

Chrysalis 911

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 911: The Realm of Myth

The first stratum is filled with beasts of all kinds. Vicious growls and the sounds of battle ring constantly here, in this, the weakest area of the Dungeon.

The second is filled with shadow and cold and death. A place of darkness where creatures of spun shadow swim and crawl through an endless maze where light is quiet.

The third is a realm of fire, smoke and ash. Demons abound and theirs is an alien and savage existence.

But in the fourth, the impossible begins to become possible. The concentration of mana is such that the rules of the world, of life, of the existence as we know it become skewed. The realm of Myth. To enter this layer of the Dungeon is to step onto the precipice of a different universe.

Excerpt from 'A treatise on the concentration of mana and its effect on the laws of physics'

Pulled forward like a fish with a hook in its mouth, I rush into the portal and am overtaken by a blinding light that washes away my vision and has me seeing stars. The texture beneath my legs changes, the temperature drops and as the light slowly fades I am left staring out into the impossible.

In front of me rises a mountain. An enormous, jagged and snow-capped mountain that rises from a floor so far below that I cannot see it and rises to a height that boggles the mind. Mist and cloud shield the top and unbelievably I realise that it is raining, faintly, but still, raining. I shield my eyes as best I can, since I have no lids to cover them and stare in open jawed wonder at the incredible scenery before me, heedless of the ants who begin to pour through the gate.

Between where I stand and the mountain opposite is a vast open space, filled with what I believe at first are incredibly dense looking clouds, but quickly realise are something else entirely. They are *floating rocks*. Although rocks isn't really the word I think fits them best. These aren't pebbles or even boulders, these are *huge*, practically islands. Each must weigh thousands of tons, large enough to host a small village. How in the name of whatever the heck passes for Newton on Pangera are these things FLOATING?!

From one of them pours a steady stream of crystal clear water, cascading over the side in a waterfall that scatters into mist as it plunges into the bottomless depths below. So obsessed am I with what I can see in front of me, I almost don't realise what it is my eyes are telling me lies to the left and right.

And the answer is, yet more mountains, two more in fact, just as colossal as the first. Is this the layout of the fourth stratum? Impossible mountains, the bottomless valleys between and the absurd floating islands in the sky? This is absolutely ridiculous! And I thought the third was weird!

[Hmmmm. Welcome to the fourth stratum. I believe this is your first visit?] a powerful mind connects to my own and rumbles in my head.

I continue to stare out ahead of me as I soak in this incredible vista.

[Yep, first time. No matter what someone tells you, it doesn't really prepare you for actually seeing the real thing, does it?]

[Indeed no. Though, if you really want to be impressed, you should more closely examine the mountain that lies beneath your feet.]

I suppose I'm standing on a mountain also, aren't I? I can't exactly tell how tall it is, since I can neither see the bottom nor the top, but perhaps I'm roughly a third of the way up? But I do wonder what's so special about this one that the Grove Keeper would point it out. Downwards is the only direction I can't see all that clearly. I can see what is *next* to me, sure, but not what is beneath my feet. So I tilt to the side a little and examine the mountain I stand upon.

Except it isn't a mountain.

"What?" I mutter to myself.

It doesn't feel like dirt or stone, it's softer than I think it should be, and the colour isn't what I would have expected.

I turn around.

"NO. SHOT."

It's a tree. *The* tree. In place of the mountain is a gnarled tangle of roots so massive, so thick, that I thought I was standing on a flat slope. Hundreds of thousands of these rise from deep in the earth and collect at the base of an absurd trunk, which must have a circumference in the *kilometres*, which rises up and vanishes into the cloud and mist overhead.

[Is that the Mother Tree?] I ask stupidly.

[Of course,] the Grove Keeper's thoughts glow with pride.

I slip into my mana sense for a moment before shutting it off. The amount of energy flowing through this tree is boggling, simply boggling, running up through the roots and converging within the heart of the tree. I had no idea it was possible to get *this* strong!

[Is the Mother Tree an ancient?] I ask. I feel like I have to check!

The Grove Keeper stares at me in surprise.

[No, of course not. Mighty she may be, but she cannot compare to those creatures.]

I swear by every fibre in the holy white beard that the tree *wiggles* in laughter at me. Wiggles!

[I came here to save your butt,] I grumble openly, slapping a leg down on the root beneath me, [no need to laugh at me!]

[Hmmm. If you would come with me, I will direct you and your siblings to the conflict. The termites have not attacked us over the surface, it is through the tunnels at the roots of the mountains that they strike.]

By now thousands of ants have gathered outside the gate, absorbing their surroundings in traditional ant silence, though I've little doubt my siblings are just as awed as I am. Just as we turn to follow the guidance of the Grove Keeper a faint sound sends my antennae swaying through the air. That sound had definitely come from *above*, and was reminiscent of something that I would really rather not see.

[Hey there, Keeper, do you guys all have the same name, by the way? Never mind that, I just wanted to ask if you knew what caused that sound?]

[Sky Wyrms.]

[SKY WYRM? As in, a dragon?!]

[Hmmm, no. As in a Sky Wyrms. I do not know this dragon of which you speak.]

I nervously clean my antennae as I keep my eyes trained on the sky above. Sky Wyrms sounds a hell of a lot like a dragon to me. If it sounds like a dragon, then it might well *look* like a dragon, and at that point I don't particularly care *what* you call it, I don't want any part of it.

With a final glance upward, I follow along with the rest of the group as the Grove Keeper leads us confidently downward, eventually walking through a gap between two roots and then within the tangle. What I expected to be nothing more than a cramped maze of building sized roots was actually a surprisingly verdant and well lit cavern in which the bruan'chii apparently made their homes. The wood of their parent had been shaped into all sorts of abodes and a strange glowing fungus suffused the scene with a warm light. There were hundreds of the tree people here, abiding together in the quiet manner of their kind. Here and there the larger Keepers strolled, the plants glittering with energy and life wherever they went.

[This is Aruatha, one of our settlements. The main front isn't far from here. Mother wishes for you to use this place to house your siblings, though we ask that you do not dig or use the roots as materials.]

[I mean... obviously.]

As much as not digging pains us, we aren't going to start eating the wood, how would that make us different from the termite scum!?

Name: Anthony

Level: 41 (Rare) (VI)

Might: 205

Toughness: 180

Cunning: 145

Will: 100

HP: 360/360

MP: 530/530

Skills:

General:

Master Excavation (IV) Level 31; Expert Grip (III) **Level 20**; Expert Stealth (III) **Level 10**; Tunnel Compass (IV) **Level 9**; Iron Mind (IV) **Level 40**; Master Stamina (IV) **Level 14**; Still Meditation (IV) **Level 21**; Snap Dash (IV) **Level 31**;

Mana:

Mana Craft (V) **Level 56**; Condensed Mana (IV) **Level 40**; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) **Level 31**; Mana Hoarder (IV) **Level 31**; Layered Mind Magic Affinity (V) **Level 24**; Directed Mana Sensing (IV) **Level 36** Expert Healing Magic Affinity (III) **Level 20**; Omni-Elemental Affinity (V) Level 80; Advanced Mana Masking (III) **Level 15**; Wood Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Metal Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Lightning Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; **Advanced Force Magic Affinity (III) Level 16**;

Pet:

Further Pet Communication (III) **Level 20**; Core Crafting (IV) **Level 18**; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 5;

Defensive:

Grandmaster Exo-Skeleton Defence (V) **Level 45**; Master Dodge (IV) **Level 40**; Master Endure (IV) **Level 16**; Expert Grace (III) **Level 20**; Advanced Mandible Parry (II) **Level 10**;

Offensive:

Unerring Acid Shot (IV) **Level 26**; Master Precise Shooting (IV) **Level 38**; Doom Chomp (V) **Level 55**; Mandible Spear (II) **Level 8**; Advanced Chomp Combo (II) **Level 10**; Charge (II) Level 6;

Mutations:

Senses:

Sharpened Perimeter Eyes +25, Future Wave Sight Antennae + 30 (Twilight Filament);

Defence:

Thickened Complete Diamond Carapace +30, Fortified Healing Inner Carapace Plating +30;

Physical:

Hardened Rapid Absorption Legs +25, Mana Drenched Mandibles +30, Hastened Potent Regeneration Gland + 30, Loud Convincing Pheromone Gland +25, Vast Hungering Stomach + 25; Lock Hyper-Twitch Musculature +25, Coordinating Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network +25;

Acid:

Propagating Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +25, Guided Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle +25; Thickened Draining Acid concentration gland +25, Exhausting Thickener Acid Stimulation Gland +25;

Mental:

Indomitable Coordination Cortex + 30; Condensing Gravity Main Brain +15; Mind Mana Focused Sub-Brain +15; Mind Mana Focused Sub-Brain +15; Mind Mana Focused Sub-Brain +15;

Mana:

Forceful Unending Gravity Magic Gland +30; Might Infusing Collective Will Vestibule +30 (Soul Crystal); High Purifying Communal Spirit Nave +30;

Species: Colony Paragon

Skill points: 52

Biomass: 653

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 912: The Creed

Suffer not the termite to live.

- *Excerpt from 'Wisdom of the Eldest'*

[No, we don't need to get settled or any such thing. We came to kill termites, lead us to the front, we are keen to begin the work,] I tell the Grove Keeper, who seems a little disconcerted.

[You should adapt to the mana level before fighting,] he warns me, his slow, deep tones ringing in my head. [You aren't used to what it's like on this level. It can affect this in strange ways.]

He's not wrong about the mana level, it feels as if it's so thick I could swim in it. My legs are on fire, sucking incredibly dense energy out of the ground, which isn't even the Dungeon, I'm just pulling it from the roots of the Mother Tree! What it feels like to actually step on the Dungeon floor where the veins are present... I can't begin to imagine.

[My people hunger to taste termite and even I may not be able to hold them back,] I confess to the large wooden figure, [it is best that you lead us to the enemy, otherwise we will run there on our own.]

He frowns down at me.

[I did not realise your kind were so bloodthirsty.]

[You've never seen an insect fight another insect? Best not get between them.]

Ever since we came beneath the surface and amongst the roots of the tree, I can sense a savage mentality rising amongst my siblings. And, if I'm honest, within myself also. The termite! They're so close now! The hated enemy, the war that has lasted on Earth for over a hundred million years. Only one social insect shall be allowed to prosper, the resources of the Dungeon belong to the unending swarm of the Colony! We will not allow these rivals to exist!

Somewhat disturbed, the Keeper leads us away from the settlement and the nervously peeking bruan'chii who watched a force of ten thousand mighty insects march passed their community, each one burning with the need to fight!

Deeper and deeper still we travelled, along winding paths of intertwined roots that seemed an endless maze that plunged into the heart of the world. The sheer size and scale of the mother tree seemed endless, but at last we came to something that spoke to me. Dirt. Precious dirt. As the lead ant, I set foot on the precious ground and immediately felt more at home.

[It is near here that they have been incurring against our Mother,] the Grove Keeper sounded grim as he pointed to a nearby tunnel, [the beasts have taken a toll on my people and now the Mother will not allow us to fight. She takes on the burden herself, but mighty as she is, she is not built to fight against this foe.]

[More like this enemy was specifically designed to fight her,] I point out, [and for some reason I feel like your mother isn't as good at fighting as she is at other things.]

The Keeper eyes me askance.

[She is mighty,] he assures me.

[I don't doubt that, but for whatever tier she is, she should be *mightier*. Exactly how much evolutionary energy did it take for her to be able to create children of her own soul? I'm guessing, a lot.]

The massive figure of the Grove Keeper does not reply, but I don't really notice, the termites are close and it is time to hunt.

"Be aware," I warn my family, "we are close now. When we meet the enemy, it will be a savage brawl like you've never seen before. Remember, there are only two things that you need to do: stay alive, kill termites. In that order. Am I clear?"

They do not reply, but I can feel ten thousand thrums of agreement through the Vestibule. There will be no energy wasted on scent when the enemy is so close at hand.

I move purposefully forward into the tunnel and note that the roots of the tree are still present, breaking through the dirt here and there, splitting and winding into smaller widths the further we travel. Soon I begin to notice segments of root that have been chewed on, clear evidence of the termite presence. The tree is regenerating the damage, but slowly, judging by the various wounds I see. It's possible the termites are using some kind of saliva or mandible mutation to slow her healing process. Just how far did the kaarmodo go to prepare this enemy? From the signs it seems as if they may have spared no effort or expense in their machinations.

Termites don't *have* to eat wood, contrary to popular belief. What they want, is cellulose, which wood just happens to have. All plants have it, though not to the same degree, it forms the cell wall that gives plants their hardy, non-spongy structures. Humans can't even digest the stuff, so weak is their tract.

Up ahead, I hear something, so I speed up and soon I encounter something that sets my antennae to twitching with disgust and rage. It's a pheromone trail, but not the familiar, warm message of my siblings, oh no. This one is strange, alien and utterly foul to me. My legs twitch and jerk as I try to run, battling the instinct to wipe my antennae clean. Just awful! It's terrible! What sort of evil could possibly produce this stuff?!

The reaction of the Colony behind me is just as severe when they come across the termite trail and the upswell of rage within the Vestibule reaches unseen heights, thrumming within my carapace like a wardrum.

Then we burst into a clearing, lush with life. Flowers, thick, luscious leaves and vines as thick as a human are everywhere and they writhe in constant motion against a monster we can only glimpse through the clearing. Enormous heads and mandibles supported on spindly legs, snapping and tearing at the plant life with wild abandon, ripping into the growth and I see them breaking it down and eating it on the spot. There are hundreds of them, here in front of us, each one of them alight with mana indicating at least tier four.

But these are thoughts, and there is no room for thoughts now.

"SUFFER NOT THE TERMITE TO LIVE!" I roar and my siblings take up my cry as we rush forward in a tidal wave of chitin and rage.

"FOR THE COLONY!"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 913: The Most Brutal Of All

No quarter. No mercy. No hesitation. No remorse.

There can be only one.

- *Wisdom of the Eldest.*

Seized with a primal rage that bubbles from a genetic level, my siblings rush forward, all thought of strategy abandoned as their mandibles gnash eagerly. Even I feel it, the emotions of the Colony flooding through me and adding to the urgent *need* to destroy the enemy insect that I already possess. It's difficult to remain in control of myself in the face of such overwhelming battle hunger but I manage, barely. The steadying presence of my pets within my mind provides a rock which I can hold onto to avoid slipping into a mindless rage.

[Invidia, make sure you protect and heal the ants,] I force out, [they aren't going to look after themselves as they should.]

[Yessssss. I sssshall havessss their gratitude!]

[Crisis, you do the same, look after the family. Tiny, just smash everything, we need to end this quickly.]

Ahead of us the roots and plants continue to thrash against the encroaching termite threat, vines whipping through the air faster than I can see to smack into the insects, or wrapping around them and flexing in an attempt to crush them. However, it just isn't working as well as it should. The termites are tough, *very* tough, and it doesn't seem to matter how much the Mother Tree batters them with her vines, it isn't enough. If she wants to deal with these critters, then she needs to bring something bigger to the fight.

But the termites are quick and clever, I can see it from across the vegetation. They work together, scissoring the vines apart with their monstrous mandibles, protecting and shielding each other from harm as their very presence seems to wither the garden. The other thing I notice is the visceral reaction the termites have to our appearance. The moment they detect us charging their entire disposition changes and the garden no longer matters. I can practically feel the fury radiating from them as they organise themselves into a loose battle lane and rush to meet us in battle.

My core ignites in rage all over again at the sight, as if the very thought of the termites attempting to stand before me is an insult that cannot be borne.

In the eternal conflict between ant and termite, one thing has always remained true, the termites are builders, but ants, ants are destroyers.

"FOR THE COLONY!" the battle cry rings out once more and then the two lines smash into each other.

Far stronger than my opponents, I apply no subtlety or strategy, I simply charge into the leading termite like a battering ram. Unable to match up to my strength or mass the hapless beetle-descendant is sent rolling end over end and I rush to exploit the gap in their line, turning to my right to capitalise on the weakness. The termites are large, bigger than all but the soldiers at their equivalent tier, and their mandibles are truly savage, low, wide and razor sharp blades that seek to latch onto my neck and sever my head from my thorax.

I mean, technically I don't have a neck, but the joint between the segments of my body is certainly a weak spot.

I won't have it though! My mandibles explode with light as I pump raw mana into them and activate my most powerful bite Skill: the Doom Chomp!

CRUNCH!

[You have slain level 34 Edax Ainae Termite (IV).]

[You have gained experience.]

[Basic profile of the Edax Ainae Termite unlocked.]

[Edax Ainae Termite (IV), Soul Eater Termite. Born of a modified Queen, this species of termite exists for a singular purpose: to hunt and destroy plant based monsters. Their mandibles are heavily mutated and attached to a Spirit Receptacle. The soul of those defeated by this monster will be drawn into the organ and devoured over time, furthering the growth and power of the termite.]

Revolted. To think the kaarmodo would think unleashing such a creature against the world would be acceptable! It's unthinkable!

My rage burns anew, I must quench it with termite experience!

But as I turn to look around me it becomes clear that the inevitable has happened. A few hundred termites against a berserking force of ten thousand ants was never going to be a close fight. The termites have been literally buried under the weight of the Colony, all I can see around me are piles of ant bodies that roll and shudder as the hapless insects beneath are torn apart. The smell of formic acid and the enraged speech of my siblings is all I feel against my antennae, the termite pollution having already been expunged.

I can tell that my siblings feel much as I do. It wasn't enough! We need more! But I have a feeling we won't have to worry on that front, just imagining the enormous, bloated termite queen out there somewhere in this fourth strata, pumping out eggs by the thousands every day, is enough to set my mandibles twitching.

"This is only the beginning!" I declare to my family. "There will be more, thousands more, millions! We have to be ready. Consume the Biomass and harvest their cores, we need to scout, build defences and prepare. Get to it!"

I can't let them indulge in their savage mindset anymore, we have too much to do before the termites, and by extension the kaarmodo, learn of our deployment here. I do wonder how the termites scout and locate prey, since they are completely blind. Likely they have invested in a more advanced form of

sensing organ, otherwise the reptiles would have to do a lot of legwork to direct their creations where they want them to go, and something tells me legwork isn't exactly something a bunch of sunbathing lizards are all too keen on.

Termites that literally consume souls. Such a thing is surely an abomination in the eyes of almost every race on the planet! Imagine if the Legion got a hold of something like this?! They'd go ballistic! If they think the Colony is something that needs to get wiped out, then I can only imagine that something like this would send them right off the deep end. It might seem a little odd for me to reach out to those nutcases, but someone definitely should. If we can get them on our side for a change, I'd more than welcome it. At the very least they might be able to put pressure on the kaarmodo to end this madness.

[You have fought well. I see the trust of our Mother was not misplaced,] the Grove Keeper greets me as he walks over, his eyes roaming over the destroyed termites with a quiet satisfaction. [This is only one place where they encroach against the roots of the Mother Tree. There are hundreds of such locations and more are opening every day as the enemy digs more tunnels.]

[I think you'll find that the termites might have met their match when it comes to shifting dirt,] I tell the massive Keeper smugly, [but I agree that is something we need to work on, and quickly. By compressing and reinforcing the dirt we can create barriers that other burrowing insects are going to struggle with. If all goes well, we'll be able to funnel them into a much more narrow avenue of attack. Once that happens, we can get down to what insects do best.]

[Which is?]

[An all-out grindfest of a war. Whoever blinks first loses.]

[Hmmmm... they have no eyes... and you have no eyelids. How is anyone supposed to blink?]

[It's just a ... never mind.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 914: Digging In

The battle frenzy of the Colony was an ephemeral thing. Once the termites were gone, their Biomass consumed and scent wiped away, my siblings and I were able to return to a more normal state of mind and begin to tackle the numerous problems at hand.

"The mana down here is absurdly thick. I feel like my core is on fire. We should adjust our spell rotations to account for the additional energy," Propellant mused.

"Any idea what the dominant affinity of the stratum is?"

"Life, mainly. There's more, but in small amounts, and it's an affinity that none of the mages have come across before, something advanced, that's for sure."

"Much like ash in the third, and death in the second."

"It does seem like they have a dominant, more common mana paired with a more powerful and subtler force. Perhaps we can expect more of the same in the stratum below. Something to think about, in the meantime I've pushed every earth capable mage into the build teams to help fortify our position."

"What can you tell us so far, Cobalt?"

"Not much. The roots of the Mother Tree are going to make our job a nightmare, I can already see that. They cover a huge amount of ground before they vanish into wherever the heck they go and all of them are potential targets for the termites. Our fortifications will likely have to build quite a ways forward from this position, but we can't rely on them completely, since the termites can dig just as well as we can. It's going to be a difficult defence."

"The termites are bigger and stronger than us," I advise the group, "and it's likely that they outnumber us, given we only have ten thousand here. So we have to utilise our strengths to the maximum. That means using your heads and milking our defensive position for all its worth. Having said that, we can't do much without more information. Burke, how do things stand on the scouting front?"

"Tunnel maps are getting filled as we speak, though it'll be hours before we get a more complete picture. As Cobalt told us, the roots are huge and spread over an absurd amount of territory, the Mother Tree seems to have buried this entire mountain to support her trunk. Once we traced the termites' trails back far enough, we can start planning where to construct our choke points and try to funnel the enemy."

"We need to move fast on that," I warn them, "we're vulnerable to being overwhelmed until we get dug in. Not usually a problem we need to worry about."

Each of the ants clacks their mandibles in amusement as they consider the unusual issue of being outnumbered by a single foe.

"Trust me, Eldest. We couldn't be moving faster on the scouting if we tried," Burke assures me.

Which means Vibrant and her group are doing it.

"We have to be hyper careful when facing this enemy," I warn everyone, "their ability to feed on souls is disturbing to say the least. I want everyone to be as careful as possible as we proceed. I'm going to move with the Grove Keeper and head to the hotspots. There are still ongoing raids from the termites as we speak."

"Will you be alright on your own, Eldest?"

Advant is clearly concerned.

"I'm never really alone, you know that. Plus Sarah is here. She's strong."

"I still think we should try and bring some humans here. With their aid we'll be much stronger."

I shake my antennae.

"The mana is too thick. The humans are willing to come, but won't be able to until they've adapted to the higher concentration of energy. It could take weeks before they can stay down here for any length of time."

"I'm just worried," she frets, "we need every advantage here."

"I agree. They'll be here, just not yet, alright? Until then we just need to hold on for as long as possible."

"Fine."

"By the way, has anyone seen Brilliant?"

"Uh, no? Did she come through?"

"Yes, she did. Give me a second."

Damn that ant, where the heck is she this time? Scanning through the Vestibule takes me a little while but I eventually find a small group of ants digging their way down alongside the roots of the tree. Luckily they'd only made it a hundred metres before I found them.

"Brilliant," I declare as I snatch up the little ant in my mandibles, "trying to get yourself killed again I see."

She wiggles and thrashes in my jaws but it's hopeless, she's sacked her physical stats to the point she'll never be able to contest me once I get a grip on her.

"I want to see the point where the roots vanish," she cries as she continues her hopeless struggle for freedom, "I need to see, I need to see, I need to see! Let gooooooo!"

THWACK!

"Nope. We have no idea where the termites might be tunneling so get your butt back to the safe zone until we've locked it all down."

"Nooooooooooooo!"

"And you lot, don't encourage her!"

"Sorry, Eldest."

It's amazing how quickly these champions can attract others to their cause. Already she's got a few willing helpers who'll listen to her crackpot schemes. After delivering the little mad scientist back to the main concentration of the Colony I meet up with Sarah and we begin a tour through the tunnel network that winds around the Mother Tree's roots. The system is vast, covering kilometers of ground, and there are signs of termite activity all over the place. Nibbled roots here, a trace of scent there, it's enough to get my mandibles twitching all over again.

[Hey Sarah, how're you finding the fourth stratum?]

The giant bear twitches in surprise and turns towards me.

[Ah? Fine, I suppose. I'm kind of intimidated to be honest, I never expected to be down here, especially not so soon.]

[I agree with you. I'm kind of worried about it actually. The Colony has taken on a lot this time, especially when we still haven't even started to expand in the third.]

[It'll be fine,] she tries to cheer me up. [they're smart, they know what they can and can't do. I'm just glad to get away from it all, I was driving myself crazy up there.]

[Still worried about Jim?]

The giant bear grows silent for a moment as we walk side by side through the tunnels. Then she nods.

[I'm worried what he'll do next. I feel like he's got a grudge against the Colony and he's doing whatever he can to damage us.]

Heh. You think I didn't notice you say 'us'? Think again!

[You know my view. He wanted you to depend on him, but you came to rely on the Colony instead. In his eyes, the ants need to be removed, then you will be forced to run back to him for support.]

[But I wouldn't!] she protests. [After everything he's done?!]

[Hey, I know that, and you know that, but Jim? He's crazy. Not that I can blame him too much, according to the Dungeon, we're all crazy.]

The big bear head sinks to face the ground.

[That's true.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 915: The Rush

[These filthy termites have been busy...] I complain.

[I'll say,] Sarah agrees, [they've dug all through this area. I'm not sure ten thousand of us is going to be enough.]

[It'll have to be. The Colony has sent the best and brightest down here, which is going to make us more vulnerable to retaliation from the kaarmodo in the third stratum and slow our expansion there. Sending any more is out of the question.]

[I suppose you're right. Hopefully we can hold with what we have.]

[Hey, we have the mighty Asura bear! Able to squash a million termites on her own, what could go wrong?]

[Shush you.]

She swats me with one paw and I brace to prevent myself from flinching as she rocks my carapace with one swipe. Dammit Sarah! How the heck did you get so strong?! Is this the kind of power that Garralosh would have been capable of had she managed to escape into the second stratum? She might not have even needed to evolve in order to display a far greater power than she did, simply having enough mana to properly fuel her core might have been sufficient. If she'd stayed in the Dungeon rather than rising to the surface then I might never have won that fight.

Bah! Who wants to think about that croc now? We've got termites to slay! I turn to the Grove Keeper who's been leading us around.

[Surely this is all of the sites? We've been to dozens already!]

[Hmmm. This is the last one. Well done, there aren't any active incursions at this time. Mother is pleased that her roots are not being gnawed on for the first time in weeks.]

The plant life around us rustles in agreement, but this time they lack their usual vigour and spite, as if the Mother Tree was fatigued. Perhaps the constant nibbling of the termites has had more of an effect than I thought. I suppose it only makes sense, she pulled her children back from the front and took on an enemy designed specifically to defeat her usual methods. It was only a matter of time until they wore her down, no wonder she was so desperate for us to get here as quickly as we could.

[Not to worry,] I broadcast as widely as possible, [your useless mother can be mothballed in an aged care facility now. We've got some competent monsters on the scene at last.]

[Anthony!] Sarah gasps.

[Be respectful. For your own good,] the Grove Keeper warns me.

A vine streaks down from above, aiming for my head but I zip to the side before it can strike.

[Too slow, old bag!] I taunt.

Rumble.

My antennae stir like crazy as the walls of the tunnel around me begin to vibrate as if something truly ridiculous were coming. I switch over to my mana sight and clack my mandibles in admiration at what I behold. The stupid tree is shifting her main roots to squash me for my impudence, truly an impressive level of vindictiveness. However...

[If you weaken yourself too much you'll leave the bruan'chii vulnerable.]

The shaking stops.

[Not to mention you need me to defeat the termites! Bwahahahaha! What are you going to do about it you old bag? You might be the biggest plant on the planet, but I have you in the grip of my claws! Take that, and that!]

I poke a nearby leaf savagely with one leg, watching as the vegetation around me trembles with rage.

[I ask that you do not push your luck too far,] the Grove Keeper steps between me and the leaf, forcing me to cease my relentless attack, [my Mother has been known to make reckless decisions in the past. If you do not relent, I fear she will crush this tunnel no matter the consequences.]

[Fine. Just go and rest, Mother Tree. We'll take care of you and your children for a while. Once we have the strength, I'll personally ensure that the termite nest is wiped from the face of the Dungeon.]

With my assurance, the plant life finally settles down, though I can tell she still isn't happy about it. I'll have to be careful she doesn't get back at me once her children are finally safe. Countermeasures will have to be put in place. Having finally dealt with the incursions, the Colony can finally get down to the business of properly fortifying our position.

"It's going to take a crazy amount of work, Eldest," Cobalt warns me when I meet back up with her. She's already established a construction headquarters and her team is busy establishing a scale model of the work zone. "Even just in terms of soil reinforcement and compressing we're talking about hundreds of thousands, possibly even millions of tons of material. We've got a lot of talented mages and carvers here, but it's still going to take a long time, and we have no idea when the termites will detect our

presence and begin to launch a counter offensive. I get the impression that they dislike us just as much as we dislike them."

"Just focus on closing down the most direct paths and getting our detection measures in place. We can worry about the rest when we have the time. And another thing..."

"What?"

"Make sure your teams are properly rotating through a rest schedule."

She pauses in the process of working on the model.

"Do you think... *they*... are here?"

"They are everywhere the Colony is, Cobalt. You'd be a fool to think they weren't here."

"But how?! Only ten thousand came through, it was watched over and counted carefully, not a single soul was unaccounted for!"

"Is that right? You didn't think to look down when you came through?"

"What do you mean?"

Confused, she looks down at her shadow on the ground, only for that thinly cast outline of herself to turn its head and smile.

"Gahhhhhh!"

"I wouldn't be surprised if there were actually nineteen thousand, nine hundred and ninety nine ants on this trip," I tell her grimly.

"One in every shadow..." she whispers back. "But wait, Eldest, wouldn't it be twenty thousand?"

I point down without replying.

My own shadow is a twisted mess of tentacles with three gnashing mouths of razor sharp teeth.

"I don't think even *they* could survive in there."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 916: Hold the Line

For the next twenty four hours all mandibles were placed into work teams and we worked like only insects can to prepare ourselves for the inevitable retribution that would come. As of this moment, the termites, and by extension the kaarmodo, don't know that we've arrived, not a single termite came into contact with an ant and lived to tell the tale, but they had to know something was up. Several thousand termites had been killed all up, not a single one who'd been sent out to raid the tree yesterday had gone back to the nest. There would be reprisals, no doubt about it.

This added a new dynamic to the termite/ant conflict. In my mind, it was always the ant who was the aggressor. Termites were basically peaceful creatures who cultivated fungus and herbivores who broke down the sugars in wood to survive. Ants on the other hand are marauding killers who butcher other insects for food, killing more arthropods than anything else on the planet, even humans. There are even

places in the world where ants are welcomed by farmers since they know the ants will find and kill every other insect they can get their mandibles on.

In this case, it's the termites who are coming to us.

Eventually we'll turn the tables on them, but not yet. For now, we bunker up as if this were a nest. For my part, I immerse myself into the zen of digging, sinking into a realm of peace that even the meditation skill cannot bring.

I am one with the soil.

The soil is one with the planet.

The planet is one with the universe.

All there is, all there was, and all there will ever be, is to dig, one mandible load of soil at a time.

The calming sense of purpose and oneness that comes from a good dig is a welcome relief from the chaos and turbulence of the last few weeks. Fighting giant lizards and demons? Why the hell have I been doing that? I could have been digging this whole time!

Alas, it's too good to last.

"Enemy spotted! Enemy spotted! Termites are advancing on the fortifications! Prepare for contact!"

A scout rushes through the section of tunnel I've been working in surrounded by my siblings, Tiny, Invidia and Crinis, blasting her warning pheromones at full power. The response is immediate, ants stop their work and scurry back toward the safety of the more established defensive line. Mages cease their work compressing and fortifying the soil and rock and join the rush, a huge train of Colony members flooding back from the work sites here and further out. I wait, holding myself to the side as the rush of my siblings continues to pass by. Only when the numbers begin to ease do I join in, positioning myself toward the back of the retreat.

"Any idea how far back they are?" I ask a nearby soldier.

"Not sure, but I don't think it's that far. The outer line of scouts was only positioned a few hundred metres past the furthest earthworks."

"So we likely don't have much time before they're here."

"I hope not. I'm ready to fight."

"Settle down there, soldier," I caution her, "this is an opponent we can't afford to underestimate."

"... your mandibles are twitching, Eldest."

Dammit!

"I can't help it! Just keep running!"

Indeed, I can see it in all the ants around me as well, the hunger for battle has awoken in them and they won't be able to rest until they've met the termite in battle and annihilated the enemy. Exactly the same as me. Eventually the tunnel merges with another, then another, widening as it goes, the streams of

ants merging into a mighty river of insect rage that eventually emerges into an opening on the edge of the main roots. The Mother Tree has been hard at work assisting us, withdrawing her gardens from the front line and helping to position the roots she can move in ways that don't inhibit our work. The result is the beginnings of an ant fortress, a mighty wall atop of which an entire army of my siblings can position themselves to rain death down on the foe.

Without wasting time the workers and I follow the scent trails to get into position for the battle to come.

"Eldest!" a scent reaches me. "Eldest! This way!"

"Advant? What's the story?"

It's difficult to make out individual smells in the crush of ants and overpowering wave of war pheromones wafting through the air.

"There's a spot for you up here!" the soldier blasts at me from nearby. "The generals want you in the centre of the wall!"

"Right!"

[Come on guys, time to roll!]

Given some direction, my companions and I rocket up the wall, Invidia fluttering his miniature wings while the rest of us climb, until we reach the top. Positioned directly in the middle of the wall, I'm surrounded on all sides by ten thousand of my siblings, ready to face off against the invading termites. The energy in the air is electric and up and down the line the uncontrolled snapping of mandibles rings out in a staccato rhythm, the ants unable to control their jaws, so desperate are they for the battle to begin.

What we had so far was just a taste, just a tiny serving of what this war will be. A few hundred termites at a time is nothing! Just the appetizer! No. Bring on the uncountable hordes! Bring wave upon wave of the enemy to crash against our bulwark! Create a fire in which the Colony can be tempered into a machine of war! This hunger has to be satisfied!

In mere minutes, the construction sites have been emptied and the full contingent of the Colony has been amassed here, not a single member absent. Apart from the uncontrolled snapping of jaws, complete silence falls over the line. No sound, no scent, only the tense wait for the first sign of the foe.

It starts slowly at first, a bare whisper, a scrape, the faint tik-tak of claws on compacted ground, but it quickly swells as that same sound is repeated hundreds, then thousands of times. The repeated clacking builds into a crescendo until it almost becomes a roar, echoing through the tunnels like an oncoming tidal wave. The ants around me are practically vibrating, not from fear, but excitement. Come to think of it, Tiny is as well.

Then comes the first sighting, an antenna, darting left and right, followed by the head, those shrunken, useless eyes and long, elongated mandibles emerging into the light. Only two hundred metres across open ground, more and more termites emerge from multiple tunnels, creeping forward, snapping their jaws in our direction, and still more come, the tunnels behind them packed with reinforcements.

They brought a good number this time. Hopefully they can put up a fight!

"For the Colony!" I roar.

"FOR THE COLONY!"

Battle is joined.

Chrysalis

Chapter 917: Colony v Colony pt 1 (of two hundred)

The rate the termites emerge from the tunnel continues to increase as the first to emerge begin to charge against the fortifications we have erected.

"FIRE!"

The order ripples through the line, causing mages to unleash their spells and others to let fly their devastating acid barrage. Naturally, I do both, raining hell using my acid and blasting out fire and ice spells utilising the omni-elemental construct. Ha! With my multi brain setup, coupled with my growing mastery of mind magic, my capacity to unleash hell from range has increased many fold! I can be pumping out multiple spells at a single time, using more than one element! The fluency and power of my casting has also improved! Even at this speed, I can compress these spells to increase their destructive impact!

I'm not quite the one ant army that I'd like to be, but I'm making great strides! The notifications start to roll in as I pummel the termite horde, but they don't stop coming.

From atop the wall, a veritable deluge of ant ordinance has been unleashed, the flat, clear space in front has been lit up in the literal sense of the word, thousands of ants pouring out as much damage as they possibly can.

But it isn't enough.

The tide of termite reinforcements continues unabated! The rate they push through the tunnels has risen to the point the cockroach descended bugs are emerging piled high on each other, reaching almost halfway to the top of the tunnel! Forget thousands, there are tens of thousands of them! I can only hope that there aren't more, since we have no idea how many are actually coming! Not that it matters, I suppose, our only course of action is to keep pouring it on!

The barrage continues unabated as the ground before us becomes a writhing carpet of dead and dying termites covered by the still living ones crawling over their own, jaws gnashing furiously as they attempt to reach us. The flood of numbers has outstripped our ability to kill them much faster than I anticipated. The termites are tough, well designed monsters, not the usual trash that would undoubtedly fill a social insect Colony like this in the wild.

Their carapaces are tough, made from much better materials than our own, what's more, they each carry a regeneration gland, to keep them in the fight longer. I'm certain that even now there are termites beneath that mass of still charging creatures who are healing, stitching themselves back together to get back into the fight. In only twenty seconds, the tide of termites slams into the base of the wall, sending a shockwave through the structure that rocks it beneath our feet.

"BRACE!"

The order comes rolling down the line and the response is immediate, mages stepping back and switching from direct fire to combined, arcing projectiles as a line of soldiers steps forward. Climbing over each other, the termites rise like a wave to reach the top of the wall and then the hard stuff begins. My minds continue to spin as I produce spell after spell, rattling them out at more than one per second even as my acid continues to fly and I ready my jaws.

The first termite to reach me is almost mad with rage, its long, sharp jaws quivering in anticipation as it lunges forward across a mound of its own kind to snap at me. But it isn't to be. My jaws, locked in position for several seconds, snap forward with the inevitability of a mountain collapsing, the dark mandibles of pure energy manifesting around them and extending the bite by several metres.

DOOM CHOMP!

Crunch!

The hapless termite is helpless to fight back against the overwhelming power of my strike and so are the three behind it, but they are quickly replaced. All along the wall a similar scene is played out as the strongest soldiers of the Colony, including Vibrant and her squad, meet the encroaching wall of termites face to face.

The scent is overwhelming as the termites blast their fury and rage into our faces whilst my siblings, willingly or not, are unleashing the battle pheromone, urging all around them to greater heights of savagery and action. All I can see is a press of termites in front of me and still the actions I need to perform don't change. Spell, spell, CHOMP, spell, spell, CHOMP!

When the wave of termites reaches over my head and threatens to overwhelm me I lock my mandibles in place and summon my stamina from deep within.

DOOM CHOMP COMBO!

I unleash three, rapid bites, crunching through the opposition in front and cutting the termite offensive here in the centre of the wall, but only for a moment. If the middle is faring this poorly, I hope the sides are doing better...

"We're getting pushed on the line. Fight back! Scouts to the front!" comes the call.

The scouts, who to this point had been responsible for unleashing an acid barrage over our heads cease firing and step forward, climbing on top of the soldiers in the first line to add height and more chomping power. Despite being 'scouts', they are still the second strongest caste in the Colony and their aid comes at an opportune moment.

Work the jaws, work the brains, work the jaws, work the brains.

It's no longer possible to see the tunnels through which the termites are coming, so I can only hope that the reinforcements have slowed.

Snick!

A termite sneaks through my guard and snaps its jaws shut around my foreleg before I can lift, too busy dodging the bites from other foes. Immediately I feel a pull as the termite tries to drag me off the wall and into the writhing mass of insects in front of me, certain doom.

Not gonna happen, buddy!

DOOM CHOMP!

I lunge forward once more and cut through the enemies in front, freeing myself but the creatures I destroy are quickly replaced, the mound of Biomass in front of the wall now acting as a ramp that only continues to grow.

"WE NEED CLEARANCE IN FRONT OF THE WALL! STEADY!" I blast all around me to carry my words further. "Get ready for the charge!"

Stepping back, I raise all three legs on one side of my body and stomp down as hard as I can, sumo style, then repeat the action three times.

STOMP! STOMP! STOMP!

The signal causes the carvers hidden beneath me to blast the section of wall outwards in a catastrophic detonation, revealing that the upper four metres of the wall here in the centre were completely hollow. And, I mean, we had to put *something* in there...

"WE SEEK!"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 918: Colony vs Colony pt 2

The charge of the Immortals took place immediately beneath my feet and the force of it was quite staggering. In a literal sense. The wall I stood upon rocked beneath my feet as those armoured behemoths took their short runup and launched themselves into a literal mound of termite bodies.

The effect was immediate and stunning as the termites in front of me are launched back, their support being blasted away with an almighty CRUNCH. Then I see them, the brightly shining armoured figures of Leeroy and her followers mowing through the massed termite army like a plough through a field. In just a few short seconds they've pushed the enemy back over ten metres as the sheer weight of their combined charge hits like a battering ram.

"Artillery forward! Mages forward! Fire! Fire! Fire!"

With the pressure relieved for a precious but brief window, the Colony moves to take advantage as swiftly as possible. The soldiers step to the side and allow the mages to come forward even as the scouts step up and begin to unleash their firepower directly into the horde below, heedless of whether the Immortals are struck or not.

I mean, with Leeroy and her crew, they'd probably be insulted if we tried to avoid hitting them. May as well just unleash hell.

With so many family members around me, I still feel fresh as a daisy as well, my muscles rejuvenated and my body humming with energy. I eagerly take a step forward and start to unload my machine gun flurry of magic on the enemy.

Peeking over the edge of the wall for the first time in a while, the scene laid out before me is one of madness. A writhing carpet of termites, some living, many injured or reduced to oozing piles of Biomass,

stretches from the base of the wall to the tunnels hundreds of metres away. The termites are still four or five deep for the entire distance, it's insane. And the reinforcements are still coming!

Just how many of these damn things are there?! Did the kaarmodo work out that we are here and decide to throw everything at us at once? Or even worse, is this just a taste of what they have at hand?

Perhaps the Mother Tree has been dealing with waves similar to this over the last few months? If so, she really should have told us!

I contemplate winding up a gravity bomb but I shelve the idea. The Immortals might not mind if the acid rains down on them, but if I start flinging black holes on their heads even they won't be able to survive. And I refuse to give them the satisfaction!

"Push! Prepare to charge!"

When the order comes from the general behind me, I prepare along with every other soldier by moving forward and gripping tight to the edge of the wall. Now that Leeroy is out there amongst the mess, the pressure has been relieved from the edge and we need to get out there to support them before they get overwhelmed. Leeroy might be a pain in the backside, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I want her soul sucked out and consumed by a monster that descended from a cockroach.

"CHARGE!"

"FOR THE COLONY!"

Filled with the exultant will of my siblings my heart is filled with righteous fire as I lean forward until my head is facing down and begin to rocket down the face of the wall. When I come to the gap that the Immortals charged through I release and freefall for a frightening moment and then latch back on, my claws screaming with the effort of holding my weight up. Not willing to risk landing on my face I trigger the strengthening mutation of the Vestibule and immediately feel my body fill with power. I feel so mighty! Bring it on, bugs!

As I charge down the face of the wall, I continue the barrage, my multiple brains making it childishly simple to fire acid and spells constantly even as I manoeuvre my body. Heck, I still have the spare mental space, I start to flood raw mana into my mandibles to increase their cutting power as we dive headfirst into the mass of foes.

The moment I hit I begin to chomp like there's no tomorrow. Even with this many ants around, I can't afford to be too wasteful with my stamina, so I don't throw out doom chops willy-nilly, but with the mana infused into my mandibles they shear through the termites well enough.

From above the rain of firepower continues from the mages and scouts as the soldiers pile in.

"Heal coming."

"Ah, forgot you were there."

"That's the idea."

The healer gripping my underside sends a wave of healing mana through me, closing over my superficial wounds and letting me save my regeneration fluid for a more dire situation. This is a more bold

application of the healers, one that they pushed hard for, bringing them into battle attached to those who need the most healing. It's incredibly brave of them and I hope that they don't suffer for it. This is going to be a long campaign and the healers are going to be the most important caste of all by the time this is done.

Once again my eyes are filled with nothing but the enemy and all of my attention is taken by the constant fight in front of me. It's impossible to know how the fight is going and I have to trust that the generals and other leaders know what they're doing. Heck, they do a better job than I do, no matter the result I'll still believe that. Even so, I can't help but be worried for my family.

[Bring the noise guys. No more holding back.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 919: Colony Vs Colony pt 3

My pets, my friends and comrades, leap to respond to my call. Tiny, who has held himself back only through the power of my direct command to this point, launches himself forward with catastrophic force, jumping high before landing amongst the termites like a collapsing meteor. His bellowing war cry reverberates off the stone walls before it rises its pitch and becomes as sharp as a lightning strike, stunning all who hear it. Well, not me, obviously, but the termites, despite being hard of hearing, are still effected.

The stillness only lasts for a second before they begin to writhe and gnash once more, but a second is more than enough time for Crinis to perform her dark work. I asked her to hide amongst the shadows before the battle began, and now the shadows are everywhere. Ant and termite are piled into a great mass four or five figures deep over a massive area that stretches from the wall to the tunnels, hundreds of metres in every direction, so much darkness into which she can slide. In that moment, when all were still, she emerged, tendrils pushing their way up from below, slipping out of the shadows before they wound their way around a target, the barbed teeth emerging to scrape and grind at the chitin shells of the termites, a horrible fate awaited those. Even worse were those who fell victim to her invasive cilla, the ghostly vines twisting through the physical realm to bring madness to her victims. Those termites who succumbed to her power became ravening creatures of desperate fear, lashing out at friend and foe alike.

BOOM!

I honestly couldn't tell if the first explosion was caused by Tiny's fist or by Invidia's mind, but they began to ring out so quickly that it hardly mattered. A steady stream of detonations rocked the chamber as the battle continued, until the air became thick with smoke and the faint thrill of electricity tingled across my antennae.

"ROAR!"

THUD!

Unable to hold back any longer, it seems that Sarah has also decided to join the fight. Luckily I can see behind a lot more clearly than I can see forward, otherwise she might have landed on my back legs. Covered in her glittering armour, she cuts an impressive figure, but she is massively heavy! After

launching herself from the wall she plummets like a stone and lands heavily, smooshing everything underneath her into a thick paste.

Nasty!

She doesn't seem to care though, her blood is up and the Asura Bear is not here for friendly conversation. Without so much as a 'hello' she rumbles forward, her lips drawn back in a fearsome snarl, her eyes tinged with red beneath her helmet. Not a good sign. If she's already losing herself to the rage, then I can easily imagine what's going to happen when she gets to fighting. Not much I can do about it right now, there's still a battle to win after all, but I will certainly file that under 'issues I need to check on later'.

With a string of interventions from powerful, tier six allies, the ant cause has rallied once again in the face of the termite flood and with these points of immense strength to rally around, the soldiers gather up and push into the enemies ranks with relentless force. Mandible meets mandible in relentless, brutal combat as the two ancient enemies face off against each other in this most unlikely battleground.

What was an endless war of mindless savagery in miniature on Earth has been recreated here in supersized fashion as thousands of insects the size of cars slam into each other, attempting to tear limbs and sever heads. It's horrific but I've no time to take it all in, all I can do is destroy the enemy in front and then find the next one. If I keep doing it fast enough, eventually we'll win.

Despite the danger, I run up alongside Sarah and with her help I drive deeper into the termite horde, relying on the broad swipes of her claws to keep me from being overwhelmed. Despite not much time having passed since their grand charge, Leeroy and the Immortals have changed the landscape of the battle for the better, but have been left on their own for too long.

I'm not even really that concerned that the termites will have killed them, those idiots are too dumb to die. No, I'm worried that they'll be pulling some shenanigans in a foolish attempt to achieve their long cherished dream of gloriously sacrificing themselves for the good of the Colony. I will prevent it from happening at all costs! You'll live forever, Leeroy, my stupid sister. Forever, dammit!

DOOM CHOMP COMBO!

My mandibles snap back and forth rapidly, the dark jaws of pure energy slamming shut with tremendous force on everything in front of me again and again. I feel my energy drain dramatically, but the space in front of me clears and I push into it to find a circle of shining metal clad figures battling fiercely despite being surrounded.

"Tch. The Eldest is here," someone complains.

"I knew it!" I bellow at them. "Glorious last stand my business district! Every one of you idiots is getting out of here alive. Got it!"

"... Fine."

CRASH!

A massive detonation of electrical energy whites out my eyes for a brief moment before my vision returns to find Tiny standing next to me with a broad grin on his face and a fierce light of joy in his eyes.

[Don't have too much fun,] I warn him, [we need this over with sooner rather than later.]

My first friend in the Dungeon gives me a quick thumbs up before he turns and engages in the fight once more, his fists blurring in my eyes as he snaps out punches faster than I can see.

"Well that's just great," another Immortal complains.

"Shut up or I'll bring Invidia and Crinis over here just to make certain that nothing happens to you!" I snap at them.

These morons!

"Now fight or I'll personally make sure you never see combat again!"

That lights the fire in them and they redouble their efforts to fight off the termites. Every few minutes one of them collapses, either from exhaustion or their wounds, I don't know, but it matters not, bright light explodes from the downed figure and soon enough they are standing again, back in the fight.

My face is aching and my brains are tired, yet still the fight goes on until finally, it's over. I chomp my mandibles shut and blast the monster before me with a spear of ice only to find nothing standing behind it when it collapses.

"The termites are retreating!" Leeroy sounds partly happy, partly sad.

I can see that it's true, their shadows are still vanishing down the tunnels, heading back to their nest, leaving us in possession of the field and more Biomass than I can poke a stick at.

"I suppose we should get Vibrant to tail them, at least for a little while."

"YOU GOT IT SENIOR BYEEEEEE!"

"Be careful! They'll be back soon! Vibrant?! Dammit."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 920: Clean Up

There was a time when some considered the Mother Tree to perhaps be an offshoot of Lerrewyn, the Grasping Tree itself. The only plant-type ancient, Lerrewyn is a creature of immense power and age who tormented the swamplands of the west during the Rending. There aren't any precise descriptions of her that survive that I can determine. In fact what accounts I do have are almost contradictory in nature. Some describe it as a ghostly tree of nightmare, a spirit that extends its roots into the dreams of its victims, draining their life force away as they sleep. Others describe it as less a tree than a mass of innumerable roots, each as thick as a man, that crawls across the landscape, pulling in and devouring everything that it finds.

Despite the obvious similarities of the two monsters, sharing the same base type, there is no other supporting evidence to suggest they are affiliated in any way. Indeed, the path and direction the Mother Tree has taken is the greatest proof anyone could ask for. In choosing to create and succour her own race of children, she has effectively cut herself off from descending any further into the Dungeon, ensuring that she is of no use to those elder monsters. Despite this, should she turn, the damage she could unleash on Pangera would be immense.

- *Excerpt from 'The nature of the Tree' by Loremaster Alberton of the Legion.*

After Vibrant and her crew sprint off down the tunnels the rest of us are left with the unenviable task of cleaning up the mess. And what a mess. I'm standing on a heap of Biomass three or four termites deep and it sure isn't going to eat itself. What's more, when I throw on my mana sight it becomes clear that quite a few of these termites have cores. Now, they aren't anything like fully developed cores, not even close. In fact, they don't come close to the cores my siblings in the Colony have, despite most of them being a long way from maxed.

Scanning the battlefield, I would guess that roughly half of the termites have cores, which explains why, despite their relatively high tier, they are close to matching up to us one on one. No, it seems that the kaarmodo have decided to embrace the swarm strategy at its most pure. Not a bad idea, since they have the natural advantage of being born deeper in the Dungeon, with more advanced body parts that we have, they don't need strong evolutions to be dangerous. It's also possible that their soul devouring organ provides the extra juice they need, giving them experience or empowering their evolution in some way? It bears more investigation.

"Report back to the wall! We need a casualty check and debrief! Move! Move! Move!"

Man... I can remember the good ol' days when we just tucked straight into the food. Things are bit more organised now, what with the accounting the generals do to keep track of wounded and make sure the post battle scene doesn't degenerate into chaos.

"Better get moving, Eldest. I know you're fine, but there's probably others I need to see to," the healer strapped to the underside of my carapace tells me.

"Oh, right. Of course."

I file back into line along with the others and we climb back to the top of the wall where the generals check over every single member of the ten thousand strong expeditionary force and lay out the plan to clear the battlefield so the work crews can get back to the more important task of fortifying our position. It's impossible to walk away from this sort of conflict with no casualties, and every loss stings my spirit, but the numbers are remarkably low considering how many we defeated.

We were lucky this time, the termites, and by extension, the kaarmodo, were stupid. They threw numbers at the problem hoping it would go away, a sign of impatience or overconfidence. If they'd taken the time to prepare a diversionary tunnel, or strike in more than one place, or any number of tactics they didn't try, we would have been in a much more difficult position. As it was, we held them up with not even a tenth of the earthworks completed, let alone the full fortification project.

I'm not sure if this is a good sign.

"Hey," I approach a nearby general, "what am I supposed to be doing? I didn't get an assignment."

All my siblings have already scuttled off, throwing themselves headlong into their next tasks, despite the crushing fatigue of having just fought a battle no doubt dragging them down. Heck, *I'm* tired and I have an organ that replenishes my energy!

The general in question wriggles a bit and runs an antenna over the slate she has in front of her.

"Ah, you aren't mentioned in the report, Eldest. I suppose that you're supposed to do your own thing."

I stare.

"I just wander off and do whatever? That doesn't seem right!"

"Doesn't it?" she shrugs. "You're the Eldest."

"I mean... I suppose so."

Tiny reaches out and pokes my carapace. I turn and look to find him giving me the most disturbing set of puppy dog eyes I've ever seen. Come on, Tiny! You're an enormous gorilla monster over ten metres tall! Have a little dignity, man!

Sigh.

[Yes, alright. Let's go eat. May as well start packing it away.]

I swear, the way the Colony has been treating me has been weird since... a long time ago. The statues I could put up with, barely, the engravings and carvings, almost tolerable, but this feeling of being... 'other' amongst my own family stings a little more than I expected it too. It's nice to be respected and all that, but not to the point that I no longer feel like a proper member of the Colony. I'll have to think on this another time, the gains from the battle aren't insignificant and I'll have to consider a big mutation session when this is all said and done.

By the time I climb back down off the wall, Tiny has already begun stuffing his face, great fistfuls of Biomass being shovelled into his face hole. Despite his abundant appetite, when it comes to my comrades, he's probably the slowest eater. Nearby, Invidia has unveiled his ghoulish grin, the hovering mouth comically larger than his miniscule hovering form. He leans forward and with an almighty CRUNCH he takes a huge bite from the sea of Biomass on display before him. Unfortunately, not even he can compete with the true glutton of the group. I can hear her at work now, though I can't see her. Probably for the best.

A creature of the shadows has she become. She doesn't even need to show herself in order to eat, instead merging herself with the darkness that lies in the gaps beneath us. Three separate, horrific gnashing sounds can be heard echoing up from below and I for one am pleased it remains hidden from view.

I suppose I better get to it if I'm going to get my share. It won't be long before the Colony starts to haul all of this away and ten thousand ants can work up quite an appetite, let me tell you.