of skill with mind bridges, it's the only way he could hope to connect to Sarah again without the Colony latching onto his location.

But still, this is a lead. There's no way he could reach us here from the second stratum, no hope at all. In fact, he can't be that far away, he must be burrowed into the tunnels between the layers.

[I believe it's collapsing behind him.]

[Dammit!]

Because of course it is. The only thing this idiot is good for is betrayal and running away! But we have the scent and I sure as hell am not going to let him off that easy. Run! Like the wind, Anthony! A thousand thoughts try to intrude on my mind as we run. I spent time with Jim. He helped me escape from the golgari as well. He's been Sarah's friend for decades. But none of these things matter, they count for nothing anymore!

To push those impulses away I sink myself deep into meditation, letting my emotions run cold. I can't afford to get distracted when the trail is this faint and hard to follow!

[Crisis? Do you have anything?]

[He's too fast. I'm not able to catch up to him.]

[Don't push yourself too hard. As long as he doesn't get too far ahead then we can follow the trail no matter where it leads.]

The worm must have purchased an organ or skill that helps him hide his mana. I know he's not that far away, but I can't seem to grab hold of his core despite the fact that I should be able to sense it at my level of mana sight. I have a dozen minds out sweeping ahead, hunting for every little skerrick of energy that leaks beyond the fleeing coward's control and it's barely enough to keep track of him.

It shouldn't be all that surprising, considering he's a worm, but he's one slippery character.

[Wait!] I shout as I sense something change. I screech to a halt as I cast my senses about, trying to determine what has happened. My sense of Jim is fading, but not in the way it was previously. The direction has changed...

[He's going up! He might be going to breach the surface!]

[The surface?] Crisis asks, confused.

[Onto the plains! I think he might be leaving the tunnels! Quick! We need to climb!]

With his prepared passage speeding him on his way it takes far less time for the worm to wriggle his way up than it does for us, as we run and climb our way out of the tunnels our hold on the trail grows ever more faint. By the time we reach the plains I can barely sense him at all, only Invidia and Al are doing any better.

[*Thissss way.*]

[You're sure?]

[*Alwaysssss sure!*]

[Good enough for me, let's run!]

Back on the plains now, the ground beneath our feet carpeted in battling demon larvae, we continue to run as somewhere ahead of us, just below the surface, Jim continues his flight.

[Come on Jim!] I hurl the thoughts forward wildly, blasting out a wave of mind magic which may or may not even reach him. [Didn't you have something to say? Come back! Or are you unwilling to face up to your own crimes?!]

The lack of reply only serves to cause anger to bubble up within me but under the effect of meditation I allow it to flow past me.

[Sarah is right here.] I taunt, [you sure you don't want to let her know why you betrayed her? Did you know she almost died because of you? Why don't you come on back and apologise? My mandibles will welcome you.]

[Anthony!] Sarah growls at me with her mind and I turn my head a little to stare at her.

[... sorry,] I mumble.

If he heard me or not, Jim sends nothing back to us as he continues to increase the gap between us. As the long minutes of running continue to tick by we begin to see what might be his destination. Far ahead a pillar slowly becomes clear through the ash and smoke of the third stratum, and it's a big one. The plate city has at least four tiers, though it's difficult to see it right now, it's possible that a few smaller ones might be hidden from view at this distance.

It doesn't make much sense, why would he be heading for a city? What demon inside is going to protect him?

[*Something comessss,*] Invidia hisses.

[Any idea what?]

[*No. Sssomething ssssstrong.*]

[Keep running. We don't give up the chase.]

At least, that's what I would have preferred, except a few minutes later a powerful mind reaches out towards us.

[HOLD,] it bellows arrogantly. [Do not trespass into the lands of your betters!]

There's something about the touch of this mind that rubs me the wrong way. I feel as if it's tickling my memory somehow, but I just can't put my claw on it... a sense of trepidation rises in me.

[Slow down a second,] I tell the others as I race out ahead.

[Identify yourself!] I fling the demand out wide.

[Insolent youth I will do so once you have extended the courtesy.]

[*Massster. The trail is fading towardsss the city.*]

A moment before I decide to throw caution to the wind and commit to the chase once more, an unwelcome sight rises up from the plains and stalks atop a high peak not a hundred metres away.

Bejewelled, decked with bright, shimmering cloth and accompanied by two humanoid figures in robes that ride upon its back, the creature looks like nothing so much as a large lizard.

Ka'armodo?!

Just. Perfect.

Chrysalis

Chapter 885: Diplomatic Immunity

Fantastic, just what I needed, another giant lizard in my life. Haven't I dealt with enough of these things?! Considering our minds are connected, I carefully shield my exasperation and reply.

[Hey there, lizard bro! How's things? Life treating you well? Try not to dry out too much down here, gets a bit warm in these parts. Make sure you, you know... stay moist. Or whatever a lizard does.]

I can practically feel the indignation radiating from the big fella.

[I am Kaarmodo,] he hisses at me, [do not refer to me as a lizard!]

Despite still having their hoods on I can clearly tell the two attendants are glaring at me. What were those guys called again? I seriously can't remember. This isn't going so well, I'm going to have to break out the ol' Anthony charm offensive and see if I can talk this liz- esteemed kaarmodo around to letting us chase that damn worm into their territory.

Naturally I'm more than a little tempted to just bust through and go running after Jim regardless what this puffed up gecko has to say, but I'm wary of creating another international incident that the Colony will end up having to clean up for me. Making enormous messes and depending on my siblings to deal with it is a habit that I'm quite keen to break. It's getting embarrassing at this point! I'm hopeful that I can reach a diplomatic solution here.

[Of course, my mistake! I would never seek to insult one of the ancient and wise members of the kaarmodo race! May your scales be ever shiny!]

Smooth.

[Anyways. Can we run through your territory and kill that worm? We hate that guy.]

And the quality follow up. Nailed it!

This is what high level diplomacy looks like! Sheer perfection in the realm of communication.

[No,] the lizar- kaarmodo retorts. [Take yourself from our lands at once.]

What?! I'm genuinely shocked, but no matter, I still have one further trick up my sleeve.

[Please?] I ask.

[...]

He's being swayed, I can tell.

[... no?]

See! He sounded much less certain of himself this time around! The negotiation is clearly tilting in my favour! He's like putty in my claws.

[We have no intention of acting against the interests of the wonderful kaarmodo or your slave... helper... people... dudes.]

[Setsulah,] the old sapient grates at me, his mind clearly irritated.

[I mean no disrespect,] I try to give the mind mana equivalent of a thumbs up, [I simply mean to state that we have no intention of bringing any harm to you or your people, we simply wish to pursue our enemy and bring him to justice. That worm is responsible for the deaths of many of my kind and my people would consider it a great service should you allow us this boon.]

Like the mental equivalent of silk, I feel like my words are smoothly seeping into every fold of this kaarmodo's brain. I can already feel the disgust and disdain that he feels billowing up like a rising tide. Clearly the actions of Jim have infuriated the noble mage and he is fully willing to cooperate.

[Leave our lands at once, or I will be forced to view your intrusion as an act of aggression,] the lizard says coldly.

Eh? I thought we were getting along like a house on fire! How could you possibly defend that damn worm!? Once again, the urge to simply ignore the damn kaarmodo and his slaves is almost too strong to ignore, but I forcefully restrain myself, even if it looks as if I'm visibly writhing with the force of effort required to do so. Then a thought strikes me cold.

[Are you protecting the worm?] I ask.

Immediately I feel the kaarmodo and his two servants grasping hold of the mana in the air and preparing to weave it into spells, which causes Al and Invidia to begin doing the same thing and all of a sudden the tension has sky-rocketed through the roof.

Except for with Tiny, he has no idea what is going on.

But then Invidia pauses for a moment and his mouth appears, opening wide before his tongue pushes a still comatose Brilliant out onto the stone ground of the plains.

[Sssshe has grown too large for me to containsss. I can holdsss her no longer!]

He sounds genuinely regretful about that, probably because he had to let go of something, an act that isn't really in his nature.

[Crisis!] I snap out an order, [protect Brilliant! Tiny! Grab hold of her and start running, we are getting out of here!]

[Do you not wish to chase the worm creature? I sense it still,] Al asks me.

[No. Brilliant is more important, and we don't want to start a fight we can't finish. I'm not going to pull the family down just to get revenge on that piece of garbage.]

I try to shield Sarah from my sending so she doesn't have to feel the anger in my thoughts, but I've little doubt that she brushed against them anyway. The giant bear's eyes are quite sad beneath her helmet as she looks into the distance where Jim fled.

[Alright! Chill! We're leaving!] I holler at the angsty iguana and just like that we turn and flee, Tiny bounding over to scoop up the prone Brilliant and bam, we are out of there.

After a few seconds I feel the three figures behind us start to release their grip on the ambient mana and only then do I relax. I can still see the pillar behind us, the giant city fading into the distance as we move away from it.

[We need to learn the name of this city,] I tell Al, [and we need to know everything we can about the kaarmodo there. What is going to be the best way to do that?]

[An envoy from another demon city is almost never refused. Certain. If the kaarmodo do not know the envoy comes from a city that you control, they will have no reason to interfere.]

[Is that something that happens often? One city sends a demon over to another city to ... do what?]

[Negotiate, often for formal war, though long distance mind bridges are also commonly used for such talks. Exchange gifts. Travel.]

[Wait, travel? Are you telling me that some demons are out there on *tour*?]

I can almost feel the mental shrug.

[Demons like me, who crave information of one type or another are often compelled to move around the stratum. Some simply can't stay still for one reason or another. Perhaps their bloodlust is so strong they are unable to wait for a formal war to be arranged, so they travel from city to city, seeking conflict and battle. Others, such as Grokus, may travel to feast on different monsters and Biomass that can be found in different places. It is common.]

Well, that's interesting I suppose. I look down on Brilliant, held in the crook of Tiny's massive arm, she's still clearly in the process of evolving, her carapace shifting in strange ways as her body is restructured beneath her outer shell.

She's an important member of the family and couldn't be risked. I wasn't really worried that we would be in danger from the kaarmodo and his servants, but the possibility that she might be harmed was enough to call the retreat, even more than not wanting to start a conflict. Even so, if we find out that they're sheltering the traitorous invertebrate, then there may be a fight between them and the Colony no matter what I have to say about the matter.

[Anthony...] Sarah breaks into my thoughts.

[I know,] I tell her, [we'll talk when we get back to the city.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 886: Little Talks

There's just something so thrilling about delving deep into the Dungeon my dear readers! I can scarce describe it, the growing sense of unease and foreboding as the mana thickens in the air around you and the tunnel walls close in. Who knows what monster might lie around the next corner? What mystery the Dungeon will throw at you next?

Even if an old duck like me no longer has much to fear in the first stratum I still get a slither of energy rushing through my aged bones.

Except that, under the protection of the Colony, I experienced the most boring Dungeon exploration of my life. The creatures had tamed the Dungeon to a ludicrous degree, carving smooth, elegant walkways and passages, wonderfully constructed staircases with soft, firm padding on the stone, to make the passage of all humans as convenient and comfortable as possible. What struck me as ridiculous was that the ants themselves didn't even use these passages! They had vertical tunnels that they could traverse as easily as you or I walk along a flat road!

If any monsters existed on the path, I didn't see them. Not a single one! It was almost boring...

As we walked, the ants patrolling the tunnels became larger and more frequent. My guide stopped to exchange 'words' with each of them, and when I enquired what they were discussing, she smiled and explained that it was common amongst the Colony and those who lived with them to encourage each other to work hard and to remind them that they take the right number of breaks.

I laughed and said that surely it's difficult to make an ant stop working. Her expression grew serious, a trace of apprehension to her brow.

"Not really," she said softly.

- *Excerpt from volume nine of 'Traveling Tolly in the lands of the Colony' published in the Monthly 'Pangera Gazette'*

I'm surprised at how long it takes for the emotion to bleed out of me as we march back to Orpule. I don't know what I'd expected would happen regarding Jim. I suppose in the back of my mind I always thought the Colony would find him eventually, as our numbers grew and we became ever more capable it was only a matter of time until we got our claws on him.

No matter how good he got at hiding himself in the past, slithering between tunnels and avoiding every fight that came his way, he couldn't possibly be so sneaky as to hide from literally hundreds of thousands of sentient creatures hungry for vengeance. Yet he managed to surprise me. Despite everything, the Colony still hadn't managed to get a sniff of him until now, a testament I suppose to just how deeply and desperately he hid himself. Somehow he even managed to come down to the third stratum, a desperately dangerous place for a creature like him, considering how open much of this layer of the Dungeon is.

And it's obvious why.

I glance across at the massive armoured bear marching along to the side of me. His strange attachment to Sarah was what caused him to betray the Colony in the first place, so I shouldn't be too surprised that he followed her down here, hoping to get in touch with her. I don't know how he spotted us as we roamed away from the Colony but he clearly saw his chance and decided to risk reaching out to her. An idiotic thing to do but I suppose it goes to show the depth of his obsession.

When we finally arrive back at the city we take the elevator up in silence as each of us ponders over the events that have just transpired. My friends don't disturb me, perhaps sensing the depth of my disquiet.

I keep a watchful mind construct on Brilliant at all times, monitoring the changes that ripple through her now larger form and waiting to see if she was ready to awaken, but by the time the elevator returns to the plate she remains comatose.

[Take her somewhere safe and quiet,] I instruct Tiny and Crinis, [and then watch over her. Make sure there's food available when she wakes up and reach out to me before she goes anywhere. I want to check in on her before she starts running wild about the place.]

[Yes, Master.]

With Brilliant still cradled in the crook of his arm, Tiny nodded and began to trundle his way toward the still growing nest built in the centre of the city. I watched them go before I turned to Sarah.

[Let's talk.]

She looked at me for a long moment before she sat with a *thump* and tilted her head back to stare up at the roof far above.

[I'm really not sure what I even want to say,] she admitted.

I didn't say anything.

[Jim was a companion to me for years. *Years*, Anthony. I trusted him. He was my *friend*. I can't just turn around and... I mean... I know what he did was terrible, I'm just...]

As she trails away I can't help but sigh.

[I get it. I understand where you're coming from. Jim was your only connection to the life you left behind, the only person who really understood what it was like to be reborn as a monster in this world. It isn't easy to turn him into a villain in your head, with all the history that's been built up between you. Not to mention, you don't recall the worst of what happened, since you were berserk at that time.]

I wander over to the bear who still hasn't moved and I give her a pat on the back with one leg.

[But you have to understand that, for us, there's no coming back after what he did. Because of him, hundreds, if not thousands, of brood died. Helpless larvae, eggs that never got to hatch. It's never going to be ok. The Colony will hunt him down no matter if it takes a hundred years.]

I let that statement hang in the air.

[That's going to be hard for you,] I continue, [I totally get that. If you can accept it, then you are of course welcome to stay with us, you're part of the family now. Whether you fight or not, whether you contribute or not, you'll always have a place amongst us. You have nothing to prove to us, ever again. If you want to try and save him? Then we may need to part ways.]

[He did it because of me,] she whispered, [we all know it. How is it not my fault?]

I shake my head.

[He did it for him. Don't ever let that thought confuse you, he might have felt like he was doing it for you, but it was for him. He has a weird and twisted view of what's in your best interest, coloured by

jealousy and a need to possess. If he had the chance he would desperately try to convince you that he only wanted to help you, but the reality is he just wanted you to himself. And I think you know that.]

With a final pat on her massive, furry back I turn and leave her to her thoughts. It's a shame that everything is so complicated on her end, the emotional attachment built up over years of, if we're honest, incarceration together. For me? For the Colony? It's just so, so simple.

[Burke! Get your butt over here!]

[What's a butt?]

[Never mind! Got something big to talk about.]

Not needing to be told twice, the powerful scout zips over to me with impressive speed. Clearly she hasn't skipped leg day, by which I mean the day dedicated to mutating the legs.

[We had a sighting of Jim the worm, to the north. We tried to pursue but he ran into a section of the stratum near a large city. A kaarmodo was guarding the way, and they stopped us, but let him through.]

When I name the traitor I can feel my sibling grow still, a cold rage blossoming in her heart. She nods, slowly, processing all that I've said.

[What do you want us to do?] she asks.

Whatever I say, they'll do right now. If I demanded that city come down, they would make it happen. I sink into meditation to try and let my emotions quiet down.

[We can't rush,] I say, my mental voice suddenly cool, [I've just asked the Colony to draw back and secure its position, I won't ruin that by having us overreach now. We won't be ready for a confrontation with the kaarmodo for a long time. Right now, we need information. I want that whole section of Dungeon mapped, I want to know how many demons and lizards we're dealing with. Most of all, I want the edges of their territory watched in case that worm comes slithering back our way. Got it?]

[It will be done, Eldest.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 887: Wriggle and Worm

The hot air of the third stratum burned against his skin and Jim cursed as his tender flesh seared in the open air. He wasn't built to be exposed like this which was probably why they demanded he come out of the protective soil for this discussion.

The demon city of Arkesh loomed high above them, the five tiers of plates disappearing in the smoke and ash far above. He shuddered and the rings that made up his long form coiled and twisted uncomfortably.

Now that he had revealed himself fully the three kaarmodo who awaited him at the base of the pillar stepped forward, accompanied by their attendants they approached him as he writhed slowly with pain.

Without preamble he felt the combined weight of their minds slam into him, smashing his thoughts aside in the most brutal way possible. If he had any illusions as to how high he was held in their regard, then this deliberate, crude intrusion would make them clear.

Fortunately, or perhaps not, depending on the perspective, Jim was under no illusions as to what the kaarmodo thought of him. To them, he was a tool, nothing more, nothing less. He viewed them in much the same way, and if it helped him achieve his goals then he would gladly suffer some indignities. After all, hadn't he lived imprisoned by the golgari for a decade? Compared to that, rough treatment from the giant, sentient lizards was nothing.

[We have protected you, as we promised we would,] the lead kaarmodo declared, [this is evidence enough of our sincerity, I am sure?]

Jim wanted to snort and scoff at the ridiculousness of that statement. Protect him? They'd very nearly left him for dead! If he hadn't slithered directly towards their city they may well have let that idiot, Anthony catch him! But he couldn't do that. The kaarmodo were touchy when it came to questioning their morals, regardless of how questionable they were.

[I am very grateful for your protection,] he said, using the power of his mind to find a little more balance within his own head, shoving the intrusive presence back just a smidge. [I would also like to think that my efforts have also served to more clearly demonstrate the threat that the Colony represents. I hope that the old ones will be more receptive to my warnings now?]

The three lizards watch him lazily as their servants stood to attention around them. It was so difficult to try and read a kaarmodo, their faces almost never moved, if they wanted to they could stand perfectly still for days at a time, their bodies not shifting position in the slightest. It was unnerving to look at.

[We are still unconvinced that the danger is as great as you suggest,] the kaarmodo to the left told him, breaking into the conversation for the first time. [We have heard dire warnings, but until now we have seen and heard little of this 'Colony'. A single ant, no matter how powerful, is of little concern to us.]

So stupid. Despite the pain he was in, Jim was reminded of the human gesture he might have engaged in so long ago, slapping a palm against his forehead. He no longer had palms, or a forehead, but the sentiment remained. How could they be so *foolish*?

[If a single ant can become so powerful. Reaching tier six, with multiple tier six pets...]

He left the thought hanging, trying to allow the supposedly aged and wise kaarmodo to fill in the blanks on their own.

[Are you trying to suggest there are thousands of such creatures? All ants, with a comparable level of strength?]

The tone of the thoughts was loaded with derision.

[No,] he quickly denied, [but given enough time they will be able to amass resources at a speed that will shock you. I have been inside their nest, I know how fast they work. By now there will be tens of thousands of them, hundreds of thousands maybe. They can spread over an enormous amount of Dungeon and funnel resources to a few individuals. Surely you see the threat?]

[These are all future concerns, far off and theoretical. Little to justify our continued efforts to protect you *now*.]

If he had any teeth he would have grit them in frustration. These damned lizards were such an unwieldy and slow instrument to work with! When his betrayal of the Colony had failed, when the golgari and Legion had fallen short of eliminating the pest, he had despaired of ever being able to pry Sarah away from the insects who pushed her to the edge of her sanity in their own defence. They were far too on guard for him to ever be able to approach the nest again, no matter how hard he tried, so he had been forced to watch and wait, something he was well used to doing.

When the Colony had expanded to the third stratum, he felt he might finally have a chance. He knew that land in the third was more heavily contested than it was in the second, all he had to do was try and find some of the ant's new neighbours and give them a nudge. The empire of the great lizards, the Dune Kingdom, seat of the old ones, had been a perfect target. Too proud to ever settle to treat monsters as equals, a conflict with the Colony was inevitable. All he had to do was provide a spark.

[They have already conquered Orpule. That makes two cities that have fallen to the Colony in a matter of weeks. It won't be long before they come here. I predict that you will begin to see scouts poking at the edges of your territory in a few days, perhaps less.]

They certainly would be here, looking for *him*, but the kaarmodo didn't need to know that.

If only he hadn't reached out to Sarah in that moment, then Anthony and the Colony would still have no idea he was here and there would surely have come a better chance to reach her. He was confident that if he just had a minute to talk to her, a little time to explain himself, then she would see things as he saw them. The Colony would destroy her in the end, he was certain of it.

But with him, he could protect her, keep her safe from herself.

[Your warnings are dire, but we are yet to see sufficient evidence. If you wish to continue to enjoy our protection, then you should honour your end of the bargain. Continue to be our eyes on this 'Colony', track their movements. If they seek conflict with the kaarmodo as you claim, they will learn how foolish it is to wage war against the timeless sands.]

Sensing the dismissal, Jim gratefully rolled his lengthy form and dove once more beneath the crust of the plains. Though the rock was hot, the air was even more so and he was grateful to once more be shielded from it. He would return to the lands of the Colony, though he would have to be doubly careful for now, but he was confident that the tinder had already been lit.

All he had to do was be patient, then he would get his chance.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 888: Big Brain

Tiny looked down at the little one cradled in the crook of his arm and felt a smile creep up on his face. It was good to protect the little one, and make sure that she survived as she slept. Keeping her safe when she was awake was much harder. Tiny preferred time like this. It made him feel good, feel strong, when he cared for the little ones. They took care of Tiny, brought him food, were family with the master, so, he would care for them in turn.

The other thing that made him feel strong was the curve of his arm as he held the little one against his chest. This angle, this position, allowed him to flex his big bump of an arm muscle to an impressive degree, something that he was sure to slowly emphasise as he moved, so that all could appreciate the wonderful sight.

In truth, it absorbed his attention perhaps too much.

On several occasions the little one had tricked him by asking him to pose and then escaping when his back was turned! Trickery! One time she had asked him which arm was thicker, his right or left and Tiny had become so absorbed in the question he had remained as still as a statue for six hours. Only when the master had realised that both he and the once-hatchling had gone missing did he return to find Tiny looking down at both arms, flexing and straightening them one after the other with a thoughtful frown on his face.

Luckily the master wasn't too mad, though he did check Tiny's core just to make sure his Cunning stat hadn't changed.

Tiny found that a little insulting. No he hadn't changed his stats! He just devoted most of his brain to hitting things and muscles, which were a key part of hitting things. Now that he had more brain than before, he could think even more about hitting things and muscles! He didn't mind it so much, though sometimes he wished his shoulders were a little larger and his brain a little smaller.

(It should be noted that Tiny has truly, ridiculously, *absurdly* large shoulders.)

[Tiny. I believe that Brilliant may be stirring,] the voice of his sister breaks into his thoughts of shoulders large enough to hoist a mountain on top of and his gaze flashes down to the small form that he holds in his arm.

The shadow has spoken truly, the young has begun to twitch and wriggle, much as the grubs do, in small increments as she returns to the world of the waking. Moving gently, he places her down on the stone floor with one massive palm before he steps back and peers carefully at the waking ant.

He doesn't want to make a mistake and have her run off on him again. The master would get annoyed and then for his next evolution his brain would have to be even bigger... which would mean less energy for more important things! His fists curl in determination which does interesting things to his forearms but before he can become distracted he snaps his eyes back to the little one.

That was close...

[I have informed the master, he will be with us soon,] his sister informs him and Tiny gives her a quick nod of gratitude.

That means he won't have to focus for too long, which is a good thing. With the imminent arrival of their creator, they settle in to wait. Little brother decides he doesn't want to float any longer and settles himself on top of Tiny's head, his two stick-thin arms supporting him. It's a shame that the little brother has such a weak body, he'll never know the true joy of smashing things with his fists, which makes Tiny a bit sad. On the other hand, the little brother is very good at smashing things with his brain, which Tiny can't do.

Perhaps smashing things with the brain is just as fun?

He considers for a second before he shakes his head in denial. No. There is no chance that is true, but the little brother enjoys it, so that is good. At the movement of the head beneath him Invidia stirs as he is forced to adjust his position and Tiny quickly feels a connection snap into being between the two of them.

On the other side of the bridge the giant ape can feel his little brother's mind, not so little right now, the weight of that ponderous brain looms like something that Tiny doesn't think he could lift.

[*Be stillsssssss,*] the little brother chides, before his eye flitters down to his resting place's massive frame. [*Your sssstrength will be mine one day!*] he declares.

Tiny shakes his head again, causing the little demon to hiss with irritation. He knew the little brother would yearn for his great power, a pity he will never be as huge as Tiny.

Then the hatchling springs awake, leaping up onto her six legs and pointing an antenna fervently behind them.

[Look out!] she cries over a hastily crafted connection.

Both Tiny and Invidia immediately turn only to see nothing behind them at all, only a wall. Perhaps she wanted them to see the wall? Before the pair can lean in closer to more thoroughly inspect said wall there is skittering noise followed by a thump behind them and they turn back to see the hatchling splayed out on the ground, each of her legs bound by a coil of shadow.

[W-when?] the newly evolved ant groaned.

[Since before you woke up,] the sister said. [Stay still until the master arrives and I won't mention your attempt.]

[Fine.]

She tried to escape! Tiny realises this and thumps one massive fist into his palm before he turns to his sister and gives her an energetic thumbs up. The patch of darkness that has bonded itself to the wall wiggles a little and sighs, before a tentacle extends and moulds itself into a matching gesture that Tiny happily bumps his own fist against before he settles back.

Teamwork. It feels nice to have others he can rely on. It took him a long time to understand that.

Shortly after, the master arrives, rushing up in a blur before stopping suddenly and looming over the little one in a cloud of dust. At the last moment, the shadowy restraints slip into the stone and vanish allowing the hatchling to stand once more.

[Thanks guys,] the master tells them, his honest gratitude shining over the connection, warming each of them like a gentle flame, [I really appreciate it.]

Then he pokes and prods the little one a few times.

[Now let's see what you've done.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 889: Blooming Potential

I'm kind of surprised that the hatchling, I mean Brilliant, didn't try and escape after evolving, but here she is obediently waiting for me after waking. Has she finally learned her lesson? That would be a good thing indeed! Growth! Actual growth! And here I thought I was going to have to change her name to Massive-idiant.

[Well, well, well,] I look down on the emphatically no-longer-a-hatchling and clack my mandibles happily, [tier five. You made it to the big leagues! A big bad ant now! This is actually the level that the majority of the Colony hasn't reached, you're now part of the elite.]

I can tell that she wants to reply something to the effect of 'naturally' but knows that she'll get a thackin' for it. As she should! Who did all the work!?

[I feel good,] she eventually says, [strong. I feel like I can see things more clearly than I could before.]

[Oh? You mean you understand things better? Or your literal sight has improved?]

[...Both? I think?]

[Interesting. Well, I'm keen to take a peek at your core and see what you chose. Hold still for a second.]

I reach down with one antenna and throw my mind into her core, swimming through the rush of mana and information that is held within until I manage to sift it down to the parts I understand.

Name: Brilliant

Level: 1 (Special) V

Might: 50

Toughness: 50

Cunning: 150

Will: 150

HP: 100/100

MP: 0/250

Skills:

Advanced Digging (II) Level 9; Acid Shot (III) Level 5; Expert Grip (III) Level 15; Crunching Bite (III) Level 16; Rapid Dash (III) Level 19; Exo-Skeleton Defense (I) level 4; Advanced Stamina (III) Level 13; Mana Craft (V) Level 4; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) Level 27; Earth Mana Affinity (IV) Level 9; Shadow Mana Affinity (III) Level 7; Light Mana Affinity (III) Level 15; Mind Mana Affinity (II) Level 6;

Mutations:

Rapid Energy Reactive Exoskeleton +20; Enhanced Vampiric Mandibles +20; Mighty Gripping Legs +20; Clarified Mana Weave Eyes +20; Delicate Mana Sensitive Antennae +20; Concentrated Melting Acid Gland +20; Broadened Pheromone Language Gland +20; Elevated Mana Core Lattice +20; Piercing Dungeon Oracle +20; Weaving Dimensional Eye +20; Purified Energy Stone +20; Mana Crystal Weave; Brain;

Species: Mature Omni-Seer (Formica)

Skill points: 22

Biomass: 24

Wowee! She's got more mental stats than I do! Considering that she's essentially abandoned physical development, I shouldn't be too surprised, but it still stings a little. Unlike me, she invested the whole lot into a single brain rather than spreading it out, which means she has quite the oomph behind a single line of effort, as opposed to my more diversified efforts. Eventually she'll reach the required rank in mind magic and then be able to craft the constructs, much as I can. I see she even went to the effort of making her brain mutable, which makes sense.

Since she became a Mature Omni-Seer it's clear that she followed through an evolution chain and the main reward appears to have been the Mana Crystal Weave, a rather potent organ, if I do say so myself.

Brilliant has gone down a path that I myself will probably have to consider rather soon, the road of investing in the core itself. She has two organs that interact directly with the gem that sits in her centre, first was the Core Lattice, a web of fine crystalline lines that branch off the core in a breathtaking structure. The purpose of this organ is multifaceted, allowing mana to flow in and out of the core more easily, as well as granting finer control over it in the vicinity of the core. Now she's added the Weave, a sphere part crystal, part flesh that the lattice connects to, further enhancing the effect and making Brilliant exceptionally sensitive to the teensiest vibration of mana that occurs within her frame.

She's basically set herself up as a detector of all things, able to sense everything that occurs around her to an extraordinary degree, particularly in the realm of mana. I can understand why also, she is desperate to understand and investigate all that goes on and she has given herself the tools to make that happen. With these mutations, she's also turned herself into a powerful all-round caster, with a steady flow of energy and very fine control over it.

With a few more skill levels under her belt she'll be able to pump out some mighty impressive magic, no doubt about it. With her absurd rate of improvement, I'm sure it won't even take her long! Dammit! This feels unfair on quite a few levels...

On the other hand, she's done basically nothing to make herself more survivable. Her toughness is too low, she can't heal herself, and her defensive Skills are still paltry garbage. If I hadn't insisted on making her run so much, her Dash would still be in a terrible state.

[All in all, I like what you've done,] I congratulate her as I remove my antenna. [You'll be able to puzzle out the secrets of mana and whatever the Dungeon hides in no time. This can only be good for the Colony.]

[Naturally,] she says smugly as she rises, [there's not going to be anything on this world that I won't be able to figure out. All I need is a little time.]

[I hope you're right, there is still way too much that we don't understand.]

Now that she's reached tier five, I feel less like I need to be actively pushing her and feeding her experience, but I still think she's not quite ready for her life as an independent champion. The moment I

let her loose, she's going to start attracting a following and become another powerful and relatively independent force within the Colony, just like Vibrant is.

Vibrant obviously works together with the Colony and is a massive contributor, but she's also a little tough to slot into plans and tends to make life a little difficult for other members of the council without intending to. I fully expect the same will be true of Brilliant soon enough. She'll help us progress, of that I have no doubt, but things will get a little messy along the way.

That's a good thing in the long run, the way things happen around here can be a little too rigid at times, I think having Brilliant and Vibrant around to upset the balance is going to be healthy. I just want to make sure that she's ready.

[Alright then, Brilliant,] I tell her, [one more trip and that's it. You'll have graduated my teaching and will be able to make your way in the Colony however you see fit!]

The little ant freezes on the spot before she turns her whole body to look me straight on.

[Are you serious? One more. That's it? One more and I'm free?]

I flick my antennae, a little annoyed.

[What do you mean 'free?' You aren't in prison! Forget it. Yes. I mean it. After this trip, you can go where you want, do what you want, investigate to your heart's content.]

Chrysalis

Chapter 890: The lay of the land

It'd be nice to mutate right now but I want to build up my bank of Biomass a bit more before I take the plunge. Going through those endless lists and menus is a massive pain in the backside and I'd rather save it all up and go through as much as possible at once.

That doesn't mean I don't tell Tiny, Crinis and Invidia that they need to make sure they're 100% ready to go before we leave. I leave my three friends silently contemplating their options whilst Brilliant roams free, enjoying a taste of unsupervised freedom before I grab her back into the fold and head out in the stratum once again.

I have several ideas in mind for this expedition, but before I commit to anything I feel like I should take advantage of the collected wisdom here in Orpule before I go gallivanting off into the wilds once again.

My first port of call is to check in with Sarah. Our last talk was a bit heavy and I know she has some things to process but I figure the polite thing is to invite her out again rather than make an assumption.

[That's kind of you, Anthony, but I think I'll rest here in the city for a bit. I don't want to go out there while my head isn't on straight. With what's going on with Jim... I just don't think I'll be in proper control of my emotions.]

Definitely not something you want if you're an anger fuelled murder-bear.

[I get you,] I give her an encouraging pat on the back. [Take it easy and rest for a while. Head up to the second stratum if you feel like it, might as well enjoy the cold while you still can.]

She shudders a little.

[I might take you up on that. Even with these enchantments it is so hot here.]

[You're just too furry!] I laugh. [You need a nice shiny carapace in your next evolution. You won't regret it!]

She eyes my diamond perfection askance.

[I'll consider it...] she says but I'm not convinced she means it.

What is this reluctance! Bah! Some people can't accept true beauty when it's right in front of their eyes... I say farewell to the big bear and head deeper into the city to check on the goings on in the anthill. As usual my appearance causes a few ripples of disturbance amongst the ants but it's something that I'm growing used to over time. I feel like the more attuned to them I become, the more attuned to me they get, as if the connection were working in both directions in some way.

Which it shouldn't be. I've studiously checked the flow of energy through the Vestibule and it's all one way. Though it's hard for me to examine exactly what happens in the Nave, I can't detect any hint of something leaving me and going to them, so I can't explain it, nonetheless it feels as if it's true.

[Eldest!] I'm greeted by Cobalt, of all the ants, certainly someone I didn't expect to see here.

[Shouldn't you be back at the nest taking care of all the expansion projects up there?] I ask suspiciously.

She holds both antennae straight up in the air.

[No thwacking!] she cries. [All the projects are running smoothly and we delayed the timetable for expansion in order to make sure there aren't any mistakes. Since I didn't have anything to do I thought I'd come down here and help with the research and construction going on.]

Research?

[You guys have found some interesting stuff?] I ask, curious.

[Oh yes,] she nods, thankful that I've been distracted from more dangerous topics, [the scouts identified a new type of ore that we are testing right now. It's saturated in fire mana and incredibly heat resistant. We can think of hundreds of uses for it but so far we haven't managed to smelt it. Either we can't make a fire that's hot enough or there's another method that we haven't discovered yet.]

Interesting...

[Well I'm sure that you'll think of something,] I shrug. I'm not going to be the one to puzzle out this mystery, I leave that to the smarter ants. [In terms of building, what are the carvers actually working on down here?]

Once again she backs off as if frightened that I might discipline her. I'm not that scary!

[Just defensive works! Honest! I've even been sleeping properly, no abductions for a week!]

One week? That's it?!

[Just how often were you getting captured?] I ask, my antennae quivering with barely concealed anger.

[Not... *that* often.]

[Rest is important!]

THWACK!

After dispensing justice to the remorseful carver I head off to find my three favourite rock covered people in the whole world. That is to say, Granin, Corun and Torrina, who made the journey over to Orpule not that long ago. As expected, I find them working with the Core Shapers, assisting in the research and practice of the caste as they experiment with the precious few Demon cores to see what they can come up with. I have to say, if they manage to fold a shadow beast and a demon together into one monster I'll be impressed, though I have no idea how useful the resultant monster would be. Perhaps they'd be better off putting different types of demon together?

[Hey there Granin!] I give him and the gang a friendly wave as I approach. [How's things treating you?]

He barely looks up at me before he grunts over the mental connection.

[You still haven't evolved yet?]

[You can't be serious!]

[What if I am?]

I stare at the stubborn old slab of granite, a touch exasperated and Torrina comes to my rescue by stepping into the mental link.

[I think Granin is just a little concerned. We've been taking measurements of the mana levels here in the third stratum and there are signs that they may already be starting to rise again...]

I stare at her, gobsmacked.

[Another wave? *Already?!!*]

She shakes her head.

[No, not for a month or two, perhaps more, but it's disturbing nonetheless. After the last two waves the readings never fell back to normal, in fact after the last one they fell even less than after the first. If this pattern continues...]

[This is evidence that your theory might be correct, that another Cataclysm is on the way...]

Well that ain't good.

[Nothing is certain,] Corun holds his hands up, [this could just be nothing and we might find that the concentration of energy begins to fall again over the next few weeks.]

I'm not even sure if he believes it...

[It won't,] Granin rumbles over the mind bridge, his thoughts unusually still. [We don't have much time until they come up for us.]

He lifts his head and looks me in the eyes.

[So why haven't you evolved yet?]