

Chrysalis 981

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Chapter 981: Born of the Tree

The Grove Keeper did not have a name, none of the bruan'chii did. Not in the sense of the sapient races, or even the Colony, it would seem. They lacked many things that others had. No first or family name, no gender, no homeland, or indeed, any real history. They possessed no spoken language, little industry or cultural artefacts, no religion or relics or indeed anything that outsiders might think was essential to bind them together.

And yet, no people on Pangera were more united than they. The reason for this was simple, and impossible for any other group to replicate: they were of one soul.

The Keeper could remember being born. A splinter of Mother Tree had broken away, not her physical form, but her very spirit, and been cupped in her loving hands. Embraced by the Mother, that shard had begun to grow. Ideas, thoughts and emotions had coalesced slowly inside that timeless realm within the Tree as the Keeper had been nurtured by its sole parent. Over time that tiny shard had grown into a bright, burning spirit of its own, a fully grown entity, ready to be unleashed on the world.

Yet that had not been the way. Rather than being sent out into the world, the Keeper had been kept close to the Mother, released from her hands and allowed to mingle with the other spirits she had raised.

How to describe that world? The Keeper didn't have the words to paint an accurate picture. There was warmth, and comfort, and safety. More than those things, there was *community*. Thousands upon thousands of bruan'chii frolicked there, held within the Soul Home. In that place they experienced a wordless joy as they enjoyed the company of quite literal kindred spirits. Of one soul, they had no need to communicate, able to share thoughts and emotions on a primal level that transcended physical reality.

The Keeper had spent most of its life in the Soul Home, beyond time, beyond the individual, held in the embrace of the Mother.

Now though, the Keeper felt the push.

It was not a command, or a directive. The Mother Tree did not interact with her children in that way. Instead, it was a gentle suggestion, but one that not a single bruan'chii had ever refused. As the Keeper's spirit began to move, so too did many that were close, all of them shifting with increasing speed as they departed their home and entered the wider network that was the Mother and her roots.

Through twisting paths and coiled branches they flew, each radiating joy and happiness as they revelled in the journey and each other's company. The Keeper felt a deep satisfaction. This was what it meant to be bruan'chii, this togetherness and unity of purpose that couldn't be found anywhere else.

When they finally arrived at their destination, they found the Mother had prepared their vessels, as she always did, and they leapt into them like children into a burbling stream. It was always a strange shift of perspective, when they joined with a body. They transitioned from beings of pure light that existed only within the Mother, to creatures of mundane reality, with senses and limbs. There was sadness in the

loss of freedom, but also joy of a different kind. In their physical bodies, they could effect change on behalf of the Mother, and lift each other up.

The Keeper experienced a quiet, dream-like state as the body prepared by the Mother continued to gestate. A steady flow of life mana poured in and in response the Keeper grew. Powerful, trunk-like arms swelled with strength as the bark coating thickened and hardened with time.

Quietly, on the edges of awareness, the Keeper could sense the others growing alongside them. So many... clearly the Mother had great plans for them.

In time, the process was complete, the Keeper stirred for the first time in this new form. Wood creaked and snapped as the giant form broke free of the root on which it had been formed, the Keeper stretching their limbs and opening their eyes for the first time.

Nearby, thousands more emerged at the same time. Keepers and regular bruan'chii alike shook their new bodies as they connected with each other via their wordless bond.

As one, they felt the presence of their mother descend. Her mind, so enormous and powerful that it dwarfed their flickering selves, lay a gentle hand on them, and through that, they knew their purpose.

The Keeper turned to the others of its kind and they quickly organised themselves, gathering together with their kindred and then setting off through the tunnels. They had been formed close to the main roots, but their steps quickly ate up the ground as they proceeded through the winding tunnels.

There was an eagerness to the thousands strong group, a fierce energy that radiated from them as they moved with purpose.

The Mother had held them back for so long, but at last they had been set free.

The Keeper's wooden frame was alive with righteous anger. The enemy had tormented the Mother for too long, nibbling at her roots and consuming the spirits of their kin. The aid of the Colony had helped turned the tide, and for that they would be eternally grateful, but it wouldn't do for the conflict to end without striking with its own branches.

The bruan'chii should be the first to fall in the defence of their parent. And now she had at last allowed them to do as they pleased.

A deep hum rumbled out of the Keepers, a wordless exclamation of grim satisfaction as they strode forward. Giant hands of Iron Wood flexed their thick fingers. The Mother had granted them forms suitable to battle, she must have stockpiled these resources as the Colony fought.

Overflowing with strength, the bruan'chii marked relentlessly forward.

When they came upon the termites at last, they surged as one, the hum growing in volume until the air vibrated with the strength of their rage.

Too late, the termites turned to face the new threat, unable to form ranks or organise their numbers in time. The Keeper brought both hands down in an overhead smash, pulping the closest monster with a satisfying *crunch*. They stepped forward, slamming a foot down on the defeated foe as it trampled forward, savage joy alight in its soul.

A feeling that was shared amongst them all. As one, the bruan'chii advanced into battle, their spirits aligned and singing the same song.

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Chapter 982: Emissary pt 1

The Colony learned much from the ways of the surface people. We studied many industries that they had developed over hundreds, thousands of years. Agriculture, metalwork, fletching, administration, pottery, tea making, and many others. Some of the learnings were exceptionally valuable and proved to have a long lasting impact on us, whereas others were less useful. Nevertheless, the thirst for knowledge and understanding within the family was insatiable, any titbit that might help us in our struggle was sought after zealously. So it was that I became drawn to the field of Philosophy.

Surely, I thought to myself, none of my brethren would have taken the time to study such an esoteric field. Therefore I would be the first, and break new ground for the family by utilising the knowledge and techniques found within for our betterment.

I was sadly mistaken. The surface dwellers occupied themselves with so many pointless questions, the answers to which seemed most obvious to me.

Why do I exist? To help the Colony.

What is the purpose of life? To help the Colony.

Why does the universe exist? For the Colony.

What is death? When you can no longer help the Colony.

Though it all seemed so clear to me, the human, golgari and others couldn't seem to grasp hold of anything. They drove themselves mad with rhetoric, driving down rabbit holes and fudging numbers back and forth until they lost sight of the questions they were trying to answer. The more I dove in, the more tangled the maze became. The pursuit of truth was entirely lost as they tried to make the simple complex and the complex simple.

I lamented the lack of purpose from my years of study for a long time. Fortunately, I was able to realise that my effort had not been wasted, that there was some good for me to extract that would benefit my family.

More than any other ant, I knew the thought processes and values of the sapient races. I knew that they were weak.

- *From the private notes of Emmanuelk Ant.*

If he had told himself a year ago what he would be doing now, he would have told himself he was insane. Though Wallace Danton, once the head guard of Rylleh, had long suspected his egg had cracked when the Colony had invaded his city. When the ants had approached him to take up this new role, he'd seen where they were coming from. In their eyes, he was a natural fit. He had combat experience against the ants, had attempted to defend a city against their assault, and had then gone on to live with and work alongside them for an extended period of time.

Who better to represent the Colony when approaching other independent city states on the frontier?

His hands rose to tug at his uniform almost of their own volition, but he stopped them before Yasmine caught him at it. He managed to push them back down, but still noticed her flick a sharp glance at him, as if she had somehow sensed his almost-breach of decorum.

She'd come a long way in overcoming her fear of the insects; working with the Colony seemed to do that, eventually. It was hard to fear something that served such fantastic tea and biscuits. Alongside their general hospitality, the ants had proven to be the most effective administrators he'd ever seen. They ran their business with incredible efficiency. Any attempt to stymie or block them was set upon and annihilated.

Their rules were relatively straightforward and they applied them directly and consistently, without fear or favour. What really set them apart, was their own unshakeable assurance of their own impartiality. They never hesitated to make the best ruling when called upon to settle disputes, and no protest was possible. Trying to argue to an ant of the Colony that they were biased was an exercise in futility, though hilarious to watch.

It was always the merchants.

"The Lord will see you now," the voice of the attendant broke Wallace's train of thought and he was brought back into the moment.

"Our thanks," Yasmine smiled politely as she gripped his elbow rather more tightly than required as she rose, forcing him to rise with her.

"Yes. Thanks," he said when she pinched him.

He didn't mind this job, but the pomp and politics of it grated him at times. Full dress uniform? Waiting in antechambers? He'd rather be fighting, but it appeared as if those days were lost to him forever.

Following behind the dignitary in front of them, they walked over lush, resplendent carpet under the watchful eyes of stern Lords and Ladies past. The city of Ironwall had been settled a scant few decades before Rylleh, but for whatever reason had considered itself vastly superior throughout their history. It was undeniable that Ironwall was the larger and more prosperous of the two, mainly due to deposits of valuable minerals in the area. Rylleh on the other hand had boasted a far stronger military and delving community.

The two were led into the Lord's office and found the current ruler of Ironwall, the Lord Korbell, standing to welcome them. Young and in good condition, the man appeared more like a member of the mercenary union than the Lord of an independent city, but he was by all accounts a capable and intelligent ruler.

Which should make Wallace's job easier.

"Wallace Danton, nice to see you again," Korbell offered his hand warmly and Wallace extended his own to shake it. "This must be Yasmine Worfu? A pleasure."

Quick to lay on the charm, the young Lord greeted them both before indicating they should sit, and pulled up a chair himself.

"I've been hearing all sorts of interesting things are going on at Rylleh. When I heard you were here wanting an audience, I thought I had to seize this opportunity to get to the bottom of it."

Wallace shrugged.

"We don't like to be boring. You should know that better than most."

Korbell grinned.

"Indeed. It's been almost unusual not to have any flare ups along the border. I can't say I don't mind the peace and quiet, but I have to wonder what caused this attitude shift amongst your people. Anything in particular?"

"We got conquered by ants," Wallace admitted freely.

Yasmine choked on a cough as her boss threw their carefully planned negotiating tactic out the window. Before she could tactically stomp on his foot, she found he'd pre-emptively blocked her leg with his own! Damned man!

"What Mr Dalton means to say," she tried to recover the moment, "is that there was a... a *shift* in the direction of the city."

"I'll say," Wallace grunted.

The Lord of Ironwall leaned back and beheld the two in front of him warily.

"I'd heard that it was monsters. In truth, I'd actually expected the entire city had been wiped out. We haven't been able to open a gate into Rylleh for months, and we heard little to nothing from your people. Now you come to tell me that you were conquered? By ants?"

"Yes," Wallace confirmed, ignoring Yasmine's subtle elbow digging. "They overwhelmed the city in just a few hours. The ants rule over it now. It's theirs."

Korbell looked at him for a long moment.

"They rule it..." he said finally.

Wallace nodded.

"Yes."

"... the ants do."

"Yes."

Another long pause.

"So... is Rylleh some kind of monster hellscape now? You've come to warn me of the looming threat of ants? To plead for shelter for your people?"

The young Lord appeared wary, and confused. Wallace moved to set him at ease.

"No, of course it isn't some hellscape. The ants take good care of the place, actually. Much better than the previous management. No, I've come to deliver you a message. The Colony has sent me as their emissary."

Korbell stared.

"You? Wallace? An emissary?" he laughed. "The very idea is ridiculous."

"I quite agree," Wallace chuckled, "but I can see their reasoning."

"Alright then. Deliver this message from your monster overlords," the lord shook his head at the absurdity of it. "What do the ants want?"

Wallace smiled slowly.

"Your city."

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Chapter 983: Emissary pt 2

The city of Ironwall gained its name in the days following its founding. The first lord had been a skilled earth mage, capable of shifting and compressing metals to a high degree. Having made his fortune delving and being paid handsomely for his skills in fortification, he decided the time had come to put his money to good use. Together with the extended family, he put together an expedition and found a location on the frontier to establish his own independent city.

The stone here was rich with minerals, particularly iron, and over a period of decades, the first lord excavated and compressed the outer shell of the city into an unbreakable wall. Surrounded by a sphere of almost pure, hardened metal, the city was renowned as an unbreakable fortress, a rare island of safety in the wild and undeveloped frontier. Combined with the prosperity gained from mining the rich Dungeon seams in the nearby expanse, the city grew quickly to the relative powerhouse it had now become.

At least, that's how the locals thought of it.

In Wallace's eyes, the city was a fat calf, just waiting to be slaughtered. The people had become complacent, confident that the work of the founder would keep them safe, as wealth had continued to accrue. Trade through the gate network had made the people wealthy, but the lack of threat had made them indolent. The impregnable shell, the unbreachable gates, had complete faith amongst the citizens here. They could not imagine a world in which they would fall.

Thinking that the only things that could exist in the Dungeon were those that they could imagine. That was their fatal sin.

"You want... my city?" Lord Korbell looked at him as if he were insane. "Is this some sort of joke?"

Yasmine glared at Wallace for a moment before she turned back to the lord with a more moderate tone.

"The Colony has sent us to inform you of their intentions. They conquered Rylleh some time ago, and are now in the process of increasing their territory. It is unfortunate, but that includes your city."

"Are you insulting me?" Korbell slammed a hand down on his desk. "You think you can just walk in here and tell me that some *insects* want to take my city from me?"

As if they were less dangerous because they're insects. Isn't the opposite true? Wallace thought to himself.

"We wouldn't dream of insulting you," Wallace drawled, "and I believe I can explain why this situation may seem so strange to you."

The young lord settled back in his chair, anger still plain on his face.

"Speak," he said curtly.

Wallace straightened himself in his chair before he went on.

"The Colony is quite young, in general terms. They've only been intelligent for around a year. Perhaps less, I don't have the exact dates on hand. The point being, they are quite new to the idea of diplomacy and aren't quite sure how to go about it."

"These creatures are *intelligent*?"

"Of course they are. You can't expect me to believe you haven't had any scouting reports at all."

"I lost several patrols trying to investigate what happened to Rylleh," Korbell frowned. "I stopped trying and gave you up for dead."

"I can't say they aren't competent," Wallace nodded. "Well, I can more or less see how this has come as such a shock to you. The ants are trying to understand what you and I might consider 'rules of war'. They believe it would be detrimental to their future dealings if they were to gain a reputation for unscrupulous actions. The idea of reputation is important to them. Were your city to be conquered without having offered you an opportunity to surrender, it would sully their reputation."

It was quite odd how quickly the ants had accepted the concept of reputation. Although on the one hand, they didn't really care what humans thought of them, they also refused to give others a reason to speak poorly of them. They would keep their dealings scrupulously clean as they saw it. If some misinterpreted their actions, then so be it, but they would always follow the 'rules'.

Lord Korbell's face darkened.

"Wallace," he said, "I had a great deal of respect for you. You've battled hard on behalf of your city against the Dungeon and I have a deep regard for your years of service. But now, to think you came here to mock me on the orders of the monsters you once swore to kill. You're a mockery of yourself."

"Oh, I quite agree," Wallace said, a slight smile on his face. "Some days I feel as if I left my sanity behind some time ago."

"You must have," the lord said, "to think that this city could possibly fall to monsters such as those. This is Ironwall. We will never be defeated, by those ants. No matter if they bring a hundred thousand. They'll never break through our walls and will die in droves before our gates."

Yasmine stood from her seat and tugged on Wallace's arm to pull him out of his chair. It was clear their audience was at an end.

"I'm sorry to cause you any distress," she tried to cover for her fellow emissary.

He was always going to make this difficult. Stupid old man! He just couldn't keep his mouth shut anymore. Wallace allowed himself to be pulled to standing as he reached into his left pocket and thumbed a crystal he had there.

"Well, Lord Korbell. It has been nice to see you again. I'll be sure to catch up with you tomorrow. It won't be as bad as you think at first. You'll find they're pretty easy to get along with. Though you might find a fair portion of your wealth might end up redistributed. They can't abide inefficient hoarding."

"Get out, Wallace. Neither you or any ant will set foot inside these walls ever again."

Wallace Dalton shrugged.

"Well, of course. They don't have feet."

Sounds of distant alarm were suddenly heard as crystal matrices around the office sparked to life. Garbled voices and panicked shouting began to echo throughout. Lord Korbell looked around in shock before pounding feet echoed through the door, followed by a host of finely dressed soldiers bursting into the room.

"My Lord!" one cried. "The city is under assault by monsters!"

Wallace sighed and rolled his shoulders. He flicked a glance at the others in the room, judging their mood before he decided to tactically return to his chair. His knees hurt these days.

"Is this your idea of honour?" the young lord demanded. "A surprise attack while you are still in the city to negotiate?"

Wallace raised one brow.

"What do you mean? I offered you a chance to surrender and you rejected it. Why wouldn't they attack?"

"They aren't afraid that I'll take you hostage and execute you?"

"Honestly, I told them that such things never happened and they shouldn't worry about it."

Yasmine clapped a hand to her forehead. This lunatic had no regard for his own life, but at the least he could care a little about *hers*.

Korbell turned back to his soldiers.

"This is Ironwall! There is no need to panic, we have driven off stronger foes than this. Contact the gates, wake the reserves, and get every man and woman ready to fight. There is no chance that they can break through as long as we commit to the defence."

"Sure about that?" Wallace pointed out the nearby window.

The soldiers and their lord looked out to see streams of ants already climbing along the walls and ceiling of the great chamber in which the city stood. The much vaunted shell that had defended them for hundreds of years had already been pierced in several places, holes the size of a small house having been punched through somehow. Hundreds of ants had already entered, a number that soon ballooned into thousands.

"The gates are under heavy assault!"

"The garrison is being attacked from underneath!"

"There are reports of tunnelling beneath the castle my lord! This area isn't secure."

Lord Korbell couldn't process the repeated shocks that came at him faster than he could comprehend. What in the world was happening?

"Rylleh lasted longer," Wallace grunted with satisfaction. "I knew that wall was overrated."

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Chapter 984: Colony vs Colony pt 21

By repeatedly firing smaller, more manageable gravity bombs I've been able to lock down one side of the assault so everyone else could concentrate on the other. Digging Sarah out is becoming a higher and higher priority at this point. Her roar, even buried under termites, is deafening. She must be causing absolute mayhem in there, but she can't last forever.

Unfortunately, enough time has passed for the enemy to burrow their way to our current position, so once again we are coming under fire from all directions. When they pop up directly beneath, above and in front of me, it becomes impossible to keep them away with the bombs. The chances of drawing myself in and getting damaged by my own spell are way too high in that scenario. Reluctantly, I'm forced to stop casting them.

The exercise has been incredibly valuable as a learning experience, however.

I've been blasting out gravity bombs at full strength, holding it back to unleash it only in the final moments as an all or nothing strike. It's been my trump card against my strongest foes and for that reason I've been reluctant to spend my gravity mana, wanting to hold it back to pump into the mega-bombs I used against the termite nest or against Grokus.

The potential of multiple smaller bombs has been completely lost for all this time, but now I realise the incredible utility. With my current reservoir of gravity mana, I can probably cast as many as twenty bombs the same size as the first one I threw at the centipede nest. If I can master the ability to develop them rapidly and throw them out in controlled ways, it'll be super useful!

Gravity mana, roaring back into usefulness even before I get the specific skill! I knew I wasn't wrong to place my faith in it.

Even so, we are in trouble here now. With the enemy pouring in, we have no choice but to huddle up and fight them in as dense a formation as we can. At the same time, we try to tunnel our way to Sarah, literally drilling into a seething wall of termites.

It's not easy!

Surrounded on all sides, we fight desperately to hold our ground and prevent the never ending waves of termites from overwhelming us. We are soon nearly buried under the Biomass left behind by the defeated foes and we shovel in food when we get a second of time but there's no way we can keep up with it all. Crinis manages to pack away a stupid amount of food into her three maws, but even then there's just too much.

If only she could rapidly convert that Biomass into more flesh, that might be an idea for her next evolution. Getting whittled down over long battles is one of her key weaknesses, but that could be overcome so long as she has access to food if she could make that conversion quickly. As it is, it'll take several hours for that food to replenish her store of shadow flesh.

In this sort of battle, Crinis is at her best. She's unleashed as many limbs as possible in order to annihilate the termites quickly, and it's working to a degree. Thousands of tentacles are out there, each one wriggling and writhing as it seeks to grip a termite and render it to pieces, but this strategy isn't without drawbacks. She can't accurately control so many at once, despite the mutations and organs that expand her control. With everything that she's poured into it, Crinis can probably utilise up to a hundred tentacles at once, which is insane when you think about it. I only have six limbs and I still get them tangled on occasion.

With a thousand tentacles thrashing around, many of them are operating on complete auto pilot, which is far from useless, but massively inefficient. Although these 'mindless' tentacles are still doing damage, they are also being destroyed far faster than the limbs that she can manipulate at will. In short, Crinis' offensive capacity is rapidly getting thinned.

"GRAAAAA!"

Tiny on the other hand, just keeps on punching. I know his stamina is flagging and he'll have to stop being so liberal with his heavy punches, but for now he is going all out. I'm honestly impressed he's been able to keep going for this long! The number of termites he's defeated must be close to my own total, which I didn't expect. The increase in his skills has really pushed him up to another echelon.

[Good work Tiny! Keep hitting right to the end! It shouldn't be long before we get relieved!]

[HARRRRR!]

I sure hope it isn't long before we get relieved. The sooner the better! I didn't expect it would be this hard to hold off the termites, another lapse in judgement. I'm confident that the Colony are rolling up the enemy like a Persian rug right now, but if they don't do it fast enough...

[The moment you get it charged up, you need to unleash your laser again, Invidia. Try to take as many out as you can.]

[*I sssssshall havessss them all!!*]

[I mean, if you can, great. Have at it.]

I shift the focus of my mind elsewhere.

[Sarah? Can you hear me? How are you?]

I try to reach out and touch her mind but all I get back is a wall of pain and rage. She's in full berserk mode right now. Judging by the sounds I'm hearing, she has become a literal termite threshing machine in there, but I don't know how much longer she's going to last.

[Guys, we need to get Sarah and we need to do it right now. I'm going to burn my stamina to punch a hole in the enemy, get ready to follow up.]

The others acknowledge my words and I waste no time. Diving forward, I lock my chompers back before unleashing my most potent, stamina annihilating combo!

VOID CHOMP! VOID CHOMP! VOID CHOMP!

Three massive bites in rapid succession rip a huge gap into the wall of termites, vaporising a large portion in front of us and we dive into the gap. My stamina has plummeted after that, but there's nothing for it, we need to go all out before Sarah's situation becomes more dangerous. Surrounded on all sides by termites, we prepare to unleash hell before they can collapse on us, but I'm distracted by a faint sense of something I didn't expect on the edges of my range.

Is that, bruan'chii?

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Chapter 985: Injured Pride

Rassan'tep reached out with his mind to sense the situation as closely as he could before he relaxed a scale. He was careful to let nothing show to his fellow ka'armodo as they stood together, directing the termite assault. He had nearly panicked, and feared he would need to intervene, when the prospective Ancient had sallied forth with such brazen confidence, rushing into the centre of their encirclement without support. It was an insane manoeuvre, and for a moment, he had feared the monster had taken complete leave of its senses. After consulting with his attendants, they had quickly dismissed the idea and realised the true strategy at play.

Dangling such tasty bait in such a blatant way was crass tactics and would never work under normal circumstances. Any competent commander would realise it was bait and act accordingly, pull back, organise a staged defence without leaving any openings. This situation was anything but normal. The ka'armodo were working on incomplete information, they had less than perfect feedback from the termite troops, and it was difficult to get a clear picture of what was occurring at times. Even more to the point, the leadership here was in the hands of largely inexperienced juveniles. Expendable pawns who could safely be dismissed as "rogues" who'd acted without permission or support.

Their lack of patience and poor judgement irked Rassan'tep, though it played into his hands in this instance.

[How is that miserable creature still alive?] hissed Oolan'tep from beside him. [This is taking far too long!]

The irritated mage was so incensed she nearly raised a claw to scratch at her scales before her attendants leapt forward to prevent the shameful display of irritation. Under their careful ministrations, she was able to calm herself somewhat, though each of her peers kept an eye on her. They had not missed the near-slip.

The young these days. Rasan'tep shared a glance with his lead attendant, the two of them sympathising with each other at being forced to associate with the uncultured and wild youth. This too was noted by the gathered ka'armodo, and with his point made, he got back to focusing on his task.

With luck, he had been assigned as part of the group tasked with hunting down the fearsome tier six ant. He'd hoped he could fail at his task just enough to enable the creature to survive, though he had expected that one or several of the pets would need to be sacrificed in order to appear convincing. It wasn't to be. Despite being completely surrounded and made to endure a relentless assault for over an hour, the ant and his followers were yet to fall.

A remarkable achievement.

[I believe we must consider falling back to reserve the remaining creatures we have at our command,] he spoke gravely over the mental link. [We have expended much and gained nothing in this endeavour. If we become hot blooded and make poor decisions, that which can still be salvaged will also be lost.]

Accusing those who disagreed of acting in an 'un-ka'armodo' like fashion was a deliberate tactic, and one he was pleased with. Hot-blooded was almost a curse word to his people, and in this situation, the moniker stuck. Trying to hold the line and kill Anthony would only result in further losses at this point. The Colony had punched through their thinned lines with ease, eradicating everything they found in the way as they drove the termites out of the Mother Tree's island. Only small pockets of resistance held now, but they wouldn't last for long. The moment they fell, the ants would then encircle what remained of this army, including the ka'armodo themselves.

Even the bruan'chii had marched out and now were mere minutes away from meeting up with the tier six ant. The moment they connected, there would be no chance of succeeding in their mission.

[How can a small group of tier six monsters be so difficult to exterminate?] Oolan'tep growled.

Growled!

[We have attacked with tens of thousands of termites. Our creatures aren't as weak as this.]

[I think we have overestimated the strength of our design in this scenario,] mused Garap'tep. [Although we shifted the Soul Devouring termite design in the queens to a new anti-ant variety, that work was largely rushed. Especially when we compare it to the effort we put into the initial form which found such success against the tree. When it comes to fighting high quality monsters with extreme levels of compact strength, our soldiers are far from effective weapons.]

The lead mage of one of the design teams, Garap'tep was at least keeping his cool, as a proper member of their society should.

[Your analysis feels accurate to me,] Rasan'tep agreed with the promising young mage. [The termites are a poor tool for the job, an issue we tried to overcome by applying extreme numbers. However, only a dozen or so of our monsters can engage with the target at a time, and that simply hasn't proven to be enough.]

Though that had surprised even him. Anthony and his pets, along with that powerful bear, had proven to be absolute powerhouses, capable of destroying huge numbers of weaker monsters without tiring.

It only further convinced him that Anthony was of interest to the Red Truth. A very promising prospect. Perhaps the most promising he'd seen in a hundred years.

[We will retreat,] Oolan'tep declared, much to the others' relief, though they hid it well. [We have suffered a grave defeat today, but we will not endure complete loss. If we regroup, we may still be able to succeed in our endeavour.]

The general mood across the mental bond was positive, though Rasan'tep wondered how much of that was simply a front. There was a general level of blind optimism about the young, and he could sense a little of that around him as they directed their army to abandon the fight and escape. They had to get out of the area themselves if they wanted to avoid a fight, so they wasted no time in mounting their entourages on their back and setting off through the tunnels.

[How do you think this will play out, Master?] Ammon'sil asked over their bond. [Do you believe that we can regroup and push the ants back once more?]

[Unlikely,] he sneered, though he kept his face perfectly still. [The losses today are a blow, but are not devastating. Even the loss of position helps our side somewhat. The ants have been drawn out of their heavily fortified territory and must now fight on fresh ground. They also have more surface area to protect, which makes them more vulnerable.]

[But?]

[But that is only true if the numbers remain relatively the same. We have more termites, and our numbers grow every day, but the Colony can bring reinforcements through the gate whenever they want. I have no idea how many of them there are, but what if a million were to walk through tomorrow? The nest would be overrun that day.]

[Do you really believe they have those sorts of numbers?]

[They may. In truth, I don't think they would even need that many. Ultimately, we have shown that even with every advantage, the termites are unable to defeat the strongest ant and his pets at this stage. Unless we create more powerful soldiers, or shift their design in some way to be better suited to the task, the ant can do whatever he wants, and we can't stop him.]

[That isn't true if the ka'armodo take part in the fight directly.]

[Which is probably what he wants,] he mused. [If my people begin to expose themselves to danger, I think they'll find that the ant is *highly motivated* to try and exploit that situation.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 986: Hooked

Total, overwhelming victory. Nothing more, nothing less.

By the time the Colony had swept in and around my solo attack, the bruan'chii had already broken through. It was simple to push the termites back, driving them out of the Mother Tree's island entirely. All they had left were the deep tunnels that curved under the lake between the mountains and it was there we needed to fortify. I spent a fair bit of time chatting to the Grove Keepers once the enemy began to withdraw, though I had to take a little time to calm Sarah down.

The giant bear was a complete mess when we finally got to her. Invidia started to pour in the healing magic straight away, but I suspect it'll take a while before she fully recovers. After throwing herself into the termites the way she did... it's little wonder she came out so poorly. I feel terribly guilty. I'd planned for the designated sacrifice-person who get's the heck bitten out of them to be me! Unfortunately, I underestimated just how willing she would be to embrace the rage and dive in. She's a hell of a lot braver than she gives herself credit for.

Her fur is matted thick with ichor, a good chunk of it hers, and deep cuts can be seen all over her massive frame. When we approach, the deep red aura of bloodlust has already begun to wane, but we are still cautious. She breathes heavily, her maw heaving air into her giant lungs like a bellows. Faintly, that ear splitting roar can still be heard rattling in the back of her throat.

[Hey there Sarah,] I say gently, [are you okay in there?]

No reply, but I continue to talk in a soothing tone.

[You absolutely beat the hell out of some termites today. You held down the fort like an absolute boss. You saved the day.]

And she had. Her effort had pinned down almost an entire flank and allowed Tiny to work his fancy footwork without being interfered with. In fact, the two who likely killed the most termites are Tiny and Sarah. Not that I didn't take down an absolute boat load of them, but those two really went to town.

[Haaaa. Haaaaa.]

I can feel the thoughts of the giant bear start to congeal as she slowly calms herself. This is honestly a great improvement for her. She raged for a long time and was pushed right to the edge of death, so to come out of it on her own is incredible progress.

I give her a few more words of encouragement before I leave her in Invidia's care and go to greet the Grove Keepers. Before I do that though...

"Protectant... how are you holding up?"

"..."

"I mean... seriously? Just freaking answer when I speak to you, dammit! The whole charade is really grating on me."

"We don't wish to expose ourselves before the bruan'chii..."

"They're our allies!"

"... for now."

"You are a seriously suspicious lot. Fine. Fine! Don't pop out, just answer my question."

"Can't you tell if we're alright?" A hint of curiosity creeps into her tone.

"You think I'll explain how I'm able to sense you? Keep dreaming."

"We are fine. A few injuries have been sustained, but we are able to continue to perform our duties."

"You did well," I congratulate them.

And they did. It's not easy to track just how successful they were, due to their damned organ, but they fought hard on the edges of the conflict. Without them trimming numbers and jumping termites who got too close, I would have taken far more damage than I did.

Having got what I wanted from my guards, I go and have a chat with the Grove Keepers. Good to finally see them show up on the battlefield...

Sarah was exhausted. Beyond exhausted. She felt as if her mind were slowly rising to the surface of a swamp. The rage still clung to her, thick, like molasses. But she was coming out of it. Every breath was so heavy, each giving her that little bit more clarity. As she returned to herself, the pain arrived. Held at bay by her berserk state, it came now in waves. Her whole body was in agony.

The healing light of Invidia covered her, pushing her wounds together, forcing broken mandibles from her flesh as her skin came together. Even now, she could tell she was heavily injured. She wouldn't be able to fight for a while.

But she felt satisfied. Even as the pain grew sharper, so too did her happiness. She had taken a stand for the family she'd chosen and she knew they would be worried for her, but grateful for what she'd done. The collective pride of the Colony would rise up and smother her like a blanket. She would gladly sink into its embrace as she recovered, until another crisis came and she would exert herself again.

For now, she experienced a growing sense of peace. Once again, she had faced her demons head on and come through the other side a little stronger. With the support of the Colony, and the encouragement of Anthony, she felt confident the day would soon come that she no longer had to be afraid of herself.

As the pain continued to grow, she settled herself down on the cold stone, still breathing heavily as she just settled into the moment.

She'd come so far.

She refused to go back.

...

[... Sarah?]

The tenuous thought, just a hint of a whisper, brushed against her exhausted mind so gently she almost didn't notice. She was so tired, she may well have imagined it. Maybe it was just because she was dwelling on the past. There was no need to worry.

[... Sarah?]

It came again, stronger this time. The connection between them was so thin, but she could sense it, only just.

[J-Jim?] she thought slowly.

She was *so tired*.

[Sarah... what have they done to you?]

His thoughts were angry, buzzing with suppressed rage that fluttered against her consciousness. She shied away from it. She didn't want this.

[Y-you ... shouldn't have come... here.]

[I'm okay. I'm safe,] he insisted. [But *you* aren't. They are going to kill you, can't you see that?]

Sarah didn't reply, she couldn't. Her sluggish thoughts were unable to shift, incapable of moving to catch up with what was happening. Sleep beckoned, rising up to pull her down. She tried to rally herself, tried to push out a few more words.

[Not... me. They'll... kill... you.]

[They won't be able to find m -]

There was a flash of light followed by a massive pulse of mana that washed over Sarah just as her eyes began to slide shut. She was barely aware of a small group of ants popping into existence in front of her.

[Hook is attached!] Brilliant cackled. [Try to run, worm. I WILL FOLLOW YOU ANYWHERE!]

It was impossible for an ant to howl with mad laughter, yet somehow the small champion achieved it, her mandibles clacking with insane glee as her eyes burned like wildfire.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 987: Brilliant in the more-than-one-verse of severe confusion

There is an element of madness to every mage who dares to tackle dimensional magic. I'm uncertain if this has to do with the mana required, the convoluted nature of the spells, or the fiendish difficulty, but for whatever reason, dimensional mages are almost universally deranged.

My friend, the great Magio-Scholar Timus, has a pet theory that the overwhelming stimulation of receiving so much sensory input is the key factor. Tracking vectors across dimensions, feeling out nebulous, invisible boundaries, computing mana waveforms, all while attempting to cast even the most basic spell. It's a lot to take in, a lot to process in a frighteningly short amount of time. She believes that only someone quite disconnected from reality could possibly have a hope of achieving it.

Excerpt from the private notes of the Magio Scholar Arctus

Jim didn't understand what had happened. He'd tunnelled so carefully, using all of his abilities to their limits in order to remain undetected.

He just had to find Sarah. Had to *talk* to her.

She was being used, driven back into the very life that she had fled. The gentle, caring figure that he'd found amongst the shapers, wounded by her time in the savage Dungeon and in desperate need of emotional support, was now nowhere to be seen.

He could sense her, he'd gotten close enough for that. Wounded, close to death, her life force leaking out onto the tunnel floor as she soaked up healing magic like a sponge. Anthony had pushed her to the limit and she'd nearly died. Again.

There was no limit for that shameless creature. He would drag Sarah into every battle so he could harness her strength for the Colony until she went mad or finally fell in battle. He couldn't allow it.

When he'd finally succeeded in reaching out to her undetected, *something* had gone terribly wrong.

Sat safe inside his space-warping tunnel, he'd felt a strange lurch, as if something had lodged right in his gut. He'd immediately gone into a defensive thrash, but there was nothing there, at least nothing he could sense.

Panic rushed to the surface, only exacerbated by the sudden appearance of five ants next to Sarah.

He felt mind magic begin to batter at him immediately and he did his best to ward it off as he began to scramble. His long worm body twisted in and around itself as he desperately turned himself around and tried to speed away.

His whole body jolted heavily and he slumped to the floor of his own tunnel, utterly confused.

If he was panicked a moment ago, now he was frantic.

In that moment of distraction, the ants forced their way into his mind.

[HA! Egg killer! Think you can get away this time? Think you're hidden?! I can see EVERYTHING!]

The five ants began to rush directly towards his position, throwing themselves at the walls of the tunnel to dig. They really did know where he was? That should be impossible!

Jim had had enough. He tried once more to flee, and when he came up against the strange resistance, he pushed against it as hard as he could.

[Think you can defeat the spatial hook? Foolish! You've been locked in place, no more of your space warping tricks. Time to pay for what you've done!]

The voice in his mind cackled with mad glee, which terrified the worm even further. He pushed and pushed, every link in his long wiry body trying to drive himself forward.

[Get away from me!] he shouted back. [Leave me alone!]

[After the innocent lives you snuffed? The future generations of *my family* that you destroyed? I don't think so!]

Once more, the ant cackled as she and her allies dug faster and faster as they approached the wall of his hidden tunnel. The closer they drew, the more frantic he became, until his muscles began to tear from his desperate struggle.

There was a horrific rip, as something deep within him tore, but finally he felt some forward momentum. With a surge of wild joy, he leapt forward and tried to speed away.

[Oh no you don't!] Brilliant roared.

Vaguely, Jim was aware of the ant's mana changing in a strange way, but he didn't care. So eager to flee he paid attention to nothing else, he rushed forward now that he finally could, gaining momentum until, a moment later, he realised something was very wrong.

Where was the tunnel? Where was the good sweet earth he'd used to propel himself forward? Gone? It was all gone!

[Oh ho! Tried to flee here did you? I didn't expect you'd be able to foil my hook, but as I said, there's nowhere you can run that I won't follow!]

Jim thrashed in the air as he tried to make sense of where he was. He couldn't see, obviously, but his sense of the mana surrounding him was fuzzy, warped.

[Where am I? WHAT IS HAPPENING?!] he shrieked.

[You're the one who punched a hole into this dimension,] Brilliant scoffed. [It took me *days* to figure out how to get here and now you want to say you did it by accident? Rubbish! Now get over here.]

Suddenly Jim felt himself being pulled, slowly, through the ... air? His long body was being towed somehow directly toward the ant.

[No, no, no, no, no, no, no!] he whined and lunged again.

That same, tearing sensation, followed by a wave of heat that nearly overwhelmed him.

[Oh, do you find it a little hot, worm? Then why come?! I call this one 'the oven'.]

He still wasn't away! He lunged again.

[Gah! It's bright in this one and I can't close my eyes... of course you would come here, you scoundrel!]

He lunged again.

[I hate it when I don't have width! I hardly need it to track you though!]

Again!

[As a fractal it's even easier to see the evil that lies in your heart!]

Again!

[The squiggly line dimension! Not much has changed for you!]

AGAIN!

[Be careful now, worm. If you try to run again you might just run into...]

It was madness. Everything was madness. Every time he jumped forward, Jim could feel himself being pulled, stretched, squashed and rearranged in mind bending ways. He couldn't hope to comprehend it, couldn't grasp any of it.

All he understood was his desperate need to be *away*, to flee and so he lunged once more.

BAM!

[... the wall.]

The impact was stunning. Jim felt as if every atom of his body had been slammed into a trash compactor. What had happened? He didn't understand... was he free?

[Nope. Like I said, I can follow you *anywhere*. I never expected you might try and jump straight through the wall... insane to try. I guess you must have been feeling desperate. No surprise I suppose, it's me chasing you after all!] Brilliant boasted.

Something took hold of Jim and he shivered. A small ant skittered across his frame, tapping at him with its antennae. Mana surged.

[Time to bring you home. There's quite a few who've been wanting to see you...]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 988: Tree Fall pt 1

50 Years before Anthony is Reborn.

Legionaries were known to obsess over the condition of their Abyssal armour. Fussing over the plates, burnishing the living stone, polishing the enchanted metal. All of these were important, vital components that ensured the proper function of the suit, providing the all-important protection that allowed their soldiers to endure blows no other army could, and exert strength no sapient should possess.

Yet, in the eyes of Grand Marshal Cicera, they didn't pay enough attention to the most fundamental and key piece.

Her worn hands moved with practised ease as she felt along the inside of the armour. Even without looking, she could shift from strap to strap, her indelicate fingers sliding along each one with gentle grace as she checked for splitting and wear. Without the straps, the damn thing wouldn't hold together, would fall off in battle, plates sliding out of place in the thick of the fight. Not on her watch.

The flickering torchlight was all the Grand Marshal needed to complete her check before she began to strap the armour on. Forearm plates were meticulously positioned and tightened, followed by shins and boots. Once that was done, her aides stepped forward to assist, holding the heavier and more cumbersome sections in place as they were buckled down and then snapped into their interlocking folds.

The process was completed in silence, each aware of the import of doing every little task perfectly. Attention to detail, no mistakes, that was how Cicera ran her Legions. That was how the Legionem Abyssii won wars.

After the two attendants had completed their final check, running their eyes and hands over every plate with focused care, they nodded and stepped back. The Grand Marshal picked up her helmet and placed it over her head, the heavy Abyssal Iron sliding into place with an audible click as it joined with the shoulder guards.

There was a world of difference between a complete set of armour and one missing even the slightest section. With her helmet now in place, the full set of enchantments hummed to life, drawing deep on the mana that circulated through her body along with her blood. Every circuit vibrated with power, returning that strength back to her in turn.

Fully dressed, she acknowledged both her aides before she stepped out of her personal tent to greet those who awaited her there.

"Commanders," she said as she stepped over the threshold.

"Grand Marshal," they each saluted solemnly, fist to heart.

"Walk with me," she directed before she strode off at pace, her junior officers falling into stride behind her. "How goes the deployment of your Legions? Atticus, you first."

"Of course, Grand Marshal. The eighth has deployed as requested, along the south west bank. Artillery has been established and fortified a kilometre behind the front."

"Have your officers been properly inducted to the order chain?"

"They have."

"Metorii."

"The twenty third is entrenched along the west bank as ordered, Grand Marshal. The mages have been condensing the earth mana for six hours, as directed."

"Good. And the twenty fifth?"

"We are alongside the twenty third. In position and spoiling for the fight."

"I hope that eagerness has been tempered with caution and reason, commander."

It didn't sound like a rebuke, but each of the officers knew that it was.

"The soldiers have completed all checks with due diligence," the commander hastened to assure his leader. "No steps have been skipped."

Cicera nodded.

"I am pleased your soldiers do not shy away from the challenge that awaits us, but victory comes to those who are prepared."

She looked out now across the field and took in the sight for the first time.

Banners waved, metal gleamed and the proud colours of the Abyssal Legions were on full display. Ten full legions, deployed and ready to fight. In the distance, across the water, loomed their target. Against the might of the Legion, it was sure to fall.

"We cannot afford failure today," she said. "Monsters that grow powerful enough to shift the balance of power cannot be allowed to survive. You know as well as I do the blood that soaks the trunk of that tree. Too many have been killed already, we will end it today."

"We will, Grand Marshal."

"There will be sacrifices. No victory can be achieved without paying the price. Have you spoken to your soldiers?"

Each of the commanders nodded. They had moved through their own legions the previous night, speaking to each soldier in turn, shaking their hands and looking the people they would send to fight in the eye. Every Legionary was prepared to die in the defence of civilisation itself.

"Very well," Cicera said finally, her voice flat and emotionless. "Send word to begin bombardment."

"Begin bombardment!"

The call was repeated and echoed down the line and into the command tent, from which it was sent through the network of glyphs that relayed her words to the teams deployed across this vast battlefield. She watched in silence, though her keen ears could hear the work being done in the background as auxiliaries and mages prepared their deadly work.

With a rushing roar, it began. The first round flew through the air, propelled from the enchanted ballista the Legion had come to call the Death Monger. Trailing bright flames, the projectile reached almost a kilometre high as it whistled through the air before falling to strike with tremendous force and an explosion of fire some five kilometres distant. The first seemed to act as a signal, as a second was fired, then another ten, then another hundred.

A thousand artillery pieces lit up the sky, the final shot landing just as the first had reloaded, ready to shoot once again. Already the flames had begun to spread around the base of the tree, the roots catching alight as the payload of alchemical flame spread across the wood.

"The mages may begin to cast," Cicera ordered calmly, the words echoing out from within her helmet.

Again, her orders were relayed across the entire field in moments. As one, the reserve mages stood and began to pool their mana. Ten great fireballs, each more than a dozen metres across, began to take form as hundreds of mages poured their energy into them, deepening the colour and intensifying the flames.

"Extend the bridges."

The earth mages, after six hours of relentless preparation, finally let loose their condensed rock. From one island to the next, a great span began to form, pushing aside the mighty waters of the lakes and providing a way forward for the legionaries.

The fireballs were unleashed, flying across the field to detonate with thunderous force against the enormous tree. Cicera could almost imagine she heard it groan in pain, though it might just be the wood shifting.

"Advance."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 989: Tree Fall pt 2

Fifty thousand Legionaries and a hundred thousand auxiliaries made up the army under the Grand Marshal's command. A mighty force that any in the Dungeon would fear to confront.

This level of commitment wouldn't normally be needed, even to annihilate a powerful Mythic grade monster. But when a powerful Mythic grade monster began to populate the Dungeon with its own race of offspring? Such a thing could not be allowed to stand.

The Consul had spoken, and so the Legion had moved. Supported from behind by the alliance of Old Races, they had made a stand. The spawn of the Dungeon could not be allowed to proliferate out of control, lest the world fall into ruin.

Hundreds of 'monger bolts arced through the air every moment, the distant explosions ringing out in a constant patter. The heat from the combined fireballs of the mages could be felt even in the command tent, and after just ten minutes of the barrage, large sections of the tree roots had already caught flame.

Rianus stood on the front line, watching the conflagration grow as the combined ordnance of the Legion flew over his head. His left hand bore his heavy assault shield, locked into position with the soldiers on his left and right, presenting an unbreakable wall to the enemy. He kept his right hand near the hilt of his gladius. The time would soon come when he would need it.

"Advance!" came the order from the centurion behind him, repeated down the line.

As one, the legionaries stepped forward, off the island and onto the great ramp that had been formed of mana only moments ago. In that moment, he felt invincible. His full suit of Abyssal armour flooded his limbs with strength, and the thousands of brothers and sisters at his back assured him.

Only victory was possible this day. The Legion's might was on the march, nothing could stand in their way.

Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch.

The steady march of the massed ranks was precise as a drum beat, their metal boots slamming down into the fresh stone in perfect sync.

"Shieeeeelds high!" roared the centurions.

"HAH!" bellowed the soldiers as the front ranks hoisted their shields higher, till the top edge sat just below their eye line.

It felt as if the world was ending over their heads. A rain of fire and death the likes of which these Legionaries may never see again.

In front of Rianus, the great tree loomed. Kilometres high, as thick as a castle, it was a monstrous thing to behold. Fitting, seeing as it *was* a monster. A living creature, born from mana to enact the Dungeon's will. Today would be its last.

"BRACE!" the centurions shouted in unison.

Though he saw nothing, Rianus and every legionary down the line acted instantly. They stopped the march, dug in their heels and brought their free hands up to support the shields in front.

Not a moment too soon.

A tangle of roots erupted through the stone in front of them, vicious ropes of plant matter as strong as steel whipped at them, trying to curl over their shields and cut through their armour.

"ATTACK!" came the order.

Rianus dropped his right hand and snatched his gladius from its sheath. With reflexes beyond those of a mortal, he slashed out five times in under a second, the enchanted and hardened Abyssal steel of his blade slicing through the roots like butter. With a shout, he *dashed*, hundreds of kilograms of legionary killing machine launching forward, shield high and blade nothing more than a flicker of light.

Up and down the line, hundreds of legionaries engaged with the plants, cutting them down as they appeared, but the tree wasn't done.

Something pushed up the water on either side of the ramp, a vast presence rising from the depths. A vast amount of water bulged upwards as enormous pods breached the surface, splitting open as they did so.

A wave of green gas emerged and swept over the legionaries in an instant, but that didn't sway them. With their modified physiology and the protections of their armour, they were near immune to poison. What took Rianus' focus was the many rows of serrated needles nestled within the flesh of the flowers.

"SHIELDS HIGH!"

He didn't need to be told twice. The moment he got his shield up he felt a rapid series of impacts that forced his arm up against his chest plate. With his view blocked, the vines emerged once more to curl around and try to slide inside his armour, but he was vigilant. The gladius slashed out once more, cutting away the seeking roots while he endured the barrage.

A moment later, the pods were struck by precise artillery fire, exploding in a burst of flame that caused hunks of smouldering plant matter to rain down over the bridge.

Once more, the Legionaries braced themselves and began to advance across the gap that separated them from the trunk of the tree. The monster clearly didn't want them to approach and Rianus was alert, expecting more tricks with every step.

Surprisingly, there wasn't another attack until they had almost reached the other side. Rising from beneath the titanic roots came an unorganised mob of creatures that could only be described as gnarled trees come to life. Amongst them were enormous, lumbering figures, twice as tall as the others.

These must be the 'children' the tree had been producing.

The new creatures strode forward, determination and rage brimming from every inch of their frames.

Rianus grinned as he advanced in lock step with his brothers and sisters of the Legion, his hand tightening on the hilt of his blade.

This would be fun.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 990: Tree Fall pt 3

Breathe.

In. Hold. Release. Hold.

Breathe.

In. Hold. Release. Hold.

Slowly. Patience was required. The sharpest blade couldn't be forged in a day. The metal had to be unearthed, refined, smelted, shaped, heated and cooled over and over again until the final temper had been achieved. The perfect weapon was the work of a lifetime.

And so was Orrina.

She was the Legion's weapon, its sharpest and most perfect. She had been forged over many years, placed in the fire, moulded, quenched, then thrown back into the heat once more.

Breathe.

In. Hold. Release. Hold.

As she repeated the mantra and controlled the air that flowed into her body, so too did she influence the mana around her. It pulsed, rising and falling along with her lungs. Vast quantities rushed into her body, were contained, and then released. Each time she drew it in, the energy within her grew that little bit more rich, more vibrant. It wouldn't be long now.

Breathe.

In. Hold. Release. Hold.

Deeper and deeper she sank. Her worries fell away. Her past fell away. Her joy. Her sorrow. With each breath, more pieces of her heart and mind were released into the dark, where they could not reach her. All that would remain was the pure core: her instincts, her training, and her unending warrior spirit. She honed her mind as the blade was honed, until it had reached the perfect, razor's edge.

The aura that rolled off her in dense waves felt as if it would cut the air. None dared to approach.

A final time.

Breathe.

In. Hold. Release. Hold.

The mana roared through her body now in a violent torrent. A storm of energy that begged for release. Her mind had been reduced to the point of a blade, nothing remained to cloud her judgement. It was time.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Thick, moulded plates of steel stood before her. An impossible construct of complexity and engineering so profound it was nothing short of a miracle. A fitting partner for her. She was the greatest the Legion could produce, an example of martial perfection. Her equipment should match.

In the distant parts of her mind, she knew her peers were engaged in the same ritual as she. Those thoughts were ignored, allowed to drift away without touching her singular focus. With measured steps, she moved towards her armour, her balance effortlessly perfect. A ladder had been prepared, but she didn't need it, vaulting up to land on the wide pauldron and look down.

Blue. So blue it hurt to look at. A shimmering pool of intense light, so vibrant and filled with power it almost overwhelmed her senses.

Liquid mana.

One last time. Breathe.

In. Hold. Release. Hold.

Orrina placed her hands on either side of the opening and smoothly lowered herself in, plunging herself into the liquid in one motion.

Agony.

The concentrated mana flooded her pores, seeping into her body and threatening to rip her apart. But it didn't happen. The vast rivers of magic that flowed through her came into contact with this new power source and found a delicate equilibrium. If she were any less saturated with mana, she would have died the moment she dropped in, but this was far from the first time for her.

With practised ease, even submerged as she was, Orrina found the straps that bound her in place, tying them off expertly before she reached up to pull the opening shut above her, sealing herself in.

The armour hummed to life.

Pressed against the unspeakably detailed enchanted matrix, she could feel herself meld with the metal, her unique skills, possessed only by the chosen few within the Legion, coming alive. The pain continued, but she didn't feel it; these were the moments she lived for.

Her mind expanded and suddenly she could see through the thick plates of metal in front as if they weren't even there. Her body moved, the armour moved, and Orrina was whole once more.

She couldn't feel the fierce grin that split her face as she reached out to her right, the gauntlet closing around the hilt of her beloved sword. Blade in hand, she strode forward, perfectly balanced, as each step was announced with a resounding boom.

The same sound came from her left and right as her fellows emerged from their pens, ready to fight. This was a rare occasion, one that hadn't happened in her entire career. Ten of them had been called up for this action. There was no chance of failure.

The battle was already well under way. Several kilometres distant, legionaries tangled with strange wooden creatures large and small as artillery and mage fire rained down from overhead. The Tree looked to be fighting back; bulbs sprouted all over the place, rising from the water, drooping down from the absurdly thick boughs overhead to launch spores and bladed seeds back.

She would need to cross the water using the land bridge the Legion had established in order to support the front line. It was quite a distance, it might take her as much as a minute.

[Simple mission: engage and eliminate. Once that tree is cut down, we can head home.]

Bruvae's mind felt as cold and distant as Orrina's own. She too had been divested of all that would impede her function as the perfect weapon.

[Engage as you see fit,] came the order.

The mental link was ended.

Let's go.

Orrina took a step, followed by another, then another. Her momentum built with impossible speed; the size and weight of her armour should have made it impossible, yet it happened regardless. By the fifth step, she was flying across the ground, each bound carrying her an absurd distance as the scenery whipped past. In fifteen seconds, she had reached the bridge and was still gaining speed.

Past the wreckage and broken stone. Past the dismembered and fallen roots. Past the fallen and dying soldiers who lay bleeding on the ground.

As the fighting drew closer, she leapt high, over the massed ranks of the Legionaries and down amongst the throng of tree people. She fell like an armoured star, her sword flashing, light from the blade sweeping out to carve through the wooden fighters like a scythe through wheat.

The faces of the soldiers lit with awe and pride as their finest members arrived on the battlefield like avenging gods. It was a privilege to fight alongside men and women such as these, and their efforts redoubled in the presence of the greatest warriors ever produced.

The Praetorians had arrived on the field.