

Chrysalis 901

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Chapter 901: To Be Tolly

I have been in many a dangerous or difficult scenario my dear readers, as well you know! It has been my joy over my forty year career to bring you my tales of adventure and insights into the many wonders our world of Pangera has to offer, and we have shared some incredible times. The blood falls of the hidden city of Parannah. The lost rhino tribes of the Folk! The crystal labyrinth within the mountain Ultima!

Despite these grand undertakings, I have to admit that the simple act of sitting down for a cup of tea and biscuits was enough to get my old heart pounding. Almost a shameful occurrence, my dear readers, and I have to admit I did smile at the irony of the situation. In my defence, this was no ordinary cup of tea!

For starters, the depth of flavour and maturity of the leaves were a cut above even what I had experienced before. My new companion enjoyed only the finest that the Colony had to offer and I have to say, though this may shock many a reader within the sun city, that the taste was quite equal to the famed 'Singing Hills' tea enjoyed around the globe in high society.

A shocking claim! I know! Nevertheless, my buds will not allow me to lie!

"This truly is remarkable tea," I gushed to my host. "The Colony has mastered the art of tea brewing to a higher extent than many will think possible."

Emilia politely translated for me and the giant queen before me bowed her majestic head in acknowledgement of the compliment. When I sat down I was informed by my guide that it was quite unusual to be granted an audience with a queen, though not many asked for one. The people of Renewal left the queens to their business out of respect and few others were brave enough to sit with them. I was informed that this was but one of eight queens who occupied the nest within Anthome and she was happy to meet with me given that she had completed her duties for the day.

"What originally began as a desire to ensure their guests were well cared for grew into something of an obsession within certain sections of the Colony," Emilia passed the reply back to me, "these ants have dedicated themselves to providing perfect comfort to any who stay within our nests. They have mastered many skills in this pursuit, weaving, pottery, crochet, baking, farming. There are vast fields within the Dungeon where ants tend to crops of wheat, rice and other surface staples, seeking to grow only the best."

I looked around the room we found ourselves in and the lush, even decadent furnishings that wouldn't embarrass even the finest of apartments. Dark wood tables and shelving that gleamed with a mirror shine that accentuated the grain in the wood, the rug beneath our feet was a masterpiece of the art, intricate patterns so fine they seemed to fold in on themselves to an infinite degree, even the cups we were using were expertly formed, with delicate paintings evoking a mood of freshness and warmth.

"I take it all of this was made by the Colony then?" I asked.

"Indeed," the Queen replied. "Our children often seek to lavish the best that they can provide on us, though we often ask them not to."

"Oh indeed?" I was surprised to hear this. "I must apologise, for I do not know how a queen would normally be treated inside a colony, but I would have presumed you would be happy to be venerated. Are you not critical to the future of the Colony?"

The queen with whom I spoke had introduced herself as Elizabant and she was a magnificent creature. Easily four metres tall and more than double that in length, she towered over me and the table we sat at to a ludicrous degree. The lustre of her carapace was remarkable and she positively gleamed, a picture of perfect health, no doubt due to the constant ministrations of her children. Despite her size she proved to be a delicate and gentle creature, her movements dignified and deliberate as we sipped our drinks and ate our cakes together.

"We are indeed important to the family, it is true. Our children pamper us and are loath to allow any risk to befall us."

Which is certainly true. My faithful guards were not allowed into the room, nor was I permitted to form a mind bridge directly to the queen herself. To even approach the outside of this room I had been searched thrice and if there was one ant less than a thousand on guard then I'm more blind than my poor dog Phillipe.

"Yet we do not view ourselves as above any other member of the family. Each of us has a role to play and without every member of the Colony working together we could not have achieved what we have done."

"Isn't it true that there is one ant who is held in somewhat a higher regard?" I asked shrewdly. "The Eldest? Is this individual considered... above?"

The queen waved her antennae gently as she considered the question.

"Yes, and no," she told me. "The Eldest was the first of us, was the one who made us what we are. We all seek to contribute to the success of the Colony and there are none who can hope to contribute more than the Eldest, so in that sense, there is reverence and respect. If you were to ask which ant carried the most authority within our family, it would be them."

"Is it possible to meet them?" my heart burned for this exclusive interview, my dear readers, burned! "I would love to have a chance to write down the thoughts of such an august ant and share them with my readers."

The queen seemed a little taken aback by my request and Emilia leaned over and placed a hand on my arm.

"You have to understand, Ms Tolly, that they are very protective of the Eldest. If you thought that it was difficult to meet Elizabant, this is nothing compared to how difficult it would be to contact the Eldest. At the moment they are very deep in the Dungeon and cannot possibly survive here in the first stratum. We could use the gates to move deeper within the territory of the Colony, but it would be almost impossible for you to come face to face with the Eldest."

Almost impossible?

"So you're saying there's a chance?" I smiled.

You know me, readers! I hate hearing the word 'no'!

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Chapter 902: Sizing Up

"Are you *sure* that you aren't responsible, Eldest?"

"What are you talking about, Sloan? I've been the soul of caution out here. All of this can be blamed on the plant. How are we supposed to know that the kaarmodo and the bruan'chii are having some sort of dust up?"

The general flicks her antennae in irritation.

"We'd heard that there might be something of the sort going on, but we never expected that it would matter to us. Even though the kaarmodo sand empire is close to the former border kingdoms, we haven't done anything to provoke them, so we never expected them to act so aggressively toward us."

"Seriously though, what's the issue between the tree and the lizards? What could they possibly be fighting over?"

"From what we've been able to gather it has something to do with resources and land in the fourth and fifth strata."

I stare.

"How in the name of *heck* are you able to figure that out? We haven't been anywhere *near* the fourth stratum!"

"We have our sources, Eldest."

I eye the smaller ant.

"You want to act all mysterious now? Fine. So what's the plan?"

"The Colony is still restructuring and expanding above so we want to avoid a major conflict if at all possible. We need to defend the garden until the grove keeper has arrived so we can learn why the mother tree has chosen to reveal herself to us at this time."

"That makes sense. I'd love to know what's going on inside her head. How many are we up against?"

"As far as we've been able to learn, there aren't actually that many kaarmodo in the nearby demon cities, though they have a functioning portal in each one."

"So we don't expect that many to come, but it could possibly be a heap?"

"Right."

"Darn. How many are we bringing?"

"Ten thousand."

Oof. That's a lot. Most of them are going to be tier four, with a good chunk of tier five mixed in, but that's still a heck of a lot of monster.

"When are they going to arrive?" I ask.

"They should be here in the next ten minutes. I left with them and rushed ahead to get here first. There are already scouts roaming ahead to find the approaching force. Things will come to a head here within the hour."

Quicker than I expected. Nice to see that everyone is so organised I suppose.

"All right then, I'll go and take a sticky beak at what's happening."

"Eldest..."

"I'm not going to fight anyone! Yeesh. Have a little faith would you?"

The doubting... it's almost enough to hurt my feelings, honestly. I bid farewell to the general and step down from the rock we stood on, scuttling down the side to rejoin my companions below. It's barely been an hour since the garden grew and already we're in this mess. I have to thank the tree for her help the last time, but on this occasion she's thrown my family in the deep end and insects can't swim.

Although ants in the amazon are known to form living rafts and float along the flood waters, their entire Colony clinging together, with their queen in the centre of the mass, in order to survive. We might have to do that I suppose. Although I think I'm far too heavy for the surface tension of the water to support my weight... perhaps Pangera has particularly dense water?

[What do you think, Crinis? Do you think we're strong enough to take on an army of kaarmodo and their attendants?]

[We are much stronger than we were the first time we faced one, master. I believe you can keep us safe.]

[Come on Crinis, you're just as strong as I am. How about we keep each other safe?]

[V-very well... master.]

[How about you, Al? Do you feel like joining in on this one? And please don't appear in mid-air on me, my heart can only take so much.]

After a short pause I hear the demon's thoughts echo across the bridge.

[I will not,] he says, [I do not seek to make enemies of the kaarmodo. It is not my fight.]

[More than fair,] I admit. [Well, I suppose you'll be hanging around anyway, just make sure you keep your distance. Things are likely to get hairy.]

Which reminds me.

"Protectant and company. Make sure you keep your wits about you. Pitched battles are a difficult place to be on bodyguard duty, so don't overdo it."

I don't get a reply, but I know that they're listening.

I wonder if Sarah is going to come out for this one. Probably not, considering her reaction to being contacted by Jim. I'm sure she doesn't want to risk being contacted by him again. So long as she stays up

in the city back in Orpule, then I don't see any way that he could get up there and bother her. I wouldn't put it past him to try though...

The dude has an unhealthy obsession to say the least. Shouldn't matter in the long run, since he'll soon pay for his crimes. In the meantime, I better do my part to protect this stupid garden so we can find out what the damn tree wants. Looking into the distance I can still see the big lizard and four setsulah attendants standing atop the outcropping. With a sigh I decide I may as well head over and attempt a diplomatic resolution.

Let me just say going into it that I don't expect it to succeed. In fact, I kind of feel like it'll end up with the kaarmodo attacking me. Don't ask me why, but I get the impression that no matter how hard I try to be accommodating, the parties I try to negotiate with always seem to end up in a rage. I can only assume that people on Pangera have short tempers or something, since I have been the soul of courtesy from the beginning.

I snap a bridge into place as we draw closer and try to sound as cheerful as possible with my smooth opening line.

[Getting any sun up on that rock?] I say, waving my antennae in a cheerful wave.

[...]

No reply, but I definitely feel a simmering anger across the bridge. Already?! What did I even say?!

[Look,] I try a different approach and assume a more serious tone, [I'm sure you don't want any of your brethren to suffer, or Gandalf forbid, die for the sake of pruning a stupid weed. Why not just let this one slide, eh? What's the harm?]

The giant lizard shifts slightly on the rock and I can feel the irritation bubbling away under the calm, near-motionless exterior. Something flickers between the attendants and I feel one of them connect to our bridge.

[The lord no longer wishes to address you, insect,] I am curtly told.

Immediately I feel them attempt to cut the bridge, but I hold onto it, rebuffing their initial attempts.

[You probably don't think we're strong enough to fight you, which is totally fine. Ants, right? First stratum monsters and all that. I get it. I just want to warn you that this might not go how you think it's going to go. You turn up here with a hundred, we're going to bring more. You turn up here with a thousand, we are going to bring more. And if you think we aren't able to hurt you... well, I guess you'll find out, won't you?]

Having said my bit I allow the bridge to be cut and turn so I can walk away, though I do in fact wander passed the outcropping so I can catch a glimpse of the lizards who are on their way. Right now I can't see them, but it won't be long until they get here, then we get to throw down in a big battle again. Finally!

... I mean. No. Bad.

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Chapter 903: Rising Sands

Rassan'tep opened his eyes slowly. The warmth on his scales spread in waves through and penetrated deep into his muscles which nearly drove him back into rest, but the patient, still mind of his attendant helped focus his thoughts.

[What is it, Ammon'sil?]

[You have been asked to accompany an expedition, Old One.]

The great lizard blinked once, which was enough to cause his servant to prostrate himself immediately.

[I protested strongly against disturbing your rest, Old One, but the winds blew against me. The Mahaan has asked this of you personally.]

The words were digested as all things should be, with patience, as Ammon'sil remained pressed to the floor.

[There is no fault with you,] Rassan'tep said as he roused himself, shifting his legs to free them from the heated sand in which he had rested. [We must all serve the will of the Mahaan. Even if she is a young thing barely free from her egg.]

[I would not dare to say that she is unworthy to scrub your scales, Old One,] his setsulah replied from the ground.

[Rise now,] the kaarmodo commanded. [If we have been ordered to assist, then assist we shall. Gather the others and prepare my war garment. The sand bath can wait until our people have been served.]

Only now that he had been commanded did Ammon'sil rise and moved out the door, his steps smooth and languid despite his speed. As he awaited his attendants the Old One took deep slow breaths, his tongue flicking at the air as he gradually returned himself to wakefulness. By the time the setsulah returned, he had extracted himself fully from his bath and the six bonded servants immediately stepped forward.

Already rasped clean by the sand, his scales were polished and oiled before the ceremonial tapestries were laid over his back and neck. Next came the rings of gleaming gold around his legs along with the heavy, enchanted gorget that clasped around his neck. Bedecked in the finery that was deserved of a kaarmodo in its second century, the Old One held his forearms close his body as his servants did their work. Once all was ready, the six bowed low before he lowered himself to allow them onto his back. Only then did he step forward, exiting his temporary abode and entering the chaotic city of Bintran.

When he had made his way through the streets he found a gathering of his kind on the outskirts, the Mahaan herself in attendance. Rassan'tep approached, his arms clasped in front of him, before he roused the mana and connected himself to the bridge.

[Nice of you to join us, Old One,] the Mahaan said, eyeing him coldly.

He shifted his hands slightly, a pointed reminder that she was yet to grow the limbs as she had not reached her second century of life. Truly the Great Desert did not value this place if one so young had been placed in such a position of responsibility.

[Perhaps it is simply my age,] he replied and said no more, closing his eyes and resting, though he could feel his setsulah bristling on his back.

[Peace,] he said to them alone and they gradually relaxed once more.

[There has been a sighting of the mother tree nearby, within the territory claimed by the ant colony that has recently appeared around Orpule. Naturally we must seek to stymie the tree wherever it is found, especially when the hateful creature appears on our front doorstep. I have ordered a sortie not only from Bintran, but our neighbouring cities as well. Destroy the garden, then return.]

[What of the ants?] another asked. [What if they seek to oppose us.]

[I care not,] the Mahaan replied, [sweep them aside and deal with the enemy.]

When no more was said, the Old One opened his eyes once more.

[Let us leave,] he said.

Altogether a dozen kaarmodo, each of them too young to have grown their full set of limbs, gathered together with their setsulah and pooled their minds together to create a disc of force that could carry them all. The coalesced mana lifted them from the plate and out over the cavernous expanse before lowering them to the ground before it disappeared.

[Which way?] Rissan'tep asked.

[To the east, Old One,] another replied.

With no need for excess words or actions, he led the young group across the plains. With their long legs, they ate up the ground quickly without using any skills and soon met up with two more groups of a similar size. Brief greetings were exchanged before they continued on their way. When he had considered things enough, Rissan'tep finally reached out to Ammon'sil, the most senior of his attendants.

[Tell me of these ants,] he commanded, [I had heard nothing of them when I retired to rest.]

[I also have not heard much, Old One. From what I have been able to gather, they have recently descended to the third stratum from above and conquered Orpule along with another city.]

[They originate in the second?]

[The first, I believe.]

[Unusual.]

Monsters from the first were generally inferior to those from the second, which made descending quite hard on them. Demons were born far more powerful than those from so high in the Dungeon. For them to be able to conquer two cities so quickly meant they must be highly unusual.

[They are intelligent to a high degree for such weak monsters, and several highly evolved specimens have been seen, as much as tier six, I believe. Other than this, I do not know, Old One.]

[This is sufficient. I thank you.]

More to ponder as his legs ate up the kilometres. The real question was, why the mother tree would bother expending resources to manifest herself here. Was it for the ants? Was she trying to open a new

front in her conflict with his people? Bes they nip any potential problem in the bud. Sweep it away as the wind swept through the desert, erasing all traces.

Soon they had arrived at their destination. A lone scout sat waiting on a high rock and in the distance the Old One could see the still budding garden of the mother tree bursting forth from the dark plains.

All that stood between them was a sea of motionless insects.

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Chapter 904: Rising Sands Pt 2

Rassan'tep looked out over the assembled masses of insect monsters and tasted the air with his tongue. Across the bond he could feel the minds of his attendants stir with trepidation. They had not expected to see so many. In the lead of the insect formation an enormous specimen, larger than the kaarmodo even, stood to attention, it's gleaming carapace reflecting the light of the embers that fluttered through the air in this stratum. Altogether the sight was an impressive

[Lend me your eyes,] he commanded, [let us examine them together.]

The setsulah, led by Ammon'sil, pooled their thoughts, allowed their mana to flow together before they collectively wove their spell and brought it back, laying it over their eyes. With their senses overlaid, the kaarmodo accepted the stimuli they provided and fed his own back into the collective. Immediately each of them shifted in place as the ant army in front of them blazed with a richness of energy that they had not expected to see. More than that, there ebbs and flows that should not be. The big one at the front, there was something... odd. Rassan'tep concentrated hard and even then he could just barely grasp the edges of that strange eddy, a curious ripple in the fabric.

[Release.]

The spell was allowed to unravel and the seven of them contemplated what they had seen.

[Speak your thoughts,] he invited his bond servants. [Do not stand on ceremony.]

Ammon'sil spoke first, as was his right.

[There are more than we expected to see, and they are more highly evolved than anticipated. This force is not to be underestimated.]

[The tier six has a core bursting with energy. Should it evolve again, it may even develop to the mythic stage,] Rapsep, wife of Ammon spoke next.

[A possibility exists that we may not be able to overcome them,] Chahan'sep spoke next, the surprise evident in the movement of his thoughts. [There is more to this colony than perhaps we expected.]

[The others may not see as clearly as we have. I believe that they may still think us to be a vastly superior force. It may be wise to consider retreat,] the youngest, Yuwan'sil said, which caused the others to turn and stare at her for her impudence.

[Peace,] the powerful mind of Rassan'tep rumbled, [I asked that you speak your thoughts, did I not?]

[You did, Old One,] Ammon'sil replied.

[Young Yuwan may well have the right of it. There is a chance we are outmatched here, which I did not foresee. There is also a strong possibility that the others will not arrive at this assessment, or ignore it even if that have. This is the brash attitude of the young and it should not surprise us. How can we expect them to know better? They have but a mere century of life behind them.]

The old kaarmodo considered for a time.

To an outsider, the standoff between the two forces, still over a kilometre apart, would have looked bizarre. Neither side moved. Not a muscle, or a twitch. The insects, as was their way, stood in perfect ranks, motionless, as if carved from stone. Likewise, the kaarmodo, with the patience born of their long lived nature and their reptilian ancestry did not stir, waiting and watching in perfect silence as their elder contemplated his course of action.

[We have been given a task by the Mahaan, so we shall carry it out,] he declared at last. [I will speak with the others and see what their appetite is like.]

He withdrew his thoughts from the connection he shared with his bondservants and expanded a bridge out toward the other kaarmodo who quickly latched onto the mana weave. Thankfully communicating via thought was so much faster other methods, they could afford to analyse their foe and coordinate themselves.

[We have taken a measure of our opponent. They stand between us and the garden that we have been ordered to destroy and it does not appear as though they will let us pass through easily. What are your thoughts?]

Generally the next oldest would be the one to speak next, but given that this war party was formed of adolescents and young adults, the hierarchy wasn't clear. As a result, dozens of minds leapt forward at once, creating a clamour as they competed with each other.

[This weak monsters shall be swept aside!]

[How can think to compete with us?!]

[We must obliterate them to send a message!]

[I believe some level of caution may be required...]

The final voice, a young female, was immediately piled in on as the others decried her perceived cowardice and lack of determination.

[These insect monsters have cowered before us for weeks. Now that we arrive in force they believe they can stand up to us? They shall be crushed beneath our claws, their attacks will brush off my scales like grains of sand. We should assault them immediately and rout them before we torch the garden.]

The Old One blinked slowly. Such a course of action would result in a resounding defeat. The kaarmodo were large and powerful creatures, each weighing tons, yet they were ill suited for massed combat. In short skirmishes they could throw their weight around and utilise their poisonous bites to great effect, but against more than a hundred times their number? They would be surrounded and picked apart, throwing away their greatest advantage, their magical superiority. Rasan'tep was tempted to show his

teeth in contempt but he managed to restrain himself. He wasn't young anymore, such a display was better left for the impetuous and foolish.

Still, this stirring attitude had gained much support amongst the youth and they stirred, as if contemplating rushing forth at this moment without waiting for his order. An unthinkable course.

[You're too hot blooded,] he rebuked them and he could feel the young minds recoil at this stinging insult.

Such a thing to say to a reptile... yet they deserved it. Charging into the enemy? Such foolishness.

[We are not here to fight ants, we are here to destroy the garden. Ranged bombardment. Form teams of five and prepare to arc your spells over the insects. You have two minutes, begin now.]

Separately he reached out to the poor female who had been so rebuffed by the others for her caution.

[You have the right of it. I will commend your insight when we return.]

He didn't bother trying to correct the others on their misjudgement. They wouldn't listen to him, regardless of his standing or age, only experience would teach them so that was what he would provide.

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Chapter 905: Rising Sands Pt 3

Life without the Eldest to guide has been difficult for the Colony. They sleep, a deserved rest to be sure, and in the meantime we have had to adjust, to overcome the challenges that Pangera presents to us without our wisest councillor and most farseeing leader. It has been like growing up for the Colony, in many ways. No longer were we able to rely on someone to guide our destiny, instead we had to collectively decide it for ourselves. Perhaps this was the intention of the Eldest all along, but only now that they sleep are we truly able to break away from this dependence.

I hope they are proud of us for what we have done. I believe they will understand, when the time comes.

- *Notes from the personal writings of Historiant.*

In a few scant minutes the kaarmodo and setsulah had gone to work, taking a commanding hold over the mana around them and drawing it in to form intricate weaves of magic. For every kaarmodo there were at least two bondservants, which meant each team contained at least fifteen minds, pooling their mental resources to craft the great siege spells that they would launch to destroy the budding garden of the mother tree.

It was a difficult spell and one that required a powerful collective to craft. The Old One did not join any of the teams, instead he observed the reaction amongst the ants as he worked with his setsulah to craft his own artillery spell. One of the many benefits that age brought was the means necessary to support a greater number of bond servants, and Rassan'tep had been particularly choosy in selecting his setsulah, each of them were powerful mana manipulators with their own specialities. What's more, they were excellent at cooperative spell casting, everything a kaarmodo could possibly ask for. He was exceptionally proud of them.

As for the ants, they didn't appear to have a strong reaction at all, which surprised him. There was almost no chance they were unaware of the spells being woven so close to them, most of the teams that

had been formed were putting no effort at all into concealing their work,. As if daring the monsters to do something about it. As he watched, his vision enhanced, he could see the ants still stood at attention in neatly ordered rows.

It was fascinating to observe them. There were many varieties of ant in attendance. Different sizes, different shape, even different colouration. It was easy to determine the purpose of the larger ones, they had thick plating for their carapace, and large heads that were no doubt packed with muscle to enhance their bite strength. A melee or warrior class if ever he'd seen one. This only reinforced his opinion that a frontal charge was tantamount to suicide. One on one, he had little doubt he could crush one of these physical ants, but a hundred to one? Unlikely.

The smaller ant types were no doubt the more magical ones, mages of varying purposes. Against a single kaarmodo, he had no doubt the ants would be laughably outmatched, but that simply wasn't how a swarming insect operated. It mattered nothing if a kaarmodo was better one to one, they would never fight one to one. A single ant was helpless, a hundred thousand of them? A force to be recognised.

These ants were clearly intelligent, and strong, something that he hadn't seen before. It was a worrying development. If possible he did not want to enter an open conflict against them right now, the kingdom had more than enough on its plate fighting off the recurring waves and contesting for territory against the mother tree. There was no need to go looking for enemies.

The massive ant that postured in the lead of the horde caught his eye once more. Large, shiny and with a brightly burning core, there was little doubt that this monster was a powerful individual without any support, yet here it had support in measures. If he judged rightly the other monsters nearby, the only non-ants in the field, were likely to be pets. He could sense the connection somewhat vaguely between them. Another mystery.

The spells were ready and still there was little to sense from the ants. Perhaps they intended to allow the kaarmodo to succeed? Was the intention to demonstrate that they were not in alliance with the tree but would gather in force to defend their borders? Such a thing would be most welcome to the Old One, and ideal outcome.

[Launch,] he sent over the bridge.

At once seven points ignited in a fury of mana. Tremendous columns of flame formed that burned ever hotter at their cores as each of the kaarmodo stepped back from the blaze they had created. The fires drew down on themselves until they formed an impossibly bright core of pure white fire that seared the air until it crackled. Then, all at once, the superheated cores blasted into the air, arcing high as they blazed a trail through the scorched atmosphere of the third stratum.

The temperature skyrocketed and Rasan'tep basked in the heat as he watched to see what the ants would do. Would they continue to not act?

Before the arcing fireballs had reached halfway to their destination, the ants dropped the concealment they had placed around themselves to reveal that they had in fact been hard at work at the entire time. The Old One was impressed. Most of his attention had gone into working on his spell, it was true, but even so he hadn't seen so much a glimmer of what they'd been weaving. It turns out they were constructing an enormous shield, but due to the effort required to keep in hidden, it wasn't yet

complete. As he watched a tremendous flood of mana began to sweep around the insect formation, being drawn in and woven at incredible speed as even more energy was pulled out of the monsters themselves and surrendered to the working.

[They are working as one mind,] Ammon'sil observed with wonder, [all of their efforts move as if guided by a single hand.]

[An incredible level of cooperation,] Rasan'tep observed. [Though not all are working on the one spell.]

It was difficult to see, but there were different spells being formed in various pockets around the formation, including by the big ant in the front. Soon these workings took shape and great spears of water were launched into the air, crashing into the fireballs with an explosive burst of steam and fury.

[Not nearly enough,] Ammon'sil said.

[They only intend to weaken them,] his master replied, [reduce the strength so the shield will hold. Look, they go again.]

More spears rose, then more as the ants churned them out as fast as they could manage it. The fireballs ate the water as if it were nothing, the concentrated heat melting them almost before they touched, yet even so, they began to shave away at the mana held within.

Then the large ant unleashed... something.

Even from a kilometre away, Rasan'tep felt a shiver creep across his scales as a deathly howl pierced the air. A sphere of dark purple rose into the sky, packed to bursting with a form of mana that he did not recognise, yet the air itself felt drawn into it, creating a wind that increased in speed the longer the spell hung in the air. When it made contact with a fireball, the sphere expanded rapidly to form a black void such that he had never seen before.

HOOOOOOOOOOWWWWL.

That dreadful sound only grew more intense as the two spells collided with each other, the energy in both crackling and roiling as each sought to devour the other.

[What is that?] Rasan'tep wondered aloud across the bond.

[I know not, master, but I fear it,] came the reply.

Held in stasis as they fought each other, the kaarmodo was fascinated to see which would break first. He honed his mind to examine the conflicting energy more closely and what he saw shocked him. Ever so slightly, but with increasing speed, the fireball was beginning to break apart. At first, just a tendril broke off and swirled around the darkness before sinking into its core, but soon the tendril swelled until the fire roared around the black sphere as if screaming its death cry.

The energy within the fireball was being eaten! When the horrific sphere finally vanished, that fireball was no more, consumed whole.

He hadn't even realised that the other artillery spells had detonated against the ant shield, which had held. The garden was unharmed and the ants still stood in their silent ranks, unmoving.

They would not be able to destroy the garden, Rasan'tep realised. They did not have the strength to compete against what the ants had brought here today. He would need to convince the others to turn back, that further conflict would be futile, which would take some effort, but with age on his side, they would obey. No doubt their fragile pride had been stung by this failure, but perhaps they wouldn't underestimate this superficially simple monsters next time.

Before he undertook that task, however, there was something else he was curious about.

Without drawing on his bond, he weaved a mind bridge, taking great care to conceal his work as he extended it across the distance between the two armies and felt it connect to the massive ant at the forefront of their ranks.

[Ah... hello, Mr kaarmodo, sir?] the mind spoke to him in a hesitant fashion.

[My name is Rasan'tep, an Old One of the kaarmodo. I have but one question for you, if you would hear it.]

[As long as you don't intend to shoot those damn miniature suns at us again, sure thing, let me hear it.]

[Have you heard of a thing known as the Red Truth?]

[Ah, hell.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 906: Face off

I watch the kaarmodo force turn and walk away with decidedly mixed feelings. Obviously, them leaving is a good thing and should be celebrated. We didn't have to kill any of them, they didn't manage to kill any of us, therefore this can be pencilled in as a win. We have managed to preserve the garden of the damn tree and not escalate our conflict with the reptiles beyond the point of no return!

Whoo!

On the other hand, we did have a rather deadly magical confrontation with them. I have to say I was actually a little surprised that the shield managed to hold as well as it did. Though Invidia helped a lot, he can't match up to the mental firepower that the lizards brought all on his own. Not even close. We also have to consider the possibility that the kaarmodo will simply return with a larger force and steamroll us. It might take them a day or two to put together such an army, but I wouldn't put it past them considering how much they seem to hate the bruan'chii.

I suppose we can only hope that the garden finishes spitting out someone we can talk to before too much time has passed, because if we need to bring another twenty or thirty thousand ants in here to fend off the kaarmodo then the chances of the confrontation being bloodless are practically nil.

On top of all that, I have another damn cultist to worry about!

I'd almost forgotten about the followers of the Red Truth, which probably isn't that surprising since I only met one other member, the chap who was following Garralosh around, but I *really* didn't want to attract the attention of more of these nutcases. I already have Granin and his triad latched onto me and while their advice is useful and they are happy to let me have my freedom and go about things my own

way, I can't guarantee that other cultists will be willing to let me roam loose when they see the potential for their world's salvation in me.

Not that the weird lizard with the arms had much to say on the matter, he basically asked me if I knew what the cult was and if I knew what they were about. When I replied in the affirmative, he turned tail and moseyed off with the rest of his reptilian crew.

Stay away from me!

[Do you think we should follow them, Master? Perhaps we can pick a few off as they retreat.]

[Now's not the time to be so aggressive, Crinis. We have to play it cool at least a little while longer. Once we've heard what the tree has to say, then we can be more confident in the direction we move.]

[I worry that they'll be back and strike at us again.]

[I hear you Crinis, and I think you're right, but for now we are on the defensive. We just need to play a stronger hand than they do.]

[Very well, Master. Try to keep yourself safe.]

[When do I not?]

[...]

I can feel the ominously writhing tentacles on my back as Crinis considers all the times I might have not acted with my own safety at the forefront of my mind. Think I might just leave that one there.

"Senior! Are you seeing this?" Brilliant cries as I approach where she's been watching over the garden.

"I mean, I can see the plants just as well as you can, but I suspect that isn't what you're talking about."

"No! Not the plants! The energy! The way it moves, and where it comes from... I swear this is some sort of pocket or naturalised gateway that she's moving this material through. It's fascinating! I just wish I could see it closer!"

"I mean... why can't you?"

"I can't go in the garden, she won't let me in," Brilliant flips her antennae as if I'm an idiot.

THWACK!

"Ouch!"

"Don't get uppity with me, you were just a hatchling only a few weeks ago! I'm not talking about going into the garden, I'm talking about digging underneath it! You're an ant aren't you?"

She stops rubbing her head and stares at me for a second.

"That's genius! I'll do it right away!"

With no further ado, the energetic little ant turns and practically throws herself into the dark soil of the third stratum, gnashing and chomping like a mad creature as she starts to dig her way underneath the soil to better spy on the source of the garden's mana. It wouldn't be quite as disturbing a scene if she

weren't cackling madly the entire time, her pheromones flooding the surroundings with her almost giddy giggling.

"I'm going to find your secrets! I'll see everything! You can't hide them from me! I'll reveal it all, layer by layer!"

Good lord. If she ends up attracting a following that takes after her... mercy save us.

With nothing else to do, the ant army that assembled to fend off the kaarmodo falls into a defensive position around the garden as scouts head out on patrols or to tail the retreating lizards. I don't bother involving myself, but I know that the leadership are calculating the likely strength of a second wave and making sure they have the antpower on hand to repel any such attempt.

In the meantime, all I do is sit down, and wait.

In the end it only takes half a day before the leaves begin to rustle and a faint tremor can be felt through the ground followed by a tall, wooden looking form stomping out of the green depths, a broad smile on its face. A moment later it extends a bridge to me and I gladly accept it.

[HmMMM. Hello there, ant-friend. It is nice to see you once again.]

Huh? This guy doesn't look the same as the grove-keeper I saw before...

[We've met?] I ask.

The big tree-figure shakes slightly with mirth.

[Mother has made me a little quicker than she usually would, so I do not quite look myself, but yes, I am the same keeper that you met outside your nest.]

[Well. Okay then. Nice to see you again. Wonderful of you to join us out here in the third stratum. The pleasure of your company is felt both warmly and deeply. I just have one question though, if you might indulge my curiosity for a brief moment?]

[HmMMM. Of Course!]

[Great. What the hell are you doing out here?]

To his credit, the big guy doesn't flinch, in fact, if anything, he seems amused by my slightly hostile question.

[Ah yes. Mother was concerned that you might not appreciate her appearance in this area, particularly so close to her enemies.]

[Something tells me she wasn't all that concerned.]

The leaves behind the keeper writhe with barely concealed amusement.

[I knew it you stupid plant! Why are you making a mess for us up here you weed!]

The grove keeper holds up two gnarled wooden hands.

[Peace, friend. In this case I must defend the mother tree. She is not able to manifest herself anywhere she pleases. This happens to be the first point in this stratum where she has sensed your presence.]

[Why not just contact us further up in the second stratum? She already has a full forest set up there!]

[She withdrew those resources and redeployed them where they were needed, along with my fellow bruan'chii. Even bringing this small garden into being has been an expense she can ill afford right now.]

That surprises me a little.

[Are things really that bad?]

The grove keeper nods sadly.

[It has been a challenging time lately. Our enemies have moved against us in ways that we did not expect. We believe the kaarmodo may have even nurtured a monstrous species, much like yourselves, to unleash on us. Even now these creatures attack our heartlands, threatening our mother in the seat of her power.]

[Monsters? Really? I thought that was frowned on.]

[It is.]

[What sort of monsters are they? I might know a little something.]

[We hope that you do. What can you tell us about termites?]

Chrysalis

Chapter 907: The Enemy

The word 'termites' rattles around in my head like an out of control, rage inducing pinball. If I had a lip it would be curled! If I could hiss, I would hiss! Which is weird, since I don't really have anything against termites per se, yet I feel an overwhelming need to rend flooding me. Look! My mandibles are actively gnashing the air without me having any input! It's as if my entire ant body is filled with the urge to destroy having merely heard the word of the ancient enemy!

In the interests of science I decide to speak to the ants around me. As the rest of them are going about their business I release a short and sharp burst of pheromones.

"Termites."

Holy smokes!

The reaction is instant! Every ant within range stops on the spot and starts quivering, their mandibles writhing in the air as if yearning to clamp around the necks of they who should not be named. This is bizarre! I know for a fact that the ants of my family have no idea what a termite is! They've never encountered them in their lifetime, never even heard the term. Is the hatred for the termite woven into our cores? Did I accidently drop that in when I modified the Queen's core? I'm pretty sure I'd remember deliberately placing a hatred of wood eating bugs into my siblings...

Regardless of the reason, the hunger for conquest is clearly there. How can the Colony live knowing that a giant monster termite nest exists out there in Pangera? We can't! We must destroy it! They cannot be permitted to exist within the same Dungeon!

[I've heard of termites, yes,] I say hesitantly to the Grove Keeper. [Are you saying the Kaarmodo have custom built themselves a termite queen and are using it in a war against the mother tree and the bruan'chii as a whole? Isn't that a little extreme?]

The giant wooden figure nods solemnly.

[Hmmmmm. It is true. Under normal circumstances such a thing would be considered an evil, perhaps even illegal act. The Legion would censure them for this behaviour and their allies would turn their backs, but these are not normal days. The repeated waves have everyone on edge. The Legion is stretched and cannot react as they wish, nor can they afford to alienate one of the old races who form their base of support at this time. The kaarmodo have leapt on this chance to pressure us. The termites have proven to be a dangerous foe for my kind...]

Well yeah, you're literally made of wood.

[... and mother has decided to ask that you repay the favour you owe her.]

[Hang on, favour we owe her? So she helped defend the Colony before the last wave, now we need to rush down *to the fourth stratum* in order to save her from getting woodchipped? That's a bit of a stretch there chief.]

[Nonetheless, this is what she has asked. If you are familiar with our foe, then do you believe that you can help us? If not, then I will speak with mother and perhaps she can ask others to come to her aid.]

He doesn't sound too hopeful of that. I suppose the repeated waves are giving everyone pressure, not just the Legion. If the Folk are up against it then they aren't likely to stick their necks out for the tree either I suppose.

In terms of knowledge about termites, I know quite a bit really. Given their relationship to ants, I researched them as part of my hobby. It was fascinating stuff! Most people don't realise this, but ants and termites aren't closely related at all. Where ants are descendants of wasps, which is where our body shapes, the wings on Queens and males come from. Some species of ant still have the stingers in the business district as well, which just goes to show how close the wasp relationship is. Termites on the other hand, are related to beetles. They have a different body shape and an entirely different social structure. Whereas ants are almost entirely female, termites are a mix of both male and female. The Queens, who grow into pulsating, immobile egg machines are paired with a male, a king, during their nuptial flight, and remain together until one or the other dies. Unlike a female ant Queen, who usually only mates once in her lifetime, the termite royal couple will mate whenever they need to and can rule over their nest for well over a decade. What's more, when the royal pair do finally die out, another pair will rise up within the colony to take their place, whereas most ant species will simply die out at that point as all of the females are sterile.

How this plays out in the Dungeon, I'm not quite sure. It isn't necessary to mate here in order to produce offspring for one thing, all that is required is Biomass, but I wager that there are still male and female termite workers, not that gender matters. I imagine that the kaarmodo captured and carefully modified

the termite queen and now they direct her and her offspring against the tree in every way they can. What would we be up against? The majority of termites are tiny little workers, smaller than most ants, though immense in number, but then there are also the powerful soldier class with their massive jaws that are called upon to defend the nest.

Generally speaking a termite Colony is much larger in numbers than *most* species of ant. A termite queen can produce an egg every three seconds, which means about thirty thousand *per day*, or over *ten million* per year. There aren't many ant species that can even approach those sorts of numbers, certainly not monogynous colonies, those with only one queen. Probably only driver ants could beat them, pumping out millions of eggs per month, which is why clashes between army ants and termite mounds are epic battles without equal in the insect world.

Back on Earth anyway. This battle on Pangera is going to be legendary. There's not enough room on this planet for two social insect colonies to thrive.

[I'm going to have to report on this to the council,] I tell the Grove Keeper, [and we'll have to discuss what to do with this. I want to help, and I think the Colony will be more than willing to help out, but we have to put a timeline in place. It's not like we can just rush down to the fourth stratum tomorrow and start fighting the good fight. This is going to take time.]

[The matter is more urgent than you realise,] the Keeper presses me. [If you are willing to help, that will be fantastic, and mother has promised to grow a gate here that will take you straight to the frontlines. It won't be ready in a single day, but in a few weeks you can be there. We can't wait much longer than that.]

[Wait, wait, wait. You want me and the Colony to invade the fourth stratum in *two weeks*? Are you off your nut?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 908: Something Grander

"Termites."

The council recoils in shock, snapping at the air, their antennae twirling violently through the air.

"That is quite uncomfortable," Coolant observes in a detached way, as if she weren't currently gnashing empty space as if it had a head she wanted to remove.

"Whataretermite!veneverheardofthembeforebutallofasuddenIwanttofightthingsrealbad!"

"Vibrant..."

"Sorry-sorry! Sometimes I forget. Anyway, I really want to fight something right now, why is that?"

The council all turn to look at me.

"It's not easy to explain. I had the same reaction," I tell them.

I hesitate.

How much do I want to reveal right now? If I tell the council all about termites, won't they quite reasonably want to know where I came by my knowledge? I've never explicitly explained my origins to my siblings, and I don't see why it would matter, but I feel a little awkward now that I'm on the spot. Bah! To hold information back just because I'm a little uncomfortable would be ridiculous! Ant lives are on the line here!

"Termites are a social insect, much like us. They have a Queen, *possibly* a king, they produce eggs which hatch into nymphs that eventually mature into workers and soldiers. They are known to eat wood which is likely why the kaarmodo decided to use them against the bruan'chii. They can even hollow out trees or logs and form their nests inside. Since the reptiles are using them as a weapon I'm sure they've done extensive modifications to the core of the Queen in order to influence the offspring and the overall species. In truth, they could be a very powerful enemy and we should be extremely cautious."

The ants gathered around the council table all nod solemnly as they consider what I've said.

"So when do we attack?" Leeroy asks.

"Dammit Leeroy!" I crash an antenna down on the carved surface of the grand circular table. "This is serious business, not your usual 'charge in recklessly' routine!"

"No, no. I think she might be right this time," Sloan says, her foreleg tapping thoughtfully against her mandibles.

I boggle at the normally cool headed general.

"You *cannot* be serious. From you, Sloan? I feel like I've lost my mind!"

"I have good reasons for my stance, Eldest, if you would hear me out before jumping to conclusions."

"Fine!" I wave a leg in apology. "This whole thing has me stressed out. I'm sorry, go ahead."

"Right then."

The general stands in her seat to address the table, all our eyes focus on her as she fussily cleans her antennae before speaking.

"I believe," she begins, "that I really hate the sound of these 'termites' and want them exterminated as soon as possible."

All around the table there are solemn nods as each of the council members absorbs this declaration.

SLAM.

"You can't be serious!"

"Eldest, I assure you that I am serious. The very mention of these fiends stirs the mana in my core. They must be destroyed."

"Look, I'm just as ready to leap into some hair-brained invasion of a stratum that is far too strong for me at the drop of a hat, but that doesn't seem like a good policy for the Colony as a whole! Am I wrong? It was only a few weeks ago that I was telling you all off for rushing into the third layer too quickly, now you want to rush off into the fourth? We'll be smashed!"

Victor raises both her forelegs in a calming gesture.

"Nobody is suggesting we mount a full-scale invasion of the fourth stratum," she eyeballs Leeroy for a second, "... I think. Slowing our rate of progress and being more deliberate with our expansion has yielded dividends already and will continue to do so into the future. When we do start to expand our holdings in the third we will be in a much better place than we were before to safely hold that which we take. We currently don't have anything like the strength required to conquer ground in the fourth, but we don't have to, right? We just have to fight against these termites. Which means all we need to do is send an expedition to help protect the bruan'chii."

"Hey-hey! I'll go! Send me! I want to go there!"

"And there's a volunteer already, thanks Vibrant."

"No problem!"

I mean, I can see their point. We don't need to fight against sapient races and conquer cities or worry about weird politics, we just need to protect the tree from the termites. Will we be able to destroy the infestation and annihilate their nest immediately? No chance. But we can dig in and fight a defensive war until we have the chops to properly compete in the fourth stratum.

"I'm just worried that we're going to be overmatched when we get there," I fret. "Even the tree and the bruan'chii are struggling, which means these termites are powerful, perhaps more powerful even than the demons we've been dealing with."

"We'll have to send our best to have any hope of success," Advant agrees. "We commit to a defensive strategy and dig in as hard as we can. As long as we blunt the offensive and relieve the pressure from the tree, then she'll be satisfied that we've repaid her for the favour and shown solidarity to our allies."

"I'll have to go personally," Cobalt chips in, "working in a whole new environment is going to be difficult to say the least and if I'm on location I can provide the best support to the build teams."

"I'll represent the healers," Mendant says in her quiet scent. "We can't afford to lose any of you, so you need the best treatment we can provide."

"And who is going to stay here and make sure our operations on the third don't stumble like they did before!" I protest.

They all look at me.

"HELL no. I'm going to the fourth, are you nuts? Imagine leaving me in charge of anything..."

I shudder.

The other ants around the table all shift their antennae in the ant equivalent of an eye-roll, which I think a little unfair. They know me well enough to understand my strengths and weaknesses by now, surely. Yet somehow I'm constantly getting caught out being thought more highly of than I deserve.

"It looks like we've decided to accept the proposal then," I say heavily. "I'll go talk to the Grove Keeper and tell him to get that gate started. We only have two weeks to prepare so I suggest we make the utmost use of that time."

Everyone agrees and begins to stir from their specially designed ant-chairs as they prepare to leave. I remain in my own seat, my mind still spinning at the thought of entering the fourth stratum so soon. I'm nervous, extremely nervous. It's far too quick! And yet the very thought of heading down there stirs the mana in my body and heats up my core. It's so exciting! What challenges will we face?! What opponents will we find?! The urge to keep going deeper into the Dungeon only grows stronger the more I explore!

Almost like I'm being pulled deeper.

"Eldest," a gentle thought prods me from my thoughts and I startle when I realise that Cobalt and I are the only ants left in the council room.

"Hey there, Cobalt. I was lost in my thoughts there for a minute, what's up?"

The little carver looks up at me, towering over her in my chair and reaches out with her specially jointed front leg to pat me on the claw.

"Thank you for sharing your wisdom about the termite enemy with us," she says.

"Oh," I'm surprised, "that's no problem. Whatever I know I'm always going to share with the Colony, obviously."

She watches me calmly.

"We know," she nods.

She pats me again.

"No matter what you were before, you are a member of this family and our precious senior. We believe in you and are so proud that you are prepared to believe in us. That is who you are now. Don't forget that."

With a final tip of her antennae, the carver lets go of my claw and crawls quietly out of the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts, and the shining threads of acceptance and love that flow from the council to me.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 909: Soul Crushing

Once the council meeting ends it's almost as if I feel a gear shift within the Colony. By the time I make it back to Orpule the change has already occurred and ants who I thought couldn't possibly work any faster are zipping about like possessed creatures. A steady flow of burning determination creeps into me through the Vestibule as the tens of thousands of my siblings within range are all furiously devoted to completing even more tasks than they were before. More than once I find myself offering cautionary warnings to ensure that they all get enough rest, otherwise they may end up getting more sleep than they bargained for.

Such warnings are never welcome, per se, but they are usually heeded, and with good reason. If the ants are pushing themselves too hard and the work becomes sloppy they do more harm than help.

The Grove Keeper is initially delighted when I report back to him that we've decided to accept his proposal but his enthusiasm dims when I outline exactly what we are offering.

[This is not exactly what the Mother Tree was hoping for,] he rumbles solemnly.

[Yeah well, she was basically hoping we'd throw away tens of thousands of lives in order to keep her alive and flourishing, which just isn't going to happen. The Colony is in a precarious position right now, which you know, more to the point, the *tree* knows, so I think she should be, quite frankly, exceptionally grateful that we are going to send our very best and most powerful ants to help her hold out. When we have the capacity to help more, then we will.]

[She did not hold back when she assisted you.]

[Even if that were true, which I can't confirm, so what? You want us all to jump off a cliff? We're ants, not lemmings! Don't think I haven't realised that you're being more than a little reluctant to share details with us about exactly what we would be up against down there. If the Mother Tree, and all of her children, can't deal with these termites then how exactly you expect an army of tier four monsters, no matter how large it is, to deal with the problem is a little beyond me!]

The giant wooden figure slumps a little, real sadness evident in its infinitely deep brown eyes. After a long moment he turns back to the bountiful plants behind him which rustle indignantly for a while before he turns back.

[Mother is not pleased, but she wants me to make it clear that she understands. I have been given permission to reveal a little more of what is happening in order to clarify her position.]

He takes a long breath, the leaves that cover his body fluttering at the sudden inhalation before he lets it all out in a gust of wind.

[The Mother Tree is a monster,] he says.

A pause.

[I mean. Yeah? I knew that.]

Isn't that obvious?! Everyone knows that!

[Hmmmmm. It isn't something that we usually confirm,] The Keeper tells me sternly. [And it is relevant to this topic. The matter at hand isn't Mother, it is us, her children.]

[In what way? I mean... you guys get spawned like we ants do, no?]

At least, I don't know of any other way that it could be done. Monsters can't reproduce in any other way. We don't have a need to, since we're spawned by the Dungeon itself.

The big tree shakes his head.

[No,] he says firmly, [we are not. The Mother Tree did not wish to create a race of monsters, spawned using the means of the Dungeon, since then we would be as mistreated and maligned as she is. It took hundreds of years, and only after ascending to a very high tier was she able to achieve it, but she found another way. In effect, we bruan'chii each contain a portion of Mother's soul. Combined with the method she employs of growing extensions of herself, she was able to create an entirely new form of life, us, disconnected from the Dungeon.]

Hang on a second.

[Are you telling me she literally breaks shards *off her own soul* to make you guys?]

[HmMMMM. This is true.]

YIKES. I knew she was crazy, but holy moly! This is the next level! It's also hella impressive. She didn't just spawn new monsters, she made an entirely new *race*, one that is accepted by the System. In order to do it, she takes on a heck of a cost though.

[The reason we are so threatened by this new enemy, is not because they are stronger than us, or stronger than Mother, but because the kaarmodo have discovered how we were made, and engineered their insect weapons to target us specifically.]

I have a sinking feeling in my abdomen that tells me I know exactly where this is going.

[Let me guess. These are some sort of soul devouring termite? They get a hold of you and then eat the shard you contain, which indirectly damages your mother?]

[And makes it impossible for her to recreate us,] he nods, [normally, even should we die, or the materials that comprise our bodies are reclaimed, we live on within the tree, and she can spin us back out whenever we desire. Those who have fallen to the termites are forever lost and now she refuses to allow us to fight them at all. Though she is capable of great things, the Mother Tree cannot do this fight alone, her weapons are not effective against creatures who are designed to consume a monster like her.]

[Good thing you shared this with me. It's helping a whole lot to garner my sympathy. At least now I understand why you reached out to us at the time that you did. Look, the first wave will establish a defensive perimeter, create fortifications and ensure that no further significant damage is done to your mother. From there we will hold the line until enough reinforcements are available that we can finish the job. Alright? We *will* finish the war for you, just not immediately.]

[HmMMMM. It will do.]

With that the Grove Keeper turns back to the garden behind him, no doubt to confer with his Mother. A moment later all the greenery ripples as a massive pulse of energy flows through every leaf and vine.

[What the hell was that?!] I say.

[Mother has accepted your terms. She is bringing up the energy and materials that she needs to construct the gate. This is no light thing for her to do, friend. I hope that you are able to do as you've said.]

[Ha. When it comes to eating termites, you won't find a better ally than us.]

Nearby, Brilliant watches all the goings on with wide, glittering eyes.

"It's amazing!" she screams. "I HAVE TO SEE MORE!"

A moment later she dove into the garden and vanished within the second.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 910: Drawn Down

There are no precise records of how old the Mother Tree may actually be. Without being present to see her spawn within the Dungeon it wouldn't be possible to know this information. Along with the more secretive, long-lived nature of plant monsters it isn't difficult to understand why documented sightings of her are so rare. Only when she evolved and became a much larger presence within the Dungeon did sightings become more common and her movements and growth more documented.

I estimate she would have been tier seven, or perhaps eight, at the time of the first recorded sighting by the Legion. A powerful tree of great size that nonetheless was already capable of moving through its extensive root system, vanishing from one place overnight to reappear in another. From analysis provided by plant-type monster specialists within the ranks of the Loremasters it's assumed that the Mother Tree invested the bulk of her evolutionary energy, and specialised her mutations, into greater survivability. Her ability to relocate is just the tip of what the monster can do to preserve her own life. During combat with the tree it has displayed remarkable regenerative capacity, drawing on hidden stores of both mana and Biomass to regrow what is lost at a rapid pace. The roots can appear almost anywhere, even disconnected from the tree itself, able to capture Biomass and siphon it back to the main body of the monster across vast distances.

The Mother Tree has even survived the destruction of her trunk on two occasions that the Legion is aware of. One of these was inflicted by the Legion itself, during the ultimately failed attempt to exterminate this high tier creature, and the other occurred earlier in the monster's life, yet she was able to fully recover both times. Some speculate that the tree itself is naught but misdirection, and her true self lies elsewhere.

- *Excerpt from 'The Root of Evil - An analysis of the Mother Tree' by Alberton.*

Two weeks is both a long and a short amount of time, depending on perspective. Is it a long time to be standing around doing nothing? Absolutely. You'd go mad within a day. Is it a long time to prepare an invasion of the fourth stratum? No. No it is not.

Despite the importance of the mission the Mother Tree had dumped on us, I didn't want the upcoming invasion to take away the main focus of the Colony, which was to continue expanding through the second and first strata to help build our capacity and strengthen our foundation before an eventual move into the third. With a wide chunk of territory in the third, we'd have the resources needed to harvest the experience and Biomass required to produce more tier six ants.

Only then would we be strong enough to invade the fourth in strength and take hold of land there. Without those precious resets, we'd simply be too outmatched against the creatures born in an environment so rich in mana compared to ours. For the two weeks we had available, the Colony focused on bringing as many ants to tier five and six as possible, trying to power up an elite force that would be capable of going toe to toe, mandible to mandible against the termites.

And of course, things between us and the kaarmodo didn't simmer down in the meantime, oh no, they only got more tense. A defensive fortification was constructed to protect the garden of the Mother Tree and manned with over ten thousand ants at all times. Even so, the reptiles and their bonded slaves

never stopped poking about, arriving in small patrols or in a grand show of force, flinging spells at us only for them to be taken apart, or dissipate harmlessly against our shields.

And maddeningly enough, somewhere out there is that treacherous worm. I haven't caught a sniff of him since the garden grew and without Brilliant to help me trace the worm tunnels, I've very little hope of getting hold of his tail.

Although, interestingly enough, Sarah has volunteered to go to the fourth strata and fight against the termites. Perhaps he'll make an appearance? I mean, it would certainly be out of character for him to venture somewhere so dangerous, but I would have said the exact same thing about him coming to the third.

[Master, it's almost time.]

[Huh? Oh, thanks Crinis.]

For me the past two weeks have been spent training and grinding, pushing my level as high as I can in preparation for the test to come. It's been a gruelling regime of roaming far and wide with my friends by my side, hunting down every strong demon we could find. It was a brutal regime, but it bore results.

In front us stands a glittering portal bound by a great arch of wood through which are threaded golden veins of potent mana. The Grove Keeper hadn't lied when he told us that this was a significant investment on the part of their mother, the amount of energy she's poured into growing this gate is nothing short of amazing. The fact that she's even capable of doing something like this is absurd in the first place! This must be how she can spread clusters of roots all over the place without any of them being connected to each other. Which means that not only are these gates capable of moving material objects through, like an army of ants, but also *energy*.

The Colony desperately needs to master the secret of these gates! If we would link all of our nests together...

The Grove Keeper stands at the ready in front of the gate, his eyes roaming over every detail and twist of the roots and boughs that make up the portal. Since it isn't ready, I might as well try and hunt down something before I forget.

Where is she?

I dip my consciousness down into the flowing stream formed of the Colony's Will. She's going to be in here somewhere, though it isn't always easy to spot it. Her thoughts are just as slippery as the rest of her when she wants to be hidden. It takes a few minutes, but eventually I catch a stray thought and I point with one leg.

[Over there, Tiny. Go get her.]

Like an excitable puppy thrown a ball, the giant, bat-faced gorilla leaps forward as if shot from a cannon, his powerful limbs slamming into the ground, crushing the stone as he bounds across the ground. As he draws nearer he leaps high into the air before crashing down amidst the foliage on the edge of the garden like a fallen tree. The leaves and flowers rustle indignantly but Tiny pays them no mind as he rummages about. After a few tense moments of groping at something beneath our line of sight he grins and hauls up a wriggling ant by one leg.

[Good job Tiny! Bring her on back!]

Filled with pride he walks back as the Grove Keeper approaches.

[The gate will be ready in a few moments. Have you gathered all that you will take? It will not remain open permanently, an hour a day is all the Mother can maintain right now.]

That isn't what I wanted to hear, but we were prepared for something like this.

[We'll manage. Everyone is here, ten thousand of the finest.]

[HmMMM. I hope it is enough.]

[Don't worry about it, I'm going, aren't I?]

He looks at me in a way that suggests my words might not have been as comforting as perhaps I had hoped. How rude!

[The gate is ready,] he announces a moment later, [move quickly.]

A qualitative change has come over the flickering space between the boughs. Where before it had been a hazy field of twitching energy, it had now become a rippling window of golden light ten metres wide and ten high. An impressive feat for a plant, no doubt about it.

Behind me the various members of the council, along with the rest of the expeditionary force waited in quiet ranks. Leeroy, Bella, Cobalt, Advant, Burke and others had come to help guide their castes in this new environment.

"Alright then, a taste of the fourth stratum. Let's go get it!" I declare before I begin to step forward.

As the portal looms larger in my eyes I feel my heart pound in my chest and the mana rushing through my body. I feel as if I couldn't turn around even if I wanted to. I must step forward into the unknown. I don't even have a choice.