

Chrysalis 991

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Chapter 991: Tree Fall pt 4

Up amongst the roots of the Tree the fighting grew ever more intense. This close to the trunk, the mighty monster could exert more of its strength. Twisted roots as thick as buildings rumbled as they rose from the ground to reveal gnashing teeth, barbed vines and poison-spitting flowers that regrew almost as quickly as they were destroyed. Mana thundered through the tree so thickly that every Legionary could practically taste it.

The damned monster must be sucking in energy from a wide area to be able to handle this level of output, but drawing that kind of power had drawbacks. Every Legionary knew the price of taking in more than one could handle.

Even monsters, born of mana, could be susceptible to it if they pushed beyond their capacity. Only time would tell if the tree was overdrawing itself.

Rianus had been fighting for an hour and even his superhuman endurance was being pushed. His shoulders burned, his wrists ached and his legs felt weak. This was when the real fight began. Any soldier could perform when they were fresh, and rested, but the Legion didn't care for warriors such as those. When exhaustion came, when arms trembled and knees shook, that was when the fight would hang in the balance.

The massive wooden creature in front of him glared, its eyes afire with righteous indignation as it brought one massive fist crashing down from overhead. The Legionary grit his teeth and braced his shield overhead, almost buckling under the tremendous impact. Driven down to one knee, he snaked his blade around the edge of his shield and cut deep into the wooden hand, forcing the monster to retrieve its limb.

He forced himself to stand once more, his body on fire as he readied himself again. His fellow soldiers pushed forward to take advantage of the slight opening he'd created, their weapons igniting with light as they prepared to deploy their skills.

An explosion of soil erupted in front of them, showering the soldiers with clods of earth before a wall of slithering roots exploded outwards. Several Legionaries were taken, dragged beneath the surface the moment they lost their footing, with thin tendrils sliding into the gaps in their armour.

"Get back!" Rianus growled as he slashed continuously, burning stamina to thin the attack and free his comrades.

A shadow flitted overhead before a figure arrived with a mighty crash. Towering over the soldiers, even larger than the bigger wooden creatures, the Praetorian swept an arm out, a broad halberd glowing impossibly bright. The vines evaporated when struck by that luminescence, slashed to nothing by the power of that single strike. Without saying a word, the mighty Legionary dashed away, ready to engage on another front.

"Reform the line!" Rianus bellowed.

He didn't have time to be awed. The Praetorians had been racing all over the battlefield, putting themselves in harm's way as much as possible to protect the Legionaries' lives and end the battle as quickly as they could. It hadn't been the first time he'd seen them and it sure wouldn't be the last.

As the legion gathered themselves back into formation, he sized up their surroundings. Overhead, the explosions continued to ring out, a rain of fire falling around them constantly. Smoke billowed from the trunk of the tree as the flames spread, the sound of crackling wood almost overwhelming to the senses.

Once they had secured the ground here, they could focus their bombardment from close range and bring the thing down. If events proceeded as expected it wouldn't be long.

"Shields up!" Rianus ordered.

On reflex, the disciplined legionaries brought their arms high, shields interlocking as a wave of energy passed through them.

The shields were no mere slabs of metal, shaped for defence. The enchantments and augments built in fed on each other, magnified the flow of mana. The more soldiers in the wall, the stronger it became. Rianus felt better now that the formation had re-established itself. No true legionary was comfortable fighting out on their own.

"Where the hell is the centurion?" he asked the soldier to his right.

"Don't know," she answered back. "When the lines crashed things got a bit tangled there for a bit."

"We'll need to fall back and regroup," he determined, "get our command structure back in place before we advance again."

"We have them on the run," she pointed out.

"Orthodox strategy, legionary," he snapped back. "We have no relay back to command. We could be hurting the fight more than helping it. We pull back."

"Yes, sir," she demurred.

They passed the instruction down the line and began an organised and slow withdrawal as chaos continued to reign overhead. Several times they were almost crushed by falling debris. With the shield wall in place, it was almost impossible for the tree people to break them, though they tried several times. The pace was slow, but they were gradually regaining their footing and meeting up with more groups of legionaries, each gathering themselves again for the final strike.

But still no centurions...

"Where the hell have the officers gone?" Rianus growled.

"Oh. I might know something about that."

A new voice, light but piercing, cut through the roar of the battlefield. He jerked his head to the side to see an ethereal figure step out of the smoke, as if appearing from thin air. Dressed in a soft, muted robe, the newcomer was humanoid in appearance, though its features were twisted with those of a beast. Two long ears adorned the top of the stranger's head, and short, white fur covered all of her exposed

flesh. Her demeanour was polite, almost friendly, yet her eyes were hard, and in one hand she held a curved blade that dripped with red.

"The Folk?" he spat, then his face hardened. "You targeted the centurions..."

"It wasn't easy," she confessed, "but your confidence, might I say arrogance, has given us this opening."

"Why are you here?"

She smiled toothily.

"A new race has been born on Pangera, so the conclave has spoken. As such, we will defend these free peoples."

"Dungeon born," he grated, "just like you. You're corrupted."

"We must agree to disagree," she stated as she raised the blade casually.

"HOLD!" Rianus roared. "Folk Blademaster!"

That was all he could say before the rabbit creature flickered and vanished before them. An instant later, a slash rang out overhead, followed by a barrage of sword light, slivers of silver death, raining down from above. Acting on instinct, Rianus didn't lift his shield to block, but allowed the blows to slash into his helmet and pauldrons as he leapt backwards.

He made the right choice.

Barely a second passed before another quiet slash rang out, in front this time, unleashing a wave of sword light that sliced through the air at dizzying speed. Those who had judged incorrectly took the blow straight to the chest. Rianus' arm buckled as a crack appeared in the face of his shield, but he held his ground and stayed standing. When the pressure eased, he leapt to the side to cover his ally who had fallen. With a quick check, he saw that the attack hadn't pierced the chest plate, but had dented it, punching the metal into the soldier within.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Hurts like heck, but I'll be fine," she gasped.

His eyes scanned around them as the legionaries began to pick themselves up, the healthier covering for the wounded until they could get their breath back.

"What the hell was that?" the wounded soldier asked.

"Blademasters of the Folk," he replied, his tone grim as he continued to survey the field. The smoke was thick now, it was damn hard to see. "They almost never leave the conclave."

"Why are they here?"

"They want the tree to live," he growled. "Another reason why we need to cut the damn thing down."

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Chapter 992: Tree Fall pt 5

The appearance of the Blademasters on the field changed the situation dramatically. Grand Marshal Cicera considered the scene that spread before her with a pensive frown. Centurions had been hunted down in the confusion and chaos of the battlefield, disrupting the chain of command and leaving a quarter of the legionaries sent over the bridge blowing in the wind.

It was a deceitful, cowardly strategy that relied completely on the element of surprise and the unique abilities the Blademasters possessed. It was also clever, and effective. Had the Folk announced their presence and stated their intention to defend the Tree, Cicera would have brought another four legions to ensure the job got done.

Her centurions would have also been more hesitant to stand apart from their troops. It was a standard strategy to assassinate officers in the field and the Abyssal Legion prided itself on its record for preserving the lives of not only its officers, but the rank and file legionaries as well.

To do such a thing was close to a declaration of war. There would come a reckoning for this.

For now, her focus had to be on the mission. The tree would fall, there was no doubt of this.

"Focus the barrage on the left side of the trunk," she ordered. "Tell the Praetorians to find and assist the leaderless soldiers. They must be guided and absorbed into the command of existing groups."

The commanders passed her orders and within minutes she could see the results play out before her. The constant barrage of artillery and magic continued unabated, but this time focusing on one side of the trunk. The already burning wood began to crack and splinter under the weight of the assault. Thick clouds of smoke already billowed around the tree, rising to the canopy and drifting out into the vast open spaces of the fourth stratum.

She could see glimpses of the soldiers regrouping in the distance. Her superhuman vision allowed her to pick out the determined faces as they reformed their lines and began to advance once more. The praetorians had been notified of the presence of the Folk in the battle and already they had come to blows.

Of course, despite their incredible skill, not even they could stand up to the finest the Legion had to offer.

"The Folk are retreating whenever they see a praetorian approach. They don't want to engage directly."

"Not surprising," Cicera remarked dryly. "That's not a fight they can win."

It was a worthy trade off. If the Blademasters spent their time running from the praetorians, then they weren't interfering with the legions.

"There are reports of more forces from the Folk appearing. Not elites, regular warriors."

The Grand Marshal frowned. They were bringing a larger contingent at this point of the battle? Why? The tree was crippled, success was close for the Legion.

"Send in the auxiliaries," she ordered. "It's time for the finishing blow."

The situation was relatively stable, but could change if more unanticipated factors were allowed to influence the field. She would commit her reserves and deal a decisive strike before things could tilt out of her favour.

The order rolled down the line quickly and tens of thousands of soldiers prepared to deploy. The auxiliaries were a potent fighting force in their own right, overshadowed by the legionaries they served beside, but competent and strong nonetheless.

It was they who manned the artillery, they who served in the medicus and managed supplies. No fighting force in the Abyssal Legion could operate without them.

There were also more specialised soldiers among their number.

Twenty thousand malformed former prisoners howled and gibbered with delight as the order finally came. They had waited so long, watching as their brothers and sisters of steel had fought on the front line. Now it was finally their turn.

Brimming with eagerness and fury, they rushed forward, over the bridge and threw themselves into the fight with wild abandon. They smashed into the front lines like a sledgehammer, rolling back the tree creatures all the way to the trunk in one mighty, sustained push.

The commanders beside the Grand Marshal watched with detached interest as the first of the hand held ordnance began to fly.

The auxiliaries whirled their bolas overhead before releasing them, their abnormal strength allowing them to cover tremendous distance. The clay balls shattered on impact, spreading their payload across the trunk.

On its own, the stuff would do little, but when ignited, it would burn with incredible heat. Good thing the tree was already on fire.

The conflagration spread in an instant. Fire roared and the snapping sound of breaking timber reached them easily over the distance. Black, oily smoke billowed from the trunk as more and more bolas were hurled into the inferno.

"The Folk are mounting an offensive, more are coming through."

"It doesn't matter now," Cicera said with confidence. "Order a fighting withdrawal."

Over the next hour, the legionaries began to pull back. After spending all of their ammunition, the auxiliaries covered for their fatigued allies as the artillery barrage continued overhead. The tree and its children continued to fight, but they were a spent force. The tree was going to fall and they all knew it.

The last to walk back over the bridge were the praetorians, their armour scorched and blackened in places, but otherwise unharmed. The army gave way as these titans of the battlefield walked through the ranks.

Cicera knew that they wanted to be gone as soon as possible. They had duties and responsibilities below that could not be allowed to wait. It had been difficult for the Legion to spare even this handful of its mightiest soldiers for this campaign.

They approached the command tent and saluted. Without ceremony, she saluted back, fist to heart, and then they turned and were gone, back to the endless war below.

In the distance, the Folk pushed forward, taking up defensive positions, entrenching themselves as their mages began to take hold of the bridge and destroy it. The Grand Marshal watched them, disinterested.

It began as a low groan that quickly grew into an all-encompassing roar. The Mother Tree cracked and crunched as it gave way under its own titanic weight. In slow motion, the enormous trunk split, and the tree began to fall.

So large was it, the wind it stirred became a storm as it fell. When it finally crashed down into the water, the waves it created were dozens of metres tall. The impact resounded around the stratum, heard hundreds of kilometres away by curious people and fearful monsters alike.

"A successful campaign, Grand Marshal," she was commended by the commanders standing nearby.

Cicera looked down on the Folk, their warriors bushy tailed and ready to continue the fight. Were they demanding that the Legion respect the fallen? Were they trying to protect the remaining tree creatures?

Or was it something else?

"Withdraw," she ordered finally.

Suspicion was not enough. The legions gathered here were needed elsewhere, there were never sufficient soldiers to do the work that needed to be done. They could delay no longer.

It wasn't easy to move so many people, even with the renowned discipline of the Abyssal Legion on your side. Nevertheless, six hours later the mighty army of steel was gone.

The bruan'chii turned and looked with sadness on their fallen mother. The great tree was no more, the trunk and its vast canopy had been toppled into the water, already breaking apart without her mana to support it.

Around them a small garden began to spring to life, the flowers and vines writhing with malicious glee.

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Chapter 993: Self Reflection... (?!)

That... was exhausting. Holy moly I'm tired.

I managed to break the stalemate, but it wasn't exactly the most subtle or efficient way to do it. This is why I leave the thinking to the Council. I nearly died, but hey, the problem has been solved!

The bruan'chii are more than happy to keep rolling the offensive forward. The poor dudes have been bottling up their aggression for so long, they're practically about to burst! Now that the big Mum has let them off the leash, the pent up rage is quite the thing to see.

Nice to see them so full of beans. The bruan'chii can be a lively sort when the mood takes them. Good on 'em. Go be the best wooden tree people that you can be.

I'm just going to chill for a bit. Maybe try and count all the holes I now have in my carapace.

"Master, are you well?" Crinis asks, worried.

"I'm just dandy. A little worse for wear, but nothing that won't heal up in fairly short order. How about you?"

"I lost a great deal of flesh. Those filthy, worthless creatures... I will be glad when they no longer trouble us."

"Me too."

Going around the group, it seems as though we mostly pulled through ok. Tiny is exhausted, having drained his stamina completely. He barely has the energy to shovel some Biomass into his face, which is saying something. Invidia was barely scratched, which is a good thing considering how relatively squishy he is. One bite from a termite and those copious brains might have been leaking out again.

By far the most wounded is Sarah. Under the careful ministrations of our floating eyeball demon, she's recovered a fair bit, but even healing magic has diminishing returns. To completely heal, she'll need food, rest and ongoing treatment over a couple of days.

She seems to have fallen asleep in the meantime.

Although one can never be certain of safety within the Dungeon, I can feel an entire army of my family running through the area, so I don't feel too threatened. It won't be long before they converge on this area, so in the meantime, I might indulge in a quick bit of torpor.

"Eldest."

"BOOGAH!"

I jump back to alertness and find the tunnel around me has already become filled with ants. There's a ton of Biomass to be carted off and my family is already hard at work. Shaking off my disorientation, I find Advant and Burke standing nearby.

"Who called me?" I say. "I'm awake!"

"We... can see that, Eldest. I was just hoping for a chance to thank you for what you've done. Our situation has been turned on its head because of what -"

"Whoa there!" I break in, prodding the soldier between the eyes with one antenna, freezing her in place. I turn to the scout leader. "Were you planning on saying something similar?"

"Uh... yes?"

Yuck.

"Don't make it weird. There was a job to do that only I could do, so I did it. Every ant in the Colony would have done the same if they had the ability to do it."

I stare at them like they've gone weird. Then a thought strikes me and I dive into the Vestibule, actively sifting through the stream of Will that flows into me. To my surprise, I find this feeling of gratitude is widespread amongst the ants around me. They are awed, filled with respect.

It's strange. And a little worrying.

What sort of attitude is this for an ant to have? Honestly, the only Colony member I expected to celebrate what I'd done was Leeroy, which obviously isn't a good thing! What I said to the two council members, I meant. The ants are the most selfless creatures I've ever met or heard of, just like they are in their natural state on Earth. The intelligence they've gained hasn't seemed to change that one bit. The only exception seems to be me.

I run off and risk my life in ways that I would frankly be annoyed if any other ant did, and to be honest, getting this gratitude for it is making me uncomfortable. Not forgetting for a second just how un-antlike I find this behaviour. What is going on with them?

"Sarah deserves far more of the credit than I do," I tell them firmly, making sure to say it loud enough for all the ants around me to hear. "She threw herself into the fight and sustained the worst injuries of all of us. If you want to give someone some praise, then give it to her."

"Of course, she's being treated well. We're extremely grateful for what she did."

"Good. But don't thank me, I did what any member of the Colony should. The work itself is the reward. Like I said, don't make it weird."

"All right, Eldest," Burke holds up her antennae, "have it your way. What are you planning to do now? New fortifications are being dug and we need to be careful about counterattacks. There's a mountain of work to do."

I stare at her.

"Are you kidding? I'm going to stuff my face and rest up until we storm the nests! I'm exhausted. We're all exhausted. You need to give us a little time to recover..."

"Right you are then Eldest," Advant says, with a humorous roll of the antennae. "I suppose we'll get back to it then. Rest well."

"Oh I will," I assure them. "I get the feeling that it's going to be *very* peaceful."

I'll be able to purge my grudge, after all. I'll be shocked if that damn worm is able to get away from Brilliant after all the insane things that crazy little champion has been able to figure out. She certainly lived up to her name in the end!

But as the ants begin to move away I worry about the changes in their attitudes. Why are they acting this way? When did the change begin? There's always been a level of... respect, from the Colony towards me.

Is it the Vestibule and Nave combo? Does it influence my family? If so, I'm not sure how comfortable I am with that... I'll need to think long and hard on this before my next evolution.

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Chapter 994: Be Civil

When Sarah woke, she felt a deep sense of peace. She remembered this feeling, from before, when the rage had burned itself out and she had collapsed, exhausted, in a tunnel. When she woke, the fear and

anger were blessedly muted, consumed. It wouldn't last long. She would slowly rouse herself to find the signs of battle all around her, claw marks dug into the walls, remnants of Biomass hanging from the ceiling and no idea what had happened.

From there it was only a matter of time until she succumbed again.

This time, it was different. She woke surrounded by ants, the warm light of their healing magic covering her and offerings of food placed in front of her. She ate gratefully. Replenishing her energy would be just as important as the healing.

With food in her stomach and the worst of her wounds on the mend, she felt comfortable enough to stand up and make her way back toward the ant fortifications. No doubt the fighting continued somewhere, but she was not ready to contribute, emotionally or physically.

She looked forward to a break. Some time to relax and relish this sense of peace would be wonderful.

It lasted a full ten minutes until she remembered something she really shouldn't have forgotten.

Jim!

He'd reached out to her just before she'd fallen asleep. Surrounded by the Colony, there was no chance he would be able to get away!

Immediately, her peaceful bubble was burst, replaced with guilt, sadness, anger, and a sick, gnawing fear. Jim was her friend. Had been her friend. She'd spent years with him. Held captive by the gorgari, they had relied on each other for support. He'd been the first and only other reincarnated monster she'd ever seen until Anthony had dropped in to disturb their quiet little world.

They had supported each other, laughed together. For *years*.

Then, he'd betrayed the Colony. Despite the terrible consequences, the eggs and larvae who had been killed without ever really having a chance to live, it was difficult to think of her friend as a villain. She couldn't flip a switch and delete the memories she had of him.

In some way, she understood that he'd done it for her. How and why his mind had twisted to that point, where he thought his actions were right, she had no idea. What he'd done was so alien, so removed from the Jim she thought she had understood.

And what would the Colony do? What would *Anthony* do?

They had none of her reservations when it came to Jim. He wasn't their friend, he had been their ally only for a short time. To them, he was nothing less than a killer of the young. She couldn't think of a worse crime in the eyes of the ants.

But Jim wasn't just a monster! He was a person from Earth. Would Anthony really be able to just... kill him? Even though they were the same?

When Sarah stopped to analyse that thought, she realised just how wrong it was. Just a monster? What did that even mean? How were any of the thousands and thousands of ants in the Colony less worthy, less a living creature with thoughts, desires and beliefs, just because they were born in the Dungeon?

And was Anthony the same as Jim? No. The two were fundamentally different. Anthony had dived into his new life as a monster, creating a new existence and bringing his new family along for the ride.

She and Jim had been kindred spirits, uncertain, afraid. Neither had been able to properly adjust to Pangera, or what they had become. In some ways, she felt that Anthony was happier to be an ant than he'd been as a person. Almost as if he were born to be a monster.

Even so... would he really be able to just kill another former human? Someone with similar experiences, similar memories? And what if he did? Would she have the right to ask for leniency? Would it even be right to do so?

Confused and troubled by such thoughts, she wandered the tunnels until she made her way back to the Colony staging grounds. No matter how she thought about it, she couldn't find any good answers. What was morally right had never been clear to her in her previous life, why would this one be any different?

Nothing was easy when sentient beings got involved.

She comforted herself with one thought: Anthony was probably struggling with this just as much as she was.

She walked around the final corner and into the bruan'chii village. There, she found a large gathering of ants around Jim, who had been tied horizontally to a pole. The trapped worm writhed helplessly as Brilliant danced atop him and Anthony, the giant glittering ant, ran circles around him, poking him with antennae and taunting him.

[Gonna tenderise you just right Jim!] he cackled. [The grubs like soft food after all. We wouldn't want to give them an upset tummy now would we? That'd be terrible!]

The crowd gnashed their mandibles, clicking them aggressively as they darted in and out, making it seem as if they would take a chunk out of the worm at a moment's notice.

[How does that feel, Jim?] Anthony taunted. [Are you scared? Feeling helpless? Like a grub? Just wriggling on the ground, unable to protect yourself when the big bad golgari come? That must be *terrible* Jim. Awful! However will you cope? MUAHAHAHAHAAA!]

Sarah watched dumbfounded as the cruel scene continued, with no sign of slowing down.

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Chapter 995: The Return

The justice of the Colony is possibly one way in which they are more alien to other sapient races than any other. What is important to them, what is not, where they are harsh, where they are lenient, doesn't always make sense to the outsider. Some of their penalties could be considered unspeakably cruel in some circles, but the ants don't so much as twitch an antenna.

Their view on forced labour, a common enough practice in the Dungeon, is strangely reticent. Perhaps that isn't speaking strongly enough. They hate it. The idea of 'forcing' someone to work is completely alien to them. After all, why would anyone need to be forced? And if you did force them, would the work produced be any good? Having unwilling workers, producing faulty work, is only decreasing overall efficiency. A waste of time.

No slavery. No indentured workers. Some might say they are a lenient race and try to take advantage of them. Those people would very quickly regret making that choice. The ants themselves do not transgress upon each other, their social cohesion is perhaps their greatest strength, but when others do, their fury is total.

- *Excerpt from "Collective Justice: A treatise on the Laws of the Colony"*

Yesssssss. I can feel it! I can feel the hate flowing through me. It burns... it burns so good! After being suppressed for so long, it is now the time, the rise of Dark Anthony! Finally we have him, the egg-killer, dancing about like a guilty worm full of guilt, pierced by the sweet hook of justice. Everything is now in place to catch the elusive, juicy fish of revenge.

I'm so delighted, I'm not even bothering to mask my mental assault on Jim, broadcasting my descent to all and sundry.

[How do you taste, Jim? Are you delicious? Will the grubs who feed on you grow up big and strong? I want to be sure they won't be tainted by the nutrients of betrayal that are riddled through your entire, corrupted, body.]

[What is wrong with you, Anthony?] the worm dares to lash out at me. [Are you crazy?]

Such impudence!

[You do not speak with Anthony, but Dark Anthony! I will not yield, rest, relent or abide until every ounce of your crimes has been wrung from your evil flesh. One ring at a time!]

[Are you even human?]

[Of course not! I'm an ant!]

Such a foolish question. Does he think the conventions of humankind can protect him? Those things are fragile. In truth, life on Earth was much like life in the Dungeon, if you ask me. The powerless were subjected to horrific treatment in the dark, but most didn't notice because it wasn't directed at them. Similarly, inside the Dungeon, the weak are food for the strong. There is no fear at the top of the chain.

A place that this wretched, wriggling, portent of cowardly doom will never reach!

[Hey, Jim? I hear you wretched worms, with your hearts filled with wretched evil and wretchedness, can regrow when you're cut in half. Is that true? Can we turn you into a Biomass farm and feed our grubs on you forever? Considering what you did, that's almost poetic, Jim. It's so beautiful that I might just cry. At least I would, if every tear in my soul hadn't been cried out after your betrayal!]

I continue to circle and prod the enemy with glee until something breaks into my mental broadcast, shocking me out of the cycle.

[Anthony? What are you doing?]

Sarah sounds absolutely aghast at my behaviour. Not surprising, really, she hasn't been exposed to the Dark One before. The darkness cannot be contained! Not in this, my moment of triumph.

[I am giving this... *creature*... the treatment he deserves! After the evil seeds that he has sown. Seeds of evil, mind you! He watered them with the rich, foamy water of betrayal and they germinated, oh did they germinate, into little sprouts of murder and death. Now, the time has come to reap the harvest, the doomed harvest, of doom! I won't avert my gaze from the terrible acts he has committed, nor will I shrink away from the punishment. It will be equally harsh! If not harsher!]

[Sarah!] Jim cries out, his mind riven with desperation and fear. [You can't leave me in the hands of this madman! *Listen to him*. He's insane!]

[Jim....]

I can see the hesitation and confusion in Sarah, she's torn in multiple directions and it's written all over her bear face. The mammals, with their soft, readable facial expressions and internal bones... so transparent.

In a way, I almost feel for Sarah. None of this is her fault, not her responsibility. And yet....

[Don't let them do this to me, Sarah!] Jim pleads. [I did all of this for you! I wanted to save you!]

And there it is. He still clings to this presumption that he did not act selfishly. Such pish! The darkness within my soul only stirs the stronger at this outburst.

[You snivelling sack of sick! You'll never take responsibility for the murder you committed.]

[All I did was dig a tunnel!]

[And what were the consequences of that, you moron?! Innocent grubs and eggs, destroyed! And for what?!]

[Those were just monsters. How is it any different from you annihilating hundreds and hundreds of them?!]

[You better be quiet now, Jim, or I'll bite you,] I warn him. [You are treading dangerous ground.]

Luckily, for his sake, the worm falls silent as Brilliant continues to poke and prod him whilst skittering across him. I turn to Sarah.

[Sarah, I know you are feeling torn. I know that this situation sucks for you. I know that none of this feels right, or good, or comfortable. But I have to make sure that you understand something.]

She hesitates. The normally cheerful and steady presence that radiates from her is completely muted, replaced by grief and fear.

[What is it?] she eventually asks.

[This is going to be tough to hear, but I have to say it... There is nothing that you can do here.]

I stare at her to gauge her reaction, but all I see is confusion. She doesn't understand.

[I can't just abandon him...] she whispers.

[No, you aren't listening. You. Can. Do. Nothing. This is out of your claws, now. Jim will receive the Colony's justice, and even if you can't stand that thought, even if you fight to the death to save him, you won't succeed. It's over, Sarah. There is only one outcome, now.]

She's beginning to see what I mean, and tears well up in those giant bear eyes. Is it sadness? Is it relief? Perhaps a mixture of both?

[Please...] she says. [Just don't be cruel. For me. Just don't be cruel.]

No cruelty? Noooooooooooooooooo! NOOOOOOOO! Those words are like poison to Dark Anthony, a knife wound straight in the heart! I can already feel my power weakening. The darkness, it's receding, its fading! It's not fair, the time was so short!

[Fine,] I tell her begrudgingly. [It won't be cruel.]

She nods, two great drops fall from her eyes to the ground. Without another thought, she turns and walks away.

[Sarah? Sarah! Don't leave me here! Save me! YOU OWE ME!] Jim screams, but I wall his thoughts away from her and then barricade him in his own mind.

I look up at Brilliant.

"Take him away," I tell her. "Contact the council and get it done. I never want to see this creature again."

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Chapter 996: Approach the Precipice

It's hard to turn my thoughts away from Jim and his eventual fate, but I force my mind to shift onto other priorities. If anything, it's a relief to have him finally caught and dealt with. It wasn't enough for him to betray us the once, he had to run around... *slither* around, and continue to try and bring down the Colony. This situation with the ka'armodo would likely have happened no matter what, but it wasn't helped by Jim spitting his poison into their ears.

As the Colony grew and expanded, having someone ringing alarm bells wherever we went would have been absolutely disastrous. In some ways, I can understand it, even if it infuriates me. Unable to accept he was wrong to betray the Colony, he had no choice but to double and triple down. He could never admit to himself that what he'd done was a horrible crime, that he had become a killer, he had instead run away from that realisation. In his mind, the Colony was bad, evil even, and with that 'fact' locked into his head, he had no choice but to act as he did.

But understanding and sympathising are far apart.

Good riddance to bad worms! We are moving on with the numerous challenges that face us. The greatest and most urgent issue of all, disposing of the literal *tons* of termite Biomass left over after the battle.

For once, the damn beetles stuck around to fight rather than retreating. The number of termites destroyed in the fighting runs up into tens of thousands, easily. Perhaps even more. I incinerated a good chunk of those, but there are plenty left to deal with the old fashioned way.

It's time for a good old fashioned, post battle feast!

[Let's dig in, everyone!] I announce to my pets.

The four of us merrily dive into the food, Tiny quite literally so, swan diving into a nearby mound of Biomass. What are you, a billionaire duck in a money bin? Have some damn class, man! I begin to shovel in the food myself. It isn't great quality, as Biomass goes. The termites aren't highly evolved or heavily mutated by monster standards, rarely even reaching tier five even, but we are still able to extract some value as we pack our stomachs fit to bursting, which takes a bit of work.

I can remember hoovering in food with Tiny, back when it was just the two of us. It felt like we could eat a mountain of Biomass back then, eating until we couldn't move and sleeping it off afterwards. With Crinis and Invidia added to the mix, in addition to our vastly increased size, we could just about pack away a *literal* mountain now. Crinis has three mouths and an almost bottomless appetite, only stopping when her reserves of shadow flesh are completely stocked. Invidia keeps his stomach in a pocket dimension and he has an inordinate amount of space in there. When his creepy mouth appears in thin air and chomps down with those vicious teeth, the food just vanishes, never to be seen again as his green eye glows with wicked satisfaction.

I can practically hear the 'yessssssss' he purrs out with every bite.

Once both of my stomachs are full, I collapse onto the ground, my six legs splayed out in all directions. My gaster has swollen to an absurd size, so big I'd have to drag it behind me if I wanted to walk anywhere. Tiny has finally emerged from the pile, his belly so round it looks like he inflated a beach ball in his guts. Even Crinis is reduced to a floppy pile of dark goop on the ground as she struggles to digest everything she's taken in.

We worked hard for the Colony. Good job, team.

[Alright,] I groan at everyone. [We should have some Biomass stored up now. Everyone should spend and upgrade, check for Skills that need to be moved along as well. I know it'll take longer for you guys, but the final sprint for tier seven is getting close, we want to be as far along as possible so we don't trip along the way.]

I couldn't stand it if one of my pets were to die full stop, but dying as you close in on the next evolution seems even more cruel. After striving for so long to reach the next step, and relative safety, falling at the final hurdle would be the worst.

Mind you, evolving probably doesn't mean further safety for me. I can still feel the claws of the Ancients in my guts, Calling me deeper. When I evolve, that feeling is only going to get worse. Still, if I can help protect the Colony, I'll do it.

Bah! This is no time to get depressed about the Call. I'm about to complete my perfect evolution! Achieve my final (for now) form! That sweet, sweet bonus energy will be mine, and for an evolution of this size, that bonus will not be small! I can hardly wait.

Checking my mutations, I can see that the only thing left is the entire business district. My commercial empire has four major components, each of which needs to be taken from +25 to +30.

I'm so eager to get the process done, I almost can't be bothered to check the options all that much. What do I want to emphasise, how do I want to proceed? Does it matter?! We are talking tier seven evolution! But of course it matters, and I force myself to slow down and consider my choices.

This is a big spend of Biomass, after all. Five hundred and sixty. I have more than enough in the tank, with a good chunk left over. With a little luck, I'll be able to amass a nice stockpile so I can mutate any reset parts of my body to a good standard straight away. For my Concentration Gland, I want to emphasise the 'thickening' aspect that I've taken on, and the weakening aspect of my Stimulation Gland. Making the acid more dense and potent is never a bad choice, especially since doing so increases the potency of the other effects that have been added to the mix, such as the binding and mana-eating parts.

For the Nozzle, I want to increase its ability to aim, since that is the primary function, after all. Pressurising the shots to give me more range is nice, but I'm no sniper, I have tough defences and can afford to get in close.

For the Acid Gland itself, I want to emphasise the propagating aspect that I mutated recently. Having my acid be able to replicate itself to a degree is nice, keeping the damage going for a longer time after a single hit. With the acid binding and sticking to the target, then multiplying itself once it's on there, the potential for big damage from each shot is high.

When it's all said and done, this is what I have:

Propagating Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +25 -> Spreading Binding Mana-Feasting Acid Gland + 30

Guided Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle +25 -> Flexi Hyper-Pressure Scattershot Acid Nozzle +30

Thickened Draining Acid Concentration gland +25 -> Enriching Draining Acid Concentration Gland +30

Exhausting Thickener Acid Stimulation Gland +25 -> Viscous Enfeebling Acid Stimulation Gland +30

Nice.

And here we go!

...

CHALLAPABAPPLE! MY DAMN FINANCIAL EMPIRE!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 997: Shake It Off + 998 Give Me a Reason

Yesssss.

YESSSSSSS!

Tier six perfection has been achieved. My form. My FINAL form. It has arrived at last! Looking over my status, I admire the wall to wall +30's. Every mutable organ in my body has reached its peak. Nothing more can be done until my next evolution. Then, the rat race will begin again. At tier seven, it'll cost me

a hundred and sixty five to upgrade just from +30 to +35. For anything new, and anything that I reset, the journey from zero all the way to the new max will be an even more harrowing expense.

At least this time I have an opportunity to build up a reserve, something I haven't really been able to do before. The Colony helped out a lot last time, but with my frequent hunting trips and this war with the termites, getting food hasn't really been all that difficult for me. My family is becoming more and more independent, allowing me time and space to go chasing food and experience. Throw in the odd major conflict and I've got everything I need to rocket up to the next tier!

Speaking of which, what is my level?

133?!

No way! What in the heck?! That's insane! I must have killed way more termites than I thought I did... Or they're giving more experience now. Either way, I've jumped up a great deal! Let the Skill points rain down on me! Gweheheheh.

My next evolution isn't that far away! At one sixty, I'll be able to make another quantum leap forward in strength. I can't wait to see what sort of options I get. Oh boy. The feeling of going to sleep and waking up as a whole new, better and more capable you is just so addictive.

Although, I have other complications now....

My core will be getting stronger, which is obviously great news, giving me more evolutionary energy and a higher level of MP. That'll also mean that it'll become harder and harder for me to go higher in the Dungeon. Right now, I can still go to the second stratum. I might even be able to visit the first during a wave, but the surface is right out. I'll never feel the sun on my carapace again.

If I double the strength of my core? Perhaps even the second stratum will be off limits for me. I'm not sure if I can take that... all the grubs are in the second stratum!

Nooooo! My precious grub time! How will I live if I can't be healed by the pure and innocent joy of larvae tickling? I-I'm not sure I can bear the thought of it. I won't be deprived like this! I have to tell the council to start egg production in the third stratum as soon as possible. I will move heaven and earth to ensure that this isn't taken away from me... being formless was never an option!

The other thing I have to deal with is the Call. Damn Ancients. They think they're all that. The constant yanking on the guts of my soul is no more pleasant now than it was when it started. Like an itch that can't be scratched, it's almost impossible to ignore. If they think I'm going any deeper at tier six, then they're outside of their minds. I'm too weak to explore the fourth stratum, forget about the fifth. I feel like they're just trying to get me killed. If they happen to approve of my next evolution, I expect things will only get worse. Which sucks!

If I evolve and then head back up to the third to help with the demon problems... yuck. I don't even want to think about it, it's distressing.

I calm myself down over time and then get to checking in on my allies. The three of them are doing well, each of them having reached a level around a hundred. They too are closing in on the next milestone. It'll be an exciting time when they make it. Having the four of us at the seventh tier will create a far more formidable team than we are now.

With all of us having completed our round of mutations, we spend the rest of the day resting and healing up. It's a nice, relaxing time, chatting back and forth and needling each other, combined with the occasional light snack.

Spending time together like this, with just the four of us, is like food for the soul. The companionship I get from Crinis, Tiny and Invidia is something that I enjoy with all of my heart. I'm almost sad when it comes to an end and we find ourselves largely recovered.

Levering myself up onto my six legs, I lead the group to go and visit Sarah.

I find her in a nearby chamber, still injured, being fussed over by a full team of healers who clack their mandibles and apply waves of their specialised magic to her massive frame.

I try to engage her in some light chat, but I can tell her heart isn't in it. Subdued and dispirited, she is clearly a little lost in her own thoughts and so I back off and give her some space, but not before leaving her with some encouragement.

[Nothing that happened was your fault,] I reassure her. [Whether or not you believe it, that is the truth. But remember, you are always welcome among the Colony. You're part of the family. If you never fight again, that doesn't change.]

And I leave her with that.

We make our way back out of the safe zone and head towards the front lines. The twisting roots of the Mother Tree curve and wind around the tunnels as we travel, but it's different now, more vibrant. The roots glow with life and there is more greenery than before. A sign of the Tree pushing more energy out now that the roots are no longer under threat?

The other noticeable change to these tunnels is the presence of the bruan'chii. They pop up here and there, smaller ones and Grove Keepers alike, tending to the sprouting gardens and interacting with each other in their own curious, silent way. It's strange, actually. I can feel the mana thickening down here. The energy that permeates the atmosphere is beginning to *thrum* with vibrant life.

It seems as though the Mother Tree and the ecosystem of... herself, that she creates down here actually works to... I don't know... enhance? Circulate? Brighten? Whatever she's doing, the mana is becoming more rich, which I'm going to assume she then begins to pull back into her roots.

No wonder she's been struggling. Cut off from these tunnels, the closest to her roots and trunk, she hasn't been able to utilise this harmonious cycle to her benefit, depriving her of all-important energy.

When we finally reach the front, right on the edges of the mountain the tree dominates, we find the Colony has already entrenched to an absurd degree. Thousands and thousands of ants teem through the tunnels and along the shoreline, building walls, traps, medical centres, tactical headquarters, resting chambers, Biomass storage and all of the other things necessary to prosecute the defence.

But I'm not here for the defence. I'm here for the offence.

In the distance, I can see, over the crystal blue waters of the lake, the white spires of the fungal gardens. Ripe for the burning.

Victor could feel a headache coming on. She paced around the model the carvers had made, studying every intricate detail over and over again as she ponders the upcoming battle.

The model itself is a work of art. Over twenty metres tall, it showed every twist and turn of the tunnels beneath the Mother Tree and every connection shared with the termite nest. The issue was, there's a *lot*. The invaders have been hard at work for a long time, building underground links between the two mountains. The termites were almost as adept at tunnelling as the Colony itself. The number of connections is one thing, the huge area they covered was another. The front between the two opposing colonies had expanded dramatically and keeping track of all the work going on is more than her brain could handle on its own.

"I need to evolve," she says quietly, "more brainpower would be so helpful right about now."

"More brainpower? You want to be a mage?" comes a potent scent from nearby.

Victor turned to see Propellant wander into the war room. The fire mage looks mighty pleased with herself after lighting up huge swathes of tunnel while driving the enemy back. Fortunately no-one has told her just how combustible the termite fungus is yet. She'd be insufferable.

"For some reason, I suddenly remembered that more brain power doesn't necessarily mean smarter."

"Hah! Don't be snide. You're just jealous of my crushing intellect and burning passion! What do you need to be smarter for anyway? Maybe this grand mage ant can help you out."

"I need to create a battle plan across dozens of fronts involving hundreds of thousands of combatants."

"... maybe Coolant is somewhere nearby? That sounds a little more like her thing."

"I thought as much."

The general can only sigh and turn back to her careful study of the model. Having this level of detailed information was a massive help, but for this battle, it couldn't be trusted. Scouts had done their best to map the enemy tunnels as far as they could, but with an enemy so adept at shaping the earth, and driven by such a cold intelligence, there was no saying what traps could be in store for them.

If she sent ten thousand ants down one tunnel, they might get flanked by twenty thousand termites leaping out of a concealed entrance! Or new passages could be dug after the scouts went through. The very thought of being outmanoeuvred in a tunnel war was unthinkable!

Curse these termites! So similar to the Colony, and yet so... so evil!

The instinctive hatred between the two monster types affected her thoughts in odd ways. She'd be glad when this was over and the termites were exterminated once and for all. How anyone could tolerate their existence at all, she had no idea.

"Have the scouts managed to find the Queens?" Propellant mused as she began to wander about the model. "If we can find them and burn the place down, we'd have solved our problems, no?"

Victor flicked her antennae with derision.

"You think they just leave their Queens out in the open? Do we? Obviously they are going to be held in the heart of the nest, as secure and safe as possible. If we could get there so easily then I wouldn't be so worried about this battle."

"That's not quite true though, is it? A normal monster termite nest might do that, but this isn't a normal nest. This colony is controlled by the ka'armodo, who want access to the queens in order to modify their cores and control the population."

Her mind ticking over, the general turned back to the model, her antennae swaying in thought.

"So there's a chance that the queens aren't being held in the depths?"

"I'm just guessing," the mage shrugged, "this could be right or completely wrong. I just think it's something to consider."

"You make a good point... but unless we can confirm it, then I'm not sure what we can do with it."

Fighting through the tunnels beneath the nest would be painful, but it might take even longer if they had to then fight up higher into the above ground nest. The size of the termite mound was truly impressive, though she was loath to say so. From the bottom to the top, it was over ten kilometres according to their scouting reports. A truly vast amount of space that needed to be explored and conquered before they would be able to win.

At that moment the Eldest strolled into the war room, their massive frame looming over the other ants without even trying. Thankfully the space was built large in order to accommodate the model, so they fit well enough.

"Hey there, squad! Propellant, how are you? Looking forward to burning the place down?"

"Of course!"

"Victor, nice to see you hard at work. Holy moly, that model is nuts! Are there really that many connections between us? They couldn't just build one big tunnel and be done with it?"

"Greetings, Eldest," the general said. The presence of the strongest and oldest of them was always reassuring and she felt a little less pressure around them. "Yes, it's a tangle down there. I've been trying to figure out the most efficient battle plan for our invasion, but it's proving difficult."

"I'll say... what a mess."

The giant, glittering ant circled the model, stepping over the smaller siblings with ease.

"Yeah, that's not going to happen," they finally declared. "Too many unknowns. I'm guessing if we come through there, the ka'armodo will just collapse the mountain on our heads. They don't care how many termites die, after all. As long as they get rid of us, then they can repopulate and get back to attacking the tree."

It was true, but Victor was frustrated.

"Then how are we supposed to assault them? Dig our own tunnels? Reinforce and protect them against collapse? It's hard but we can do it..."

"What? Heck no," the Eldest said, "we should collapse all these tunnels and compress the stone to lock them off. We should be attacking over land. Build a bridge between the mountains and we go in from the top."

"From the top? But that would leave us wide open!"

The Eldest looked at her for a second before patting her on the head with one leg.

"Victor, you've gotten too focused on winning the tunnel war. Yes, they're a colony of digging monsters, just like us, but that doesn't mean we have to fight them in the tunnels."

She was confused.

"It doesn't? If we don't enter the tunnels, then how do we defeat them? They won't come onto the surface to fight us will they? Not with the ka'armodo controlling them..."

"Oh, they'll come up," the Eldest assured her with a pleased clack of the mandibles. "If we give them a reason, they'll come boiling up and straight into our jaws."

Chrysalis

Chapter 999: They Go Marching

The Colony has distinguished itself in battle across its existence, displaying sharp tactics, excellent training and sound strategy at all levels of warfare. Such a thing is highly unusual for a swarming monster type, but the irregularly high levels of intelligence obviously made it possible for the ants to accomplish many things that are atypical.

In small numbers, they are smart. They move quickly, engage carefully, retreat expeditiously and attack aggressively when the opportunity presents itself. The caste system provides them a strong balance of specialists, making teams of ants well positioned to handle a wide variety of situations.

In larger groups, they become very deadly. Capable of digging and fortifying positions in a matter of hours, they can be expensive to dislodge the moment they gain a foothold. With a strong command structure and perfect discipline, they present no weaknesses, no chinks in the armour. They must be confronted directly, head on, or not at all. Only a skilled and determined force can match them.

In a swarm, they show their true might. The endless tide of ants is a foe like no other that I have ever witnessed. The concentrated power of their collective is overwhelming and they will sweep away whatever lies in their path. Against that indomitable horde, I have seen nothing succeed, and I have tried much.

- *Excerpt from the war diary of an unknown general.*

Advant watched as a continuous stream of ants marched through the portal, four by four. There wasn't room for more sadly, the big soldiers barely fit, side by side.

The scouts could fit through five by five, and the generals six by six, which helped.

The Colony was going all out in its assault against the rivals they had found here in the fourth stratum. Every member of the family felt the burning rage within their inner core, an unsettling anger that would

not end until either they, or the termites had been put to rest. As always, the Eldest had the right of it, they could not both exist on Pangera, one had to go.

Despite the muscles in her face going stiff, she maintained a strict salute, her antenna bent to her head as rank after rank passed her by. Tier fives and fours, these represented the best of what the Colony had left to offer, the sixes already here and involved in the fight. From what she'd heard, the battles above had been intense, a great deal of new territory had been conquered for the family, new demon cities brought into the fold.

Which meant experience and Biomass flooding into the warriors of the Colony. More powerful Soldiers, Mages, even the core shapers had reaped a rich harvest in the fighting above. Along with the victories that had been won here, the Colony continued to develop at a frightening speed.

Still, she couldn't wait for it to be over. When the enemy had been put to rest, its queens destroyed and brood fed to the larvae, they could retreat back to higher in the Dungeon, concentrate on developing their holdings, refining their advancements. With the added security of having the Mother Tree locked in as an ally, the Colony would finally have a chance to catch its breath.

At least she hoped so.

More and more ants marched past. From the flashing light of the portal they emerged, turned to meet her salute, and then vanished down the roots and underground, on their way to the front. This would be the largest force the Colony had gathered in its history, the largest battle they had ever fought.

When she'd seen the numbers, she'd been shocked to her core, but had been assured that this was what it would take. Nothing short of overwhelming victory could be accepted here, anything less would lead to a protracted fight that would distract and divide the Colony.

Half a million ants would join the assault. An unprecedented gathering of ant might.

Some of the tier fours were fresh recruits, graduates from the academies in the first stratum! The Colony was going all-in.

When the last of the reinforcements had passed her by, Advant sighed and flexed her sore antenna, grooming it carefully to settle her nerves. She should be confident, the Eldest was involved in the attack, along with all the most powerful fighters in the Colony. Surely they couldn't fail, not with everything that they'd brought to bear.

Even the Mother Tree had committed the upper limit of what she could spare. Powering the gateway to bring this many monsters to the battle hadn't been cheap, or easy. Nothing was being held back.

Unexpectedly, the gate flashed again, and through it came something she hadn't expected to see. Humans, golgari, a few folk, each with their spears, shields and matching uniform. The ranks weren't as neat as the ants had been, the precision wasn't there as they turned to salute her, but from them she could sense a vibrant fighting spirit. Mixed in amongst them were the brown robes, floppy antennae attached to the hoods. The preachers had also come.

The Colony had specifically not made any requests of their allies for this fight. Yet here they were, answering a call that had not been made.

Most shocking of all, at the end of the column came five ants, each bearing an individual on their back! Strange saddles had been attached to them and the riders sat comfortably, perhaps even proudly, atop their... steeds?

"What on Pangera is going on here?" she demands of the passing ants.

"Cavalant reporting, general," the lead ant snaps out a quick salute. "We are the inaugural ant cavalry division. The generals required all legs on the tunnel floor so we have been taken out of training and sent to help."

"You're still in training?" Advant asks dubiously. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

"We are. Isaac here was the first to gain the class change that allowed him to ride on an ant, but others have followed since. We are still working things out, but we will be an asset on the field, I can assure you of that."

"Very well. Report below."

"I will, general."

The bizarre ant cavalry followed behind the foot troops as they marched down and into the tunnels below. Still not quite believing what she was seeing, the Soldier followed in their wake and watched as the troops were broken up and deployed along the front, generals waiting at intervals in the tunnels to direct each battalion, each unit, each squad to the correct position.

This battle was going to be short, vicious and sharp. A hammer blow to break the enemy once and for all.

Advant wandered the lines, talking to the many ants she encountered along the way. It was incredible to see so many fighting fit members of her family assembled in one place. On the surface, everything appeared calm, but down here in the tunnels, every inch of ground seethed with ants. Every caste was here. Almost all of the council members as well.

The tunnels were packed. Every chamber was packed. Ants were climbing on top of each other to make space. Ants were sleeping, engaged in torpor, standing right on top of each other. She could barely move for all the bodies packed into the staging grounds and it went on, and on, and on.

Soon, this heaving tide of chitin and fury would be unleashed upon the unsuspecting termites and ka'armodo not so far away. They wouldn't know what hit them.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1000: White as Snow

A cold wind blew. It cut through the empty street, and through the lone figure who staggered through the chill, a package tucked under one arm. The small person pulled a tattered coat tighter around their slight frame as they looked around, seeking something that they soon found.

A familiar sight, a familiar door, though it had looked different in years passed.

Back then, a family had lived here, some of the time. The Father, frequently away, the Mother distant and cold, like a winter wind. Less like a home, more of a hotel, with its comings and goings. It lacked the

warmth of welcome, the comfort one sensed from a door with someone waiting behind it. There was almost never anyone behind it.

The boy though, he was always there, even when the others weren't.

It wasn't so bad, he often thought to himself. People led busy lives, there often wasn't enough energy left to tend to those around them. Many lived in worse conditions, much worse. Besides, what was the use in complaining?

Especially when you've got a job to do.

He walked over to the house and leaned into the gate, forcing it to swing open with a creak. Sounded like it was getting rusty. Likely it was. He'd tend to it tomorrow maybe, or the day after. He needed a good sleep before anything else.

Well, he needed a meal, but he tried not to think about that.

A key was removed from a pocket and with a metallic clack it turned in the lock. The door opened to a dark corridor. As he always did, the boy leaned forward to check for any mail. It had been some time since he'd received a letter from his parents. Perhaps it was a little ungrateful of him, but he didn't even need a letter at this point, a little money would be more than welcome.

It had been some time since he'd had that, too.

But there was nothing, as ever lately. With a quiet shrug, the boy stepped inside the house and closed the door behind him, ensuring the lock was turned afterwards. He wouldn't make that mistake again. His legs still ached when it was cold. And it was cold now.

"Holy moly," he winced, "that stings."

Half hopeful, half resigned, he tried to flick the lights on, only to have his fears confirmed when his surroundings remained dark. At least something had been learned. The number of 'final warnings' that one received before the power was shut off, was six.

A good, solid number. He couldn't begrudge them, they'd given all the notice that could be reasonably expected. The lack of cooling in the fridge wouldn't be a problem, since there was nothing in it, but the heating would be an issue.

The winters were cold, that was one thing, but his sisters would really struggle without any warmth.

Speaking of.

'Hup!'

He hefted the package once again and began the climb up the stairs. Each step was more of a struggle than usual, and it became harder to ignore the gnawing hollow in his stomach. He powered through.

He wouldn't be caught napping though! Not yet!

When he reached the top step, the boy pumped his fist in triumph. Then he staggered as the strength left his knees. But he righted himself! Then pumped his fist again, but more restrained the second time around.

It might have been easier to house the girls on the ground floor. However, only in this room, upstairs, was there a window that got the right light. The price was worth paying, he decided.

Still firmly clutching the package, a bundle of newspaper wrapped around something squishy and wet, he made his way to the room at the end of the hall. Unfortunately he didn't account for the darkness and stubbed his foot on the side table.

"Dammit!" he yelled.

A few hops later he entered the room and a tired, but bright smile spread across his face. On the table, the girls, his sisters, were hard at work. The scouts and foragers were busy, despite the dropping temperature, they were looking for food, eager to provide for the queen and support the family.

He hobbled over to the table and hastily unwrapped the package. A steak, the last food he could afford, even then he'd needed a discount from Mr Balney, the local butcher. It wasn't much, but the protein would keep the family going for a while yet.

Holding the meat in one hand, he carefully lowered it down into the open topped foraging area. He lay it down in a corner where none of his sisters would be crushed and watched with delight as they quickly swarmed to the area.

Antennae tippy tapped against the meat, scouts testing and assessing before they attacked with hunger. Mandibles pinched away tiny segments of meat that the workers then devoured. With food safely stored in their abdomen, the scouts then turned and rushed back to the nest.

He watched as they sprinted back on six legs, to be welcomed by the other members of the family with a hero's welcome. The workers swarmed around the scent the scout had released and then began to follow the trail back to the food.

In moments, a column of workers had formed, rushing along the line of scent to the food. Soon, the meat was covered in ants, using formic acid to break down the steak to make it easier for them to ingest.

Each member of the family was part of a unit. They supported each other, worked together, were always there when they were needed.

"Must be nice," Anthony smiled.

He watched with satisfaction as the meal was devoured, transported back inside the nest where the food would be dispersed amongst the larvae and provided to the queen. The young would grow big and strong, enter their cocoons and then emerge as new workers, ready to support the family and ensure the next generation would be born.

Night began to draw near as the hours passed, and the boy grew weary. He lay his head down on the desk and continued to watch the activities of his family.

He was so hungry, he felt so weak. But that was fine.

He just needed a little rest, tomorrow he'd get something to eat. The family had been fed, that was the most important thing.

As time ticked on, he became lulled by the silent bustle of the ants, until eventually, finally, his eyes drifted shut, and sleep claimed him.