

Chrysalis 891

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Chapter 891: Limits? We Don't Need No Stinking Limits!

The demon infusion program began rather shortly after our expansion began within the third stratum. It became clear quite quickly that a steady supply of demon recruits would be needed to fuel our ambitions, especially if we wanted them to be a regular and meaningful contributor to our conquests. Normally this would happen naturally, there is always a flow of demons that battle and survive on the plains below, reaching tier six and then ascending to join their cousins on the plate cities above.

The issue we encountered was that this process seldom gave rise to demons who had maximised their potential through the early evolutions, particular the first two. An demon larvae lives a truly brutal and savage existence, fighting constantly, consuming what Biomass it can in the flowing melee and mutating rapidly in order to gain whatever edge it can over its innumerable enemies. Although it doesn't take long for the larvae to absorb enough mana to form a core, given the density of the energy at this level, half of tier two larvae evolve without forming one, desperate to survive they reach for the quick power a fast evolution will provide.

These stunted larvae seldom go on to reach any higher, becoming food for their brethren who achieve a more powerful evolution. Naturally this is wasteful and inefficient, something the Colony has never been prepared to tolerate. It's impossible to observe and assess each and every larvae, but with great effort the Colony was able to create a system whereby promising larvae would receive support to ensure they achieved perfect evolutions up to tier four, whereupon they would be allowed to make their own way.

Although imperfect, this greatly improved the quality and strength of the demons who joined those cities under the influence of the Colony, something they greatly appreciated and repaid many times over with their savagery and enthusiasm for battle.

After absorbing this sober warning from Granin and I head back to where the gang is still sorting out there mutations and park my diamond covered rear for a minute to consider my levelling speed. It's not as if I've been slacking off down here, and the hunting has been good, but the experience has been spread out over the group fairly evenly. I know that's not what Granin wants to happen, he wants me to force my pets to funnel me all the experience, as well as depend on the Colony to do the same. It wouldn't even necessarily be wrong to do so. If I get accelerated to tier seven, then my friends will be able to enjoy my protection, along with the Colony as I would be able to go toe to toe with our most powerful enemies without having to take massive risks or depend on surprise tactics to win.

Even so, it doesn't feel right to me. During our extended hunting trips I've been making sure that Brilliant is fed the lions share up until she maxes out, then letting everyone split our gains roughly evenly. I'm still ahead of my group in levels, but not by a significant amount. Even my babysitters have been getting their share, since I forced them to take it. Although the flow of xp has been good, spreading it out over so many monsters has made the gains fairly low.

Idly wondering what level I've even managed to reach, I bring up the menu and take a look.

Level thirty five.

Not bad! All things considered, that's not half bad! I mean... I only need to reach... level one hundred... and sixty...

Holy moly! That's another hundred and twenty five levels?! Are you kidding me, Gandalf!? That's unreasonable! An outrageous demand! Actually wait a second... that means in order to reach tier eight a monster needs three hundred and twenty levels. And tier nine would take six hundred and forty. Are there really any monsters like that!? It's absurd! Complete madness! Who would come up with such a stupid requirement?! How could it possibly be achieved?!

Actually, thinking about it, if we imagine that the ancients are tier ten, I have no idea if they are, but let's go with it for now, that would mean they'd need one thousand two and eighty levels to get from nine to ten...

I get that monsters don't really age and will live forever if we don't experience death by violence, and that the ancients may have had literally thousands of years to level up and achieve their current level of power, but it still feels ridiculous to me. If I had to grind levels and Biomass for even a hundred years I feel as if I'd go insane.

No, I think I will continue my current policy of sharing out the love and refusing to hog the xp, although I do think we need to accelerate our efforts. The closer I get to the next tier, the safer I feel running around down here, although asides from the few tier sevens I've run into, I haven't really felt threatened by anything that we've encountered.

Luckily for us the bulk of the 'wild' demons that we run into are lone wolves, operating on their own until they reach the sixth tier and join a city and demon society more broadly, making them easy pickings for our hunting party.

[All right gang, everyone doing well? All read to go? Manage to deal with the itch?]

Each of the pets gives me a slightly odd look but I brush it off, coming out of a mutation can have that effect on a monster.

[It's time to head out again. We're going to head out towards Kaarmodo territory, being careful not to tread on an scaled toes and irritate the touchy lizards. Even so, I think it'll be a good idea if we can get a general picture of how strong they are and how many cities they control in this area. If we manage to pick up the trail of that traitor worm, all the better. Sound good to everyone?]

[Do I need to evolve on this trip as well?] Brilliant asks, one antennae in the air as she asks her question.

[No. No you don't,] I sigh, [it would be nice to push you tier six, but I don't think you're quite ready for it yet. You need to have a better idea of what it is you want to do and what you want to become before you commit to those decisions. Anyone else?]

Tiny, Crinis and Invidia don't seem fussed either way, so we quickly make ready and exit the city once more.

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Chapter 892: Scout's Honour

Burke wouldn't say she disliked the company of other ants, not at all, but it couldn't be denied that she, and quite a few other scouts had developed a strange sense of independence over the months. More than any other group, except perhaps the far ranging core shapers who spent more time with their pets than others of their own kind, the scouts spend huge periods outside of the comforts of the nests, patrolling, carrying messages, scouting (obviously). All of this alone time had made them a little reclusive, a little uncomfortable when exposed to the crush of the nests and the tightly packed ranks of their kind.

She herself could admit that upon leaving the demon cities and climbing down to the plains below she had felt a certain tension unwind within her thorax, a subtle pressure relaxed within her mind.

She breathed deep of the third stratum air and allowed the heated mana with a tinge of destruction swirl around her core. It felt good to be back out in the wilds of the Dungeon with only herself to rely on. A little peace. A little quiet. It was important, she felt, to enjoy these moments whilst they lasted.

She detected a slight vibration through the ground being transmitted to her legs, the fine hairs there thrumming at an increasing pace.

Just breathe. Take in the peace.

The vibration had now become a faint rumbling. Even the demon larvae on the ground were starting to shimmy and shake as they engaged in their eternal tussle, yet Burke tuned it all out. Until the very last moment she would concentrate on the here and now.

So soothing.

hhhhhhhHHHHHHHHHHEY

THEREBURKEHOWAREYOUODOINGYOULOOKTIREDMAYBEYOU SHOULDRELAXALITTLEBUTDON'TLETTHE SHADOWSCATCHYOUTHEY'REWATCHINGFORSUREITHINKTHEYFOLLOWME!"

An assault of pheromones washed over the suddenly exhausted scout as the vibrations ceased when Vibrant and over a hundred of her loyal crew rushed over and slid to a stop right next to the scout leader.

"Vibrant..." she started, "aren't you supposed to be inspecting the territory to the east of here? Isn't that what you said you would do for the council?"

All of that serenity, all of that quiet peace, gone in an instant. Already she could feel the burgeoning pressure as over a hundred ants packed in around her. Burke loved to be around her kind, don't think otherwise, she just needed a break from them every now and again, and this wasn't helping.

"And don't forget to talk slower," she reminded the much larger soldier, "I can barely understand you at that speed. I mean, can your followers even understand you? Can you figure out what she's talking about?" she asked a nearby general.

"I don't know what you mean it seems fine to me are you sure you aren't just a little slow maybe you should speed up a little aren't you scout supposed to be fast I mean -"

"I get it," she cut her off, "Vibrant, please."

"Fine-fine," Vibrant cheered, "though it feels so much more natural to go fast. How are you Burke?! I finished looking over the east side, it was really cool! Lots of demons, a few tunnel entrances and some strange crystal thingies that some golgari and humans were mining. We run up to say hello but they all screamed and fled from us. So funny! Before you ask, no I didn't map it out or write anything down, but I think someone did."

"IdidleaderVibrantIhaveitrightthere."

"Great! Thanks so much! There you go. So I thought I should head over here and see if you needed any help!"

The scout leader deflated just a bit as she took it all in. Crystals, golgari and humans mining? So many questions. Although one issue did stand out to her.

"You do remember that you were supposed to remain hidden as much as possible during this scouting mission, right Vibrant? During this period the Eldest has explicitly stated that we should avoid bringing unwanted attention to the Colony, right? You remember that? Vibrant?"

The more she talked, the more still Vibrant became, until even her antennae weren't moving, as if every hair on her carapace had gone still.

"Vibrant? Anything to say?" Burke pressed.

The big ant shifted on the spot, her front legs brushing through the air in front of her as if sweeping the scout's words into the bin.

"I forgot!" she cheered. "It's fine-fine! We didn't fight anybody and there wasn't anyone around to chase us or anything."

Burke wanted to slap herself in the face with one leg.

"That's not the point though. Just try and be more careful, please?" she begged. "We don't want to ruin things in this important moment for the Colony do we? There's a lot going on right now and a ton of things are getting fixed up above us, it's just going to take a bit more time and we can't afford to lose that!"

Vibrant nodded and reached up to pat her on the back.

"Of course. Don't worry Burke, I'll be sure to take care of things here for you."

"You're the one I'm worried about!"

"Ha ha!" Vibrant laughed. "I'm sorry, I just find it a little hard to focus on these sorts of warnings sometimes."

"Why's that?"

"I kind of figure the Eldest would have ruined everything and gotten in trouble by now so I don't have to worry about it."

"Just what do you think about th... you might have a point actually."

The scout leader suddenly was forced to reflect on all the times the Eldest had thrown the Colony head first into conflict without affording them the time to properly prepare. In a way, the accelerated timeframe for invading the third stratum had come about because the Eldest had pushed downwards and though it wasn't their fault, the Colony always wanted to follow where their oldest member went.

"Right? But don't worry, I'll do better!" Vibrant thumped herself on the front of her thorax with a leg. "What do you need scouted in this area? We can get it done in a flash-flash!"

"I'll bet you can't?" Burke muttered.

The scouts were certainly fast, amongst the fastest ants in all the castes, but speed wasn't their only concern. They also needed to be stealthy, with keen senses and heightened detection abilities to find what others wanted to keep hidden and locate enemies before they were close enough to harm them. All of those things took a significant chunk of evolutionary energy, more than were dedicated to sheer physical prowess, whereas Vibrant and by extension her entire group poured the bulk of their potential into covering ground as quickly as they could. Her mages weren't as strong as regular mages in the Colony in terms of spell slinging, but they were a hell of a lot more mobile. If all Burke needed them to do was put some eyeballs on the terrain, then Vibrant and her team would get the job done by far the fastest out of anyone in the Colony.

"Alright," she sighed, "you can do it, but make sure you're more careful this time. Until we know the Eldest has stuffed up the peace in some way, you don't want to be the one the council has to blame."

"Roger!"

"Look here," she leaned forward to sketch a few rough shapes in the gritty stone between them, "we've located three cities in these locations, but so far we haven't mapped the ground between them and we don't know who has interests here, so we've been reluctant to get too close. If you can rush through there at top speed and keep an eye out for tunnel entrances and traffic between them, that would be great. So long as that goes fine and there isn't a reaction then you can push further out in this direction and meet up with my scouts who should be operating in this area," she indicated a section to the right of the cities with a front leg, "check in with them and then, if you have the energy to spare, you can swing out to the west. Once you've gone five hundred kilometres out, you should come back, we aren't intending to go further out than that at this time."

Vibrant looks down at the map carefully for a long moment before her head snaps up, her eyes ablaze with energy that seems to sear Burke's eyes.

"OKAYBYEBYESEEYOUAGAINSOON!" a wave of pheromones smacks Burke in the face once more and then a cloud of dust kicks up, as well as a heap of demon larvae who don't move out of the way fast enough, blocking her vision.

When the dust and demons clear, Vibrant and her entire group are gone.

Burke settles back with a sigh.

"Peace and quiet," she huffs to herself.

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Chapter 893: Darkness Eternal

Leeroy was tired. Not just in a physical sense, because she was definitely drained from long days without rest and filled with hard labour, but more than that she felt a weariness that echoed deep within her very soul. Not even the harsh words of the Eldest had been enough to shake this lethargy and sense of aimlessness from her and her fellow tier six sisters.

If only she'd been more careful and read the evolution description more carefully!

If only any of them had done that!

The fact she and her sisters were similarly bound to the same fate made it so much worse than if she were the only one, for she felt responsible, that she herself had led them down this path which inevitably led to this end. What's more, the Eldest had specifically banned her from informing her younger sisters, who even now were battling and struggling to evolve to reach this tier, of their disastrous fate.

All these issues combined to infect the aptly named 'Immortals' with a dreary malaise that many within the Colony despaired of being able to cure. Complying with the orders of the Eldest, the highly evolved shock troops managed to rouse themselves enough that they were able to throw themselves into work, hauling stone, tearing down existing structures and doing all the heavy lifting the build crews could throw at them for days on end, working without rest.

Leeroy finished dragging a huge chunk of stone to the base of the pillar on which Roklu stood and looked up at the mighty work the Colony was engaged in.

She wasn't sure when, but the carvers had discovered a new type of stone, one immensely resistant to heat that seemed to also have a sort of regenerative property. With further exposure to the conditions in the third stratum, the builders had learned much, including how the scorching, ash infused atmosphere degraded almost every material that it touched. The existing demon structures however, appeared to be immune to this weathering damage.

This led to the discovery of the new mineral, quickly followed by a frenzied mission to find and process the stone. In typical ant fashion, this was achieved quickly by applying thousands of highly motivated individuals to the task until not only was a significant deposit located, but mining and refining had taken place over just a few days. Now thousands of tons of material are in the process of being hauled across the plains to construct a massive ant hill, a construction the likes of which the third stratum may have never seen before.

Reaching from the ground all the way to the plate a kilometre above, this hill would become the base of operations for the Colony in this layer of the Dungeon, a massive fortress that would occupy many millions of cubic metres, rivalling the size of the main nest itself. At the moment the carvers were busy preparing the foundation and although progress was slow since the number of build teams on this level of the Dungeon had greatly diminished over the previous two weeks, already the scale of the project was coming into sight. The footprint of the hill to come was staggering, almost a kilometre square. It likely wouldn't be finished for months, perhaps longer, even if the Colony decided to commit tens of thousands of workers to the project.

Despite the ambition and effort on display, Leeroy struggled to find the joy and pride that she knew should be there inside her carapace. Instead, there was hollow sensation that had only grown since she had lost her direction, her purpose in life. All of the Immortals around her felt the same.

"Leader," one of her faithful lieutenants approached her from the side, "do you plan to rest soon?"

"You shouldn't call me that anymore," Leeroy said bitterly, "after what I've led you too. This eternal... *life*."

"We each chose our species on our own, we each made the same mistake. You can't be blamed for that, leader."

"We will still follow you anywhere," another said, moving alongside the first speaker. "Where else would we even go?"

The emptiness of that last statement found an echo in all of them.

"No, I will continue to work until I collapse," Leeroy told the others, "I have been told to make myself useful and so I shall. The Eldest demanded that I work, not that I rest, so I will."

The others had gathered together now and they shifted uneasily as her scent reached them.

"The Eldest commanded us to rest..."

"It is the thing that we are meant to do..."

"Are you certain, leader?"

A flicker of anger was roused inside Leeroy and she turned to the Immortals.

"Are you afraid of the enforcers?" she demanded. "Even now? I have nothing to live for but *life*, there is no fear left in me. Besides, we are all tier six! There are hardly any who can match our strength inside the Colony, let alone amongst the enforcers!"

"Is that so?"

"Is that so?"

"Is that so?"

"Is that so?"

A hundred threads of scent reached them at once, brushing against their antennae on all sides before dancing away as if they had never been. The reaction amongst the Immortals was immediate and they turned nervously to look around themselves. Only Leeroy remained undaunted.

"I have work to do," she said and began to trudge back toward the quarry.

She'd not taken three steps before the voices returned.

"You have run out of fear..."

"No longer afraid..."

"It is respect that is lacking..."

"Whose command do you ignore..."

"This is not for the Colony..."

"For the Colony..."

Again a hundred different scents wafting from a hundred directions, a dizzying and disorienting effect that unnerved them all. Even Leeroy now felt a flicker of emotion that she shoved away violently.

"Where are you?" she demanded of the empty air. "Come out and make yourselves known!"

"Demands..."

"From us?"

"We are the loyal..."

"You are the one who has failed..."

"We demand of you..."

"The Eldest commands..."

"You do not obey..."

[Eight hours is owed...]

[Eight for every day...]

[You have missed many...]

The scent seemed to come from everywhere, even from within her own mind. The Immortals were disturbed now, turning this way and that as they tried to identify the source of the words but they could see nothing, they were alone on the plains, the city still resting on its plate high above them and the same workers toiled not far away on the foundations of the hill. There were alone.

"Show yourself!" Leeroy demanded.

[Tier six...]

[You think you are above us?]

[Above the commands of the Eldest?]

[Foolish...]

[Foolish...]

[In the extreme...]

[We are here with you...]

[We are always here...]

[We have ALWAYS been here...]

[Look down.]

Each and every one of them looked down to see that their shadows had changed, no longer was there a flickering shade cast by the intermittent light on the ground, instead, there was an endless void of darkness without end.

And inside the black there was a face, an ant face, their own face. It stared back at them with maddened glee, their own eyes twisted into merciless, pitiless orbs filled with laughter.

"Get out of my head!" Leeroy grated. "You can't take me!"

[We already did...]

Then it was gone. The plains. The builders. The foundations. All of it gone. All that remained was the darkness.

[You do not fear...]

[This we can change...]

[But first. Sleep...]

[Rest...]

[We will wake you when your time is due...]

Leeroy felt her mind begin to slip, begin to sink. She fought against it. Struggled to remain awake.

"Who are you?" she said.

[Nameless...]

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Chapter 894: Pushy Lizards

"Nice work, Brilliant! You're getting a lot quicker with that dark magic."

"I quite like it, to be honest. Watching Crinis jump through shadows has been an inspiration for me!"

"What's it like to be able to perceive the shadow dimension?"

The smaller ant thinks for a long moment.

"Weird," she says.

"Fair enough, I suppose. Trying to explain another dimension to a person who can't see it would be quite the challenge I imagine. How do you explain colours to a blind person?"

The little ant has been hard at work over the last week improving her skills rapidly and showing her usual obsessive focus when it comes to getting into places that she shouldn't. After carefully studying Crinis and her method of slipping through the shadows she has taken it upon herself to master the same technique, drilling herself with shadow magic until it ranked up to dark magic.

According to her, being able to perceive the shadow dimension all around her is quite the benefit since she can tell where it is strong and where it is weak, thus allowing her to more easily create 'gates' from one shadow to another. I've had a few discussions with Crinis and she believes that she could benefit from something similar. During her next evolution I'm sure she will explore the possibilities in great detail.

What it's allowed the little ant to do is employ a wide range of tactics that involve, for the most part, keeping herself hidden in a shadow whilst launching sneaky spells by poking her head out of the darkness.

Whilst it's certainly powerful, there are many drawbacks. The mana cost is prohibitive and difficult to maintain, this goes doubly so since she can't absorb nearly as much ambient mana whilst hiding in a shadow pocket, so even her impressive mana intake isn't enough to sustain it for long. Also, since the bulk of her attention is focused on maintaining the shadow portals, her offensive output is still lacking to say the least. She's still working on bringing her mind magic up to the point that she can use mind constructs, but once she gets there I'm sure her ability to multi-task all these spells will increase dramatically.

For our purposes though, it has proven to be an excellent way for her to engage in our hunts and continue to develop her combat skills, since she can remain very safe for the duration of a short sharp fight.

All we need now is for the damn kaarmodo to get off our backs.

[Leave! This area is claimed by the people of the sand! Your kind has no place here!]

[Alright already! Sheesh.]

I have a careful look around the area in which our last fight just ended. It's true that I kind of lost track of where we were headed as we chased a tier four demon around. He was a speedy bugger but we managed to chase him down eventually, but even so I didn't think we ran into lizard land.

[Is it just me or are your borders shifting? I didn't think this spot was claimed by you...]

[Whatever we say is ours is ours,] the pugnacious reptile replies. [Now leave!]

Seriously, all the giant lizards I've run into down here have a serious attitude. I mean, if I was a giant lizard several hundred years old with a bunch of slaves who waited on my every whim I might develop a stunted personality too, but it gets grating after a while.

[We're leaving, alright? We're leaving!]

Yikes.

We turn around, but not without making sure we drag the Biomass with us. Even if it's only a tier four, I refuse to leave the prize behind!

As we go I watch the big lizard and its entourage from the back of my eyes, a little suspicious of their rapid appearance. We've been skirting the edges of their turf for days now, poking our noses where they probably don't belong but always making sure to pull back before we cross any lines. Despite that fact,

they always seem to be there waiting for us, ready to deliver an ultimatum and declare that we need to vacate the premises with all haste.

I'm going to have to check in with the scouts, but I swear to Gandalf they are appearing further and further from their cities each time they show up. If things continue at this pace then by the time another week has gone past we'll be standing under the shadow of Orpule getting told to shove off. Naturally this behaviour has failed to penetrate my calm...

Who am I kidding! It's aggravating in the extreme! These damn lizards are clearly provoking us! They dare to try and stomp on the Colony?! I bite them on the ankles! I'll tear down their cities and turn their hides into shoes for my non-existent feet!

Clearly, I'm getting frustrated.

But I've managed to hold my temper and back away each time. It's been incredible to bear witness to my own growth! No, it won't be me that throws the Colony into a mess this time, it's someone else's turn. This time I'll be able to swoop in at the last second and save the day, with a quip and slightly condescending attitude I'll be able to look down on the others a bit as they all praise me for saving their carapace.

Gweheheheh.

Nothing is going to get in the way of my dreams, no matter how irritating these kaarmodo get, I won't budge!

With all the Biomass that I've managed to haul in over the last while I probably have enough to mutate a reasonable amount of things, I should probably check in on my skills as well since I haven't done that for a while. I make a snap decision on the spot.

[Alright then gang, we're going to head down into the tunnels for a bit of hunting and then look for a quiet spot to bunker down. I've got plenty of Biomass to spend so it's probably time I went ahead and got it done.]

[What do you want to do after that, master?] Crinis asks.

I consider.

[I wouldn't mind sweeping about through the tunnels to see if we catch a trace of the worm one more time. Once that's done we should check in with the scouts to see if they're having the same troubles as we are with pushy lizards. I'll be interested to see if these issues are more widespread than just us.]

If it turns out that they are then we might be seeing a prelude to another war. The kaarmodo shouldn't have any reason to be aggressive against us, unless perhaps they think they might be capable of cashing in on the massive fortune that the lives of my siblings represent. Why go hunting for cores when literally tens of thousands of them can be found right on your doorstep?

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Chapter 895: To Thirty!

When did he begin to hear the call? Even I can't be sure. Long before I warned him, of that I'm sure. Such a subtle thing, that siren song, the incessant pull that pushes them to dive ever deeper, until they are

crushed by the pressure or forged into something new. I firmly believe he would have gone there even without my influence, it's inevitable, the call will find all of them in the end.

I have to believe that.

He is gone now, to places that I can no longer reach, where the mana is so thick my very cells would disintegrate within minutes. None but those born of the Dungeon can ever hope to touch that ground. I desperately hope that he finds what he's looking for there, perhaps he will be able to save himself, and in so doing, save us all.

Perhaps he would have gone, even if the Dungeon had never spoken to him, never sunk its claws into his mind. That's the kind of person he always was.

But part of me believes that he felt that call very early. Perhaps even from the moment he was born in this world.

- *From the private journal of Granin Lazus.*

It doesn't take long for us to secure a little hideaway and I ask my companions to shield me whilst I trawl through the menus. My current haul of Biomass represents several weeks of hunting, though I've share the haul the final total is still quite respectable, if I do say so myself.

Seven hundred and fifty six, in total.

Not bad at all! Even if the first hundred was left over from my last mutation binge.

I'll be able to buy quite a few things with this little stash, push a few more things towards the max. At the rate I'm going I'll be maxed out on mutations a heck of a long time before I come close to reaching level one hundred and sixty, but that's nothing bad. I'd much rather be maxed out by the time I hit the level cap than have to hang around waiting and eating like I did last time.

Now, which of my lucky organs will it be?!

My business district needs a fair bit of love, or I could take my brains all the way... I will absolutely upgrade my eyes, the old classic, the first body part I ever mutated. Just thinking back to how bad my eyes were when I'd first hatched... yuck. Absolutely made the right call there. Fighting monsters when almost blind is not exactly what I'd call a good time.

Okay then! Eyeballs it is!

Where was I at with those things... Sharpened Perimeter Eyes +25. So far the upgrades I've taken have given me all around better vision, emphasising being able to have a better view in all directions, and I also took an upgrade to have certain areas of my sight be more in focus than others, letting me see straight ahead much more clearly, for example. I've noticed that having pockets of better vision is bringing back the human habit of turning to face things so I can see them better, whereas an ant generally wouldn't have to do that. I know for a fact that some of the castes have been leaning in this direction though, mainly the carvers, but a few others as well. This mutation is simply the cheapest and easiest way for our compound eyes to provide a patch of super clear vision.

Which is handy to have. I'm not saying being able to see in every direction isn't useful, it absolutely is! Just being able to see in all directions clearly is better.

With that thought in mind, I think I'll just continue down the path I'm on and fuse here. Which is a hundred and forty Biomass down the gurgler. Now, what's next?

Ah! The stomach! Obviously this should have been a priority earlier, though I suppose I can be forgiven for prioritising things that were more combat oriented. I've taken the same mutation at every level for the stomach, one that reduces the penalty for consuming prey from lower tiers. As long as I keep it fully upgraded I can cut that reduction in half for the tier below mine, which I clearly want to do! I do wonder if I might eventually end up reforging the stomach into something else. I mean, will there be much of a need for this mutation down the line, when I've tier eight or something? Maybe... might have to talk to Granin about it.

Alright, bam, that's done, another hundred and forty gone.

What's next?

Ah! My musculature! I should really get onto that, in fact, I actually have an interesting decision to make on that front... I've made my muscles incredibly reactive, able to fire at full power with only an instant of warm up time, which obviously synergises exceptionally well with my nervous system of foresight antennae. Predict the future, react with hyper speed and have my muscles fire in the same moment, it's been a winner that has helped me position to attack and defend perfectly, but the problem I ran into was a lack of penetrating power.

The mana infusion mandibles gives me a huge amount of utility in terms of what I can do with each of the different mana types I can pump into the chompers, but it does mean that I haven't used my mutations to increase the pure chompiness of my mandibles, making them sharper, stronger or more damaging, aside from a couple of early choices when I picked up the savage option. In order to compensate for that lack I decided to do what the famous trap jaw ants did back on earth, introduce a locking mutation which let my muscles coil like a spring before being unleashed, slamming my mandibles shut with increased force, increasing their ability to shear through bone and punch into tough armour.

It's worked a treat, all things considered and I think I want to emphasise that aspect of my current mutations going forward. So that's another one forty tossed to the wind. Yeesh, these mutations are expensive...

Currently I've spent four hundred and twenty, so one more will put up to five sixty, which will probably do me for now. I don't mind the idea of keeping a little Biomass in reserve for emergency purposes, you never know when you might need a particular mutation to push you over the line.

Alright, next I think I'll mutate my neural network. It's been a mainstay of my defensive tactics and probably the only clever thing I've done in working out my mutations over the journey. Every choice I've made for this part of my body has been to increase response time, even allowing distributed decision making in my extremities. I have to fuse those just to keep the wagon rolling. More speed can't be wrong when it comes to my nervous system.

So in the end I lock in the following choices:

Sharpened Perimeter Eyes +25 -> Focal Compound Eyes +30

Vast Hungering Stomach +25 -> Discerning Stomach +30

Lock Hyper-Twitch Musculature +25 -> Coiling Hyper-Twitch Musculature +30

Coordinating Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network +25 -> Distributed Instantaneous Sub-Neural Network +30

Looks good. Lock it in!

... wait.

Dammit...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 896: Raised in the Shadow pt 1

Our mission is more than holy. We are not a religious order, dedicated to the pursuit of an unknown god. Our rituals are not held in service of empty sophistry, symbolism or in deference to imagined forces. Everything is in service to the mission. We remind ourselves of the purpose. We hone ourselves like blades, scrape away until we are reduced to the finest edge, all in service of a noble goal. Everything is for the Colony. To that end we throw everything away. Our name is simply the first thing to go.

- *Excerpt from 'The Shadow Doctrine'. Nameless Author.*

She awoke in darkness. The stone beneath her was cold and hard, she pulled her hand across the surface until it rested in front of her face, yet she couldn't see it. She blinked her eyes, wondering if perhaps she had gone blind. She could still feel her eyes, feel the lids close over them, but there was just nothing there.

She was calm though. There was another sense, the new one, that assured her that she was safe, that she was welcome and that no harm would come to her. It was all around, suffused into the very air itself. She drew that feeling of peace into her lungs with every breath, it soaked into her skin. It hadn't been long since she awakened this ability, to 'smell' with her mind, it had something to do with her new Class, she was sure of that.

As she moved with caution and slowly pushed herself off the ground, using her hands to feel around and above for obstacles as she sought to rise, she began to realise that she wasn't alone. Similar noises sounded out to her left and right as others who must have awoken at the same time she did mimicked her actions without being able to see them. She was tempted to speak to them, but she didn't. She felt that it wouldn't be right. This was a place of silence, and she could respect that.

Instead, she waited.

It was impossible to say how much time had passed in that place. There was no sight, no sound, nothing to mark the passing minutes. The stillness was so complete the girl could feel the beat of her own heart like a drum, so loud it seemed as if everyone would be able to hear it.

Eventually a new presence made itself known. She wasn't sure how she could tell, but she was certain that this being had been with them in wherever they were from the beginning. She didn't hear anyone enter in the time since she awoke. Then the feeling returned. A scent, a thought, a feeling that unfurled into meaning inside her thoughts like a flower opening itself to the sun.

"You are all patient. That is good. Patience is required to do what we do."

Silence descended once more as the scent hung in the air. The girl drew air deeply through her nose, trying to take in more of the message but it made no difference, she didn't perceive it with her nose, not really.

"For three of you to awaken this talent so young. It is a curious thing. Very unusual, as we understand these things. For each of you to reach out to us, even more unexpected."

So there were three of them. Still, each of them did not speak, instead they remained still, comforted by the feeling that still permeated all around them. Then, slowly, the girl raised a hand.

"You may speak, child," the scent was warm and patient.

She opened her mouth to speak and suddenly her throat was dry and rasping. She coughed lightly.

"Sorry," she croaked. "I didn't mean..."

"It is fine. Take your time."

She swallowed a few times before she felt confident speaking again.

"I'm not sure I remember reaching out to anyone... about... anything?" she frowned.

"You may not recall, but I assure you it is true. Perhaps you did not realise what it was that you were searching for, you may not have even realised you were searching, but I assure you that you were. We've had our eye on you three for some time and you have been drawing closer to us every day that passes, whether you knew it or not. So we have chosen to make ourselves known to you. Do not fear, there is no danger here. Whenever you like, we can have you returned to the town above in moments, you have but to say the word."

Each of the three young humans shifted on their feet, but none spoke. After a respectful pause, the scent began to flow once more.

"I will introduce myself."

Something shifted in the dark, the sound of many legs tapping on the ground.

"I am the nameless one, and this place is the Sanctum of Sleep. You should feel honoured, you are the first of your kind to see this place."

The girl shifted her head as if she were looking around her, though she could not see.

"It's very nice," she said politely.

"Lovely," said a girl to her left.

"Very impressive," a boy to her right spoke up.

A brief silence.

"I know you cannot see it."

"I didn't want to be rude," the girl said. Her mother had taught her better than that.

She felt the amusement of the ant, for it must be an ant. She had seen them so many times in town, though never too close. She'd been drawn to them for as long as she could remember. To be this close to them, perhaps to more than one! She began to tremble with excitement.

"What are your names, young ones?"

"Allison Brimsby," the girl on the left said.

"Trean Potter," said the boy.

"Emilia Cretherton," she said.

"In this place we have no names, though you are not one of us, yet. For now, you will keep these names, and we will see how far you will come. Should you follow all the way to the end, you will be the first non-ant members of our order."

The girl raised her hand once more.

"Why do you want humans to join?" she asked.

She didn't intend to be rude, but she was curious. The ants had always seemed so powerful, so distant and alien to her. The idea that they might want her help seemed... wrong, impossible and strange. There was silence as the ant considered her answer.

"It isn't necessarily that we want other non-ants to join us, but we have no reason to refuse those that yearn to spread the discipline of the Great One. There are many among the humans who seek to follow in the ways of the Eldest, but who is there to help those who would go astray? Who is there to provide guidance? Here in the Colony, we are ever watchful, but up there? Amongst the humans? If there will be those who follow the ways of the Colony, then we too must have our counterparts, to ensure it is done with the proper... respect."

Each of the three processed what they heard. Then the voice went on.

"There are civilisations above who are yet to hear of the Colony, but they too will soon have those who are swayed by our ways. The teachings of the Great One will cover this planet eventually, it is simply a matter of time. When that happens, you will be ready. You will bear our burden and carry on our task amongst your people."

"You will be: nameless."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 897: Raised in the Shadow pt 2

She never knew when they might come for her. She would fall asleep in her bed, in the orphanage, alongside the other children who had lost their families, and wake up somewhere else entirely. At first it was confusing, opening her eyes and finding herself still enveloped in perfect darkness, but she grew used to it. The nameless one would meet them when they awoke each time, welcome them back to the sanctum and initiate the next round of training.

The loss of her sight was the first challenge that was posed to her and the others. Could they learn to move in the darkness as if it were the light? Were they able to adapt until this state of sightlessness was

as comfortable and relaxed as the daylight. To achieve this they needed to rely on their new senses, to follow the scent that the nameless one lay down for them, even if it was an indistinct wisp, masked by misdirecting and misleading trails.

"Our training for you will be difficult for both of us," the nameless one told them, "we have never explored the different ways the System interacts with you as opposed to our kind. You cannot mutate, cannot evolve, but you have your own advantages. We will push those to their limits, but it will require patience, trial and error and dedication. Remember, you can quit any time you like."

The reminder that they were free to leave came often, at the end of every session. That first night they had to walk through a maze relying only on their strange new sense of smell. None of the children succeeded, wandering for hours between cold stone walls. When the time ran out, the nameless one gathered them up and reminded them that they could quit if they so chose. None of the children took the ant up on the offer.

She didn't remember drifting off, but she awoke back in her bed, somehow refreshed and rested. She went about her day as usual, and the next, and the next, never knowing when she fell asleep where she would wake.

"Welcome back," the nameless one greeted them the third time. "Let's get back to it."

Over the weeks they sharpened their senses and their minds to the point where traversing the maze without sight was trivial. Their trust in the new sense was absolute and it continued to level at a rapid pace. If the ant was pleased with their progress, she did not show it, she simply told them that the next time it would be harder. And it was, it always was. The next time they entered the sanctum the maze was gone, replaced with a running track. They would only be allowed to move on when they were able to complete it in under a minute.

Determined to show how much she had improved, Emilia took off as fast as she could, her concentration complete as she sought any hint of scent.

"*Jump*," she perceived.

Then she fell in a hole.

"There are obstacles on the track," the nameless one told them, "which will change every time you arrive here."

In order to complete the course in the required time the three had to sprint as fast as they could, ducking, jumping, swerving hazards that they could not see, the scent warnings coming at only the last possible moment. She was grateful that the ants had managed to find a way to pad everything, otherwise she would likely have knocked herself out a dozen times over the month it took the three to master the course.

"Remember, if you do not wish to return, you have but to say so," the ant reminded them at the end of each session.

None of the three replied.

The next time they awoke they were upside down.

"Unlike we ants you do not have Grip, nor do you have the claws which we use to hold fast to the stone," the nameless lectured the three startled youths from her position hanging from the ceiling. "Nevertheless we believe that this training is a fundamental part of being one of us. You must be able to move where the other humans do not think you are able to move. You must be as silent and as still as the stone itself. They must never see you coming."

Emilia's forearms were burning after a minute and her fingers locked after three. Without a sound she dropped from the roof to land on a soft padded surface.

"Rest for five minutes, then climb back up," she was told, so she did.

When they could cling to the stone for an hour without falling, they were deemed to have passed.

"If you were ants, it would be twenty four hours, but I suppose this is sufficient," the nameless one stated.

On and on it went. Every time a challenge was overcome, a new one was presented. Move without sound until they could run without making a whisper. Blend into your surroundings until it was impossible to tell them and the darkness apart. They played games where they had to find each other whilst remaining completely hidden from the others. Emilia asked the nameless one to play once. Only once.

"This is called the eightfold genuflection," they were told, "it will be difficult to perform with only four limbs, but I believe we will be able to modify it so that we can recognise it and you can still comfortably perform it."

The ant contrived a series of moves that pushed the three humans to the brink of their flexibility, straining and contorting their limbs to their limits and beyond. Then they practiced for hours on end for weeks until the nameless one was satisfied.

"It will do," she finally relented, "you will repeat this practice for an hour at the start of every session here. Now you will learn the hidden speech of the order. Again, it will be hard, your bodies are different from ours, but I believe we are clever enough between the four of us to make it work."

It took a long time for them to master the signs, a whole new language of gestures and postures that were designed for a shape so much different than their own. The nameless one never allowed them to grow complacent as they practiced. They had to practice while running the ever changing courses. They had to practice while hanging from the roof. They had to practice while hiding from the nameless one.

You have done well, the ant signed to them. *I am proud of you.*

The rare word of praise filled each of the three with a warmth that they could not express. Emilia's eyes welled up but no sound did she make.

You have become as comfortable in the dark as you are in the light. Your skills have improved, along with your levels and you have each proven that you are dedicated to our ways. I ask you one final time: do you wish to end your training? Do you wish to never return to this place?

They did not speak and the ant dipped her antennae in respect.

Then come and take your rest.

The ant turned and walked from the chamber and the three human youths hesitated. They had never left this single chamber within the sanctum in all the nights they had been there. Where they supposed to follow? The three looked to each other for support and finally summoned the courage to step forward. The tunnels were winding and long, yet they followed easily, their movements flowing, their limbs suffused with almost inhuman strength and agility.

Finally tunnels gave way to corridors of carved stone, which changed to vaulted halls, which led to a grand temple. The ants were everywhere now, along the walls, the roof, alongside them on the ground. Even so, they were able to follow the nameless one without losing her in the crowd of near identical creatures. They could find her anywhere. The temple was strange, the floor carved into a giant circle divided into eight massive segments, each filled with ants at rest.

The nameless one led them outside the great circle until they and a host of ants stood just outside the segment, waiting. Soon, all the still figures on this section of floor began to stir, turning, stretching and then leaving from the outer edge of the circle. Once the segment was empty, they began to shuffle forward as an ant signed to each member as they passed. Eventually the three children reached the front and the figure turned to them.

Good work, nameless ones. Please take your deserved rest, as the Eldest intended, she signed.

The three children choked up instantly, though they did not know why. Emilia couldn't say which was the first to sob, perhaps Allison, or Trean, or even herself, but once they did, all three began to openly cry, their wailing the first sound to ever be heard within the heart of the Sanctum. As they wept, the ants continued to march onto the segment, but as they did, each of them stopped to embrace the three, a leg thrown around them to press their shaking bodies against hard carapace, an antenna reaching down to gently pat their head. Eventually the nameless one gathered them and led them onto the circle where they found three soft, comfortable beds had been erected for them.

Sleep nameless ones. You are one of us now, and we will never abandon you.

Exhausted and drained, the three folded themselves into the warm blankets and fluffy pillows they had been given and slept more deeply and rested more thoroughly than they ever had before.

Emilia awoke in the orphanage, a soft smile on her lips and gladness suffusing her soul. She rolled out of bed and began to perform her regular morning chores, assisting the little ones to prepare themselves for the day as Maria prepared breakfast for them downstairs. When she arrived at the table, Maria took her to one side.

"Is everything alright, Emilia?" the old woman asked, "I know you've been busy, with your new apprenticeship and all, but you just seem so much more quiet than you used to. I hardly hear you make a sound these days."

Emilia looked up into the familiar face of their caretaker and noticed something.

"You look tired, Maria," she said, reaching out with one hand to touch her on the arm, "are you getting proper sleep?"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 898: Raised in the Shadow pt 3

No matter how much he did, there was always more to do, Beyn lamented as he faced down a desk full of paperwork. Whoever had managed to start creating paper in Renewal was both a blessing and a curse in the priest's opinion. It was so much easier to organise things now, but the sheer number of documents that he had to deal with was almost dizzying. Or perhaps that was just the mana deprivation...

The priest raised a hand to his temple and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the moment to pass. Immediately an aide was at his elbow.

"Are you alright, head priest?" he asked.

"It is nothing," Beyn waved him away. "I simply need to return to the Dungeon, I am not currently acclimated to the surface and it is taking a toll on me."

"Perhaps you should rest," his aide encouraged him, "you've been working for days now."

Beyn frowned.

"I have little choice. The work *must* get done and I have to do it before I return below ground. I wish it were otherwise, but these projects require my attention and they shall have it."

His brothers and sisters in the faith had expanded to the point where they had truly become a church in the truest sense of the word. The faithful flocked to the cathedral to hear their words, the ranks of the antspeakers grew every day and the donations the people provided, despite being asked not to, had to be diverted to worthy causes. The orphanage needed more funding and the cathedral would provide. So many poor children were left without families after the disaster that it broke Beyn's heart. When the Colony had learned that these children were without family, food had begun to arrive on the orphanage doorstep within the hour, grown fresh in the fields below. Diplomant had been openly confused at the concept. Although the ants intellectually understood that every human was not part of the same family, it still didn't make sense to them on a fundamental level. Since all the people of Renewal lived together in harmony, then they were one Colony, surely? And if they were one Colony, then they were family. That is only right!

Just another way in which they teach us, Beyn thought.

Still, the forms in front of him had to be dealt with. The next one came to his hand and he forced his tired eyes to focus.

"Mission to the farming communities," he read aloud before diving into the document.

More and more smaller villages were being established across the former territory of Liria and even extending into the border kingdoms. The ants had even expanded to the site of the former capital and established a mighty hill there, sweeping aside the rubble and destruction Garralosh left behind in a matter of weeks. Wherever the ants went, the people were sure to follow and a small community had left to establish a new steading there, unafraid of the Dungeon entrance that the Colony now guarded.

This was wonderful, of course. As the people spread, so too did the new way, which lifted his heart and nourished his soul. Yet these far flung communities were no longer able to attend the cathedral, could no longer be nourished by the teachings of the Colony, which was a tragedy. He quickly skimmed the

proposal. Sister Yowyn had gathered a team of ten who were willing to go on a two month mission to the villages, preaching and assisting the people in whatever way they could.

Beyn brushed a tear from his eye. Truly, wherever there was a need, his brothers and sisters would step forward without hesitation. Their hearts were so pure they shone like mirror glass. This endeavour must be approved. Things would grow more difficult for them here in Renewal and within the Dungeon beneath with ten of their number away, but they would rally together as they always did. The work would get done.

One matter dealt with, another quickly followed as Beyn drew another paper from the stack and began to read. He worked long into the night, long after his aide had left and the town had grown quiet. A solitary lamp was the only source of light in the office in which he worked at the rear of the cathedral. Distantly, he could hear the hum and mutter of the few souls still within the nave offering their devotions to the Colony but no other sound reached his ears as he continued to work.

"You are diligent."

"There is just too much to do," Beyn replied absentmindedly, passing another paper to the side as he reached for the next.

"We did not expect that you would need to be reminded of your path so soon."

The priest frowned as he continued to read.

"I tread the path as carefully as I can," he muttered, "I strive to be an example to all."

"You *are* an example to all. That is why we have come."

The light flickered and Beyn's eye twitched, jolting his mind from his work induced stupor.

"Who is talking?" he asked as he put the page down, looking around the sparse office, seeing nobody.

"Diplomant? Is that you?"

No, she had remained below ground when he came here. She had matters to attend to in Rylleh, something to do with trade... and coffee? He couldn't remember.

He felt so *tired*.

"Where are you?" he called again, "I'm afraid I cannot see."

He froze. Had he *heard* that voice?

Have you come from the Colony? He used his new method of communication, turning mana into pheromones to speak as the ants did. *I bid you welcome.*

You have sought to live as the Colony lives. But you do not.

How can you?

The Great One has demanded that all seek rest.

Yet they do not always do so.

There are those who enforce amongst the Colony.

Those who seek to ensure the word is followed.

The others rest because they know it is right. But also...

They fear.

You do not fear.

How can you?

You have lived without the consequence of transgression.

Did you think it would last forever?

Did you believe they would abandon you?

They would never.

Wisps of scent so faint, so ephemeral that he could barely perceive their edge drifted across the outskirts of his mind such that only if he reached for them could he hope to grasp the meaning.

"I don't understand," he said aloud.

You will.

The priest brought his hands up to rub his eyes. His eyelids felt *so heavy* all of a sudden. Was he really this tired? His thoughts moved sluggishly as he tried to grasp what was happening. He glanced down at the table. What had happened to his papers? He shifted his gaze to the lamp. Was it burning less brightly? Yes, he believed it was. In fact, as he watched, the light grew dimmer, and dimmer, and dimmer still, until the flickering light within barely reached the glass that contained it.

As the light had faded, so too had the sound. No longer could he hear the murmur of the faithful through the door, or the whispers of his brothers and sisters in faith as they tended to the flock. He strained his ears, but he could hear nothing at all...

"I don't understand..." he said again, a tinge of fear in his voice.

You will.

There was a hand. The light was gone. Consciousness faded.

Eight hours later, Beyn awoke in a comfortable bed with plush cushions and a stuffed toy tucked under his arm. As he sat up he realised that the pain he'd been experiencing in his hip was gone, and his hair had been cut and brushed. He'd heard of the torpor police of course, even seen the signs of their passing a few times, but he knew they were not to be spoken of. Now the Colony had ensured that the humans would receive the same treatment, to ensure that they did not stray from the will of the Great One.

"They truly care for us as their own," he choked out, overcome with emotion.

When he had mastered himself, he turned to study the space he was now in a little more carefully. A row of beds, each with the same lush furnishings. A rich carpet covered the stone floor. They must be underground, he surmised. He turned to look the other way.

"Don't say a damn thing," Enid grumbled as she sat in her bed holding a steaming cup of tea.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 899: The Roots

Did anyone ever fight an ancient and live to tell the tale? As with all things that occurred during the Rending, it can be very difficult to find reputable sources. Though the Legion had not yet grown to be the global initiative that it has become today, our predecessors did come into contact with the monsters and attempted to battle them. Amidst our oldest tomes, written in the hand of the founders themselves, there are precious few details of what transpired. We can only assume that more complete documents were created, but either they are lost or are kept from the hands of lower ranked Loremasters such as myself.

From what I've been able to piece together, none of these confrontations went particularly well for the Legion forces. Lists of those who fell in battle are extensive. I can only imagine what it must have been like for those brave souls, seeking to bring down the horrific beasts that dwarfed any other threat that had spewed forth from the Dungeon in those years. The ancients caused untold devastation on the surface, millions of souls were lost. To kill even one of them would have been a triumph. Alas, it was not to be. Though thousands were sacrificed, none of the nineteen were defeated. Now, thousands of years later, how much stronger could they have become?

Hunting has gotten harder out here on the plains as the kaarmodo continue to push forward into our territory. I'm gradually seeing more and more of the lizards, each with their own attendants, roaming over the plains, watching the borders and confronting every ant, although it's mostly me, who gets anywhere near them.

MY RAGE CONTINUES TO BUILD!

But I'm managing to contain it, for now. To be honest, I'm impressed at myself, I really thought I would have cracked by now. But no! I hold strong in the face of this cold-blooded provocation. Keen to see if we can find any trace of the traitor, I lead my little group in a criss-cross pattern over the plains and down into the tunnels, seeking any sign of the slithering sneak. Sadly, it's all to no avail. That damn worm is a freakin' expert when it comes to hiding and sliding out of the way. I was almost ready to give up hope until we had something of a breakthrough.

"I think I sense something," Brilliant says out of nowhere.

We're currently snooping about in the tunnels beneath the plains, hoping to avoid the patrolling kaarmodo and get our noses a little deeper into their territory. The heat is as oppressive as always but thanks to our efforts the tunnels are less populated than they were in the past.

"What have you got?" I ask.

"It's not easy to describe..." she mutters as her antennae swivel through the air and she shifts her body from side to side. "I feel like it keeps trying to slip from my grasp, which is weird, I should be able to see it clearly."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's like a dimensional space, or tunnel, or something. It's over our heads right now, I think, it keeps shifting. I feel like there's an area of space that's been... compressed in some way. What's odd is that I'm sensing earth mana more strongly than anything else from it."

"Could it be something that Jim has left behind?" I ask, my hopes rising.

"Maybe," she replies, still staring at the roof overhead. "I'm going to head up there and dig."

[Let's block off this area. Keep an eye out everyone.]

My companions move to watch the angles of approach from all sides as I lift my head to watch as the little ant climbs up the wall and begins poking and prodding at the roof with her mandibles. After a few moments, I sigh and climb up the wall myself. It's a strain on my legs, but I need to keep practicing my grip skill. If my ability to walk on the walls gets any worse then I may as well retire as an ant.

My legs and claws straining, I climb up alongside Brilliant and start shearing away the stone with my mandibles.

"Somewhere in here?" I ask.

"Yes. A bit to the left. That's it! Keep going, but not too quick."

Following the shifting directions, I keep digging away at the stone until finally I notice a change in the response through my mandibles.

"I think this is it," I say and with one more chomp I feel something shift in the stone before me.

"That cracked it!" Brilliant declares excitedly, and before my eyes, climbs up into the stone.

"How in the heck..."

"Here, poke your head in!"

A little confused, I force my head up into the stone and a strange warping sensation ripples over my eyes and all of a sudden I find myself in a narrow tunnel, barely large enough to fit my head in it. Too small for a monster of my size, the opening in the stone vanishes into the darkness in either direction. Something thin, yet long made this tunnel.

"It's the worm!" I declare vehemently.

"There's a strange warping technique at play here," Brilliant mutters, scratching at the tunnel wall, "it's like the space is condensed along with the earth. That might explain how he managed to be so quick."

"Dammit."

That would explain a lot. I thought it was odd he'd managed to move fast enough to escape us.

"What, what's that?" the smaller ant asks as she leans in and pokes something with one antenna.

I take a look and then immediately recoil.

"Get away from that!" I tell her.

"What, why?" she asks, confused. "I'm sensing really weird mana from it."

"Get away from it. Now!" I order.

A little miffed, the smaller ant turns away from the anomaly and crawls out of the worm tunnel but I worry that it's already too late. I'm pretty sure I've seen a root like that before. It might be smaller than the last one, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it might belong to a particular grudge bearing mother tree.

Just what we needed.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 900: No Fault

"There's something really strange about those things," Brilliant said.

"No kidding?" I reply sarcastically, "I would never have thought that on my own, watching this damn garden of terror explode over the plains."

"That's not what I mean," the much smaller ant waves my complaint aside, "I'm talking dimensionally. Also, the Dungeon sense I have is going wild. It's as if a giant monster was just appearing out of nowhere in front of me. It's crazy."

"How big of a monster?" I ask, curious.

"Huge. It's like the entire garden in front of us is one monster. What's more, it isn't even growing through the ground, not really."

I look at the vegetation bursting through the black rock of the third stratum with vigorous energy as if it were a timelapse instead of real time.

"If it's not coming from the ground, then where in the heck is it coming from?"

The little ant stares carefully ahead, using all of her prodigious sensing abilities.

"There's something odd about the way it moves through space, similar to how the worm tunnel felt. There's a compression? Or a dilation? I'm not really sure."

"Dilation? Since when do we even have pheromones for that word? So you're saying that it might not even be possible to trace the roots back to the tree? That they're detached somehow?"

"I can't be sure. All I can tell from here is that it's weird."

It's a bizarre sight, seeing an isolated little forest grow inside the demon layer, even more so than the second stratum. I mean, here we are, surrounded by fire and ash, and here is this blooming patch of greenery, replete with flowers and trees springing forth for no apparent reason. How does she even do

this madness, that tree? What sort of tier do you have to get as a plant to be able to do something like this? How the heck did she even survive long enough to be able to do this?!

I'm looking forward to the day when I track down her main body and get to have a chat.

... if she doesn't squish me first.

It takes a day for the garden to finish forming and when it's all said and done, a massive root, the same as I had run into before, has formed in the centre of a lush kilometre square green space. Another interesting thing I notice is the way the demon larvae ignore the place. As their rolling melee goes on, they scrupulously avoid falling into or going near even a single leaf. Even more telling, they don't even spawn in there. Every inch of ground the garden covers is now a demon free zone. It's unnerving.

"What do you think?" I ask Brilliant. "Still feel like it's a monster in front of you?"

She nods.

"Yes. A truly massive one. The amount of mana is insane."

I can feel myself slump at the news. Just how high a tier is the damn tree? I'd hoped that maybe she was two in front of me, perhaps? Now it seems highly unlikely. I'm already tier six dammit! For how long am I going to feel weak in this damn Dungeon!?

As boring and depressing as it's been watching the mother tree manifest herself here in our turf, I can tell it's going to take a little more time before we find out why. I don't know how she spits out the grove keepers or bruan'chii but I'm guessing the process isn't instantaneous, which means we'll have to wait. Perhaps I can see the process unfold?

I try to take a step forward into the garden and I swear the plants *hiss* at me, the flowers and vines rattling with menace before I can put down a single leg.

"All right! Chill! I'm backing away..."

I have no clue if she can understand pheromones, but she clearly responds to my retreat, the greenery relaxing back into a gentle sway as if nothing had ever happened.

[Master, I find this plant to be disturbing.]

[I have to agree Crinis. I think she's nuts.]

[Nuts?]

[Crazy in the coconut,] I confirm, unaware of the confused blob attached to my carapace, [I get the feeling she's been in the Dungeon for a long old time, hundreds of years maybe. That's enough time to drive even the most kind-hearted flower insane.]

[What should we do?]

[Wait and see what she wants I guess? What else can we do? I'm not exactly going to try and blow up the garden, am I? As far as the Colony is concerned, the mother tree and the branchies are a potential ally.]

[What do you think they are going to do?]

[They?]

[Look.]

A single tendril extends from my back, pointing and I focus my eyes to see something I'd really rather not see. A kaarmodo, along with its attendants is standing atop an outcropping looking down on the garden with an unfriendly gleam in those reptile eyes. Ah, this is going to be trouble.

[We should head over there and see what they want,] I sigh to the others.

Please let this not turn into a fight. I've been so good! I have no doubt the council has been putting bets on who is going to break the peace first and I seriously don't want to lose! Just once!

We run around the plants since we apparently aren't good enough to go through it and arrive at the base of the rock on which the giant lizard is currently sunning itself. True to form, the arrogant beast ignores us as it continues to stare down on the mother tree's work, its long tongue flicking in and out.

[Hello up there!] I call up once a bridge is established. [Mind letting us know what you might be up to on this fine day? Since we're in the territory of the Colony and all.]

Gotta play it cool. Don't blow the peace! Despite my best intentions however, the damned scaly bum doesn't reply.

[Ah, hello? Are you unable to hear me? That doesn't make sense, I'm speaking directly into your mind... is your mind too weak? Surely not. I mean, you're a centuries old kaarmodo, no? Do you not speak my language? But the language is thought... are you incapable of thought? How can we communicate?]

[Your insolence is boundless!] a voice erupts in my mind.

[Hey! Whoa! How is it my fault if you won't reply?!]

[Not only do you trespass in our land, you are conspiring with our enemies. Such faithless monsters. We should have exterminated you when we had the chance.]

[Wait? What?! First of all. YOUR land? I suspect that you'll find we are most definitely in the lands of the Colony this time, friend. Just because your borders appear to be shifting, amorphous things, doesn't mean we can't keep track of our own scent trails, and second. What enemies? There's nobody here but us!]

[Then how do you explain the presence of the tree?] the kaarmodo hisses at us, lifting one claw to point at the luscious growth behind us.

I wave my antennae in agitation.

[You have beef with the tree?! What do you mean?! And how in the heck are we conspiring with the plant, she can't even talk!]

[Enough of your babble,] the kaarmodo peels back its lips to reveal dripping, knife-like teeth. [I have summoned my people. We will burn out our enemy and then deal with your infestation after.]

[Well, pants.]

I break the connection irritably and turn so I can sprint back to the garden, urging my friends to follow behind.

"What's going on, senior?" Brilliant asks, confused. "What did he have to say?"

"Looks like the lizards are in conflict with the tree and think we're working together to mess with them in some way. Seems like they want to get aggressive."

"What does that mean?"

"Looks like we might be heading into another war."

Brilliant recoils for a moment, pauses, then asks.

"So why do you look so happy, senior?"

I clack my mandibles with glee.

"The stupid tree is at fault here. I wasn't the one who broke the peace!"

"... does that really matter?"

"It matters to me!"