

The Everything Room

Initially it was good to be in deserted tunnels, away from the constant scurrying over others, in turn being walked upon, momentary touching of antennae and the constant interplay of scents that formed a permanent network of information. They were creators and carriers of information swimming in a sea of further information, picking up a piece here, re-scenting it elsewhere. Large conversations or planning sessions were a hectic experience. Individuals running over and behind, scenting their points from a place where the message would travel over those who needed to hear it, then running to catch the scents from others. Angryfood often wondered if anyone ever actually made decisions. All of their bodies responded to the information they received without thought, just as he had responded to the recent rallying call. It wasn't as if someone decided and the rest responded, everyone simply reacted to the information they had to hand, and things got done.

Here, in the quiet, with nothing but the earthy subterranean air washing over him with no messages, no imperative actions, all that was left was the echo of all that information, the ripples that traveled through him, slowly quietening. If he stayed here long enough and let the old one travel ahead, would there be anything left when those ripples stopped? How long would it take? Would he get hungry? He felt scared for a moment and remembered Tunnelcool's warning. Why was this mad old creature taking him away from what kept him working and moving? Did his new mentor really know what he was doing? If they got lost he could see them slowly winding down, dying through lack of stimulus, lying in a tunnel full

of flat meaningless air desperately trying to fill it by scenting to each other ‘move!’, ‘move!’, ‘move!’, but finding that it wasn’t enough.

‘Nestling? You smell like a grub that’s had its intestines sucked by a careless farmer, you are not dying, what is the matter?’

He started to explain, his vocabulary being entirely unsuitable for the task at hand.

He didn’t need to scent much.

‘Separation fear? Have you never been this far from the scent mass? Yes, I forgot, I was rash.

It is a scary experience when it first happens and there has been less and less reason over recent generations. Our system of communication means that unused patterns degenerate quickly and are forgotten, that is why the colony is in so much danger, we have become insular and the outside world is not so constantly reinforced within our communication. It is being forgotten. I should have introduced you to a tree foraging team first, there are few of them left but they would have given your body a taste of separation.

‘You will not die, your mind will not become nothing and disappear on the breeze. You carry within you all you need to survive without the colony. Not that we would want to for long, but we can.

And your fear will pass. It had better; we have much further to travel’

Angry food clambered onto his mentors back, placing his face and antennae directly over and in front of his mentors. ‘Where? What will we do? Why me?’

‘Why you? Because I met you and you are here! You are not someone else are you? Foolish question. Where? Possibly very far, but first somewhere very close. Here.’

The old-one lifted a piece of dried matted fungus, revealing a fissure.

“And what will we do? Quite possibly we will save the entire colony from imminent destruction at the hands of the breeders. Now follow.”

With that he quickly scurried into the small fissure, forcing Angryfood to clamber backwards to allow their progress into the narrow entrance. Angryfood followed, feeling somehow like a spectator and not realizing that his mentor was trailing an undetectable scent that was acting like a leash, furtively working into Angryfood's body and mind, pulling him along. In the mind of his mentor this was not just coercive but was intended now for efficiency, ensuring that Angryfood's hesitancy did not cause him to lag behind and hence get lost in the complex and narrow passageways they now found themselves in. He also knew that it meant nothing anyway. He too was following a leash, one of the path of things. Angryfood's personal thoughts about the functioning's of the colony and how they all simply reacted automatically to the vast information system they both created and relied on was exactly how his mentor felt as well, but he extended it to include all life and experience. There were no choices for anyone. The weather did not make decisions, it responded to moisture and temperature. Plants and the fungus did not decide to grow in one place or another; they rode on the cause and effect of the weather, terrain and conditions they faced. He too did not make decisions, although there was an illusion that he did.

For Trapper though there was another advantage to this way of thinking. It allowed him to be at peace with the events he was about to unleash. It was an important and inevitable act that would change the lives of millions, not only in this colony, but also in another similar colony, forgotten by almost every individual here under the 'Scryat tower' and certainly never known by this young apprentice. The destiny of the two Colonies was about to clash and who could tell what the result would be.

He turned his attention back to their route. Somewhat perversely to his beliefs he wanted to be sure he didn't take a wrong turn. His defense for this twisted paradox of no choice yet the fear of error was always that his playing the part, acting the role of the attentive choice maker

was also an inevitable part of the whole flow. Just like every other thought he had ever had, it was all bound to happen. Often you just had to stop worrying about it and just get on with enjoying the ride. So he did, left, left, right, sometimes clambering along the roof when the floor became slippery or a chasm appeared until finally, thanks to fate of course, they arrived at a wall. He pushed hard and it pivoted aside.

He released Angryfood from his spell before they entered the room beyond, allowing him to approach in his own time, aware of the awe inspiring nature of this space and its inhabitants. It was well lit in comparison to the outer tunnels and the hidden route they had followed. Angryfood moved his antennae over the rim of the doorway, where the rock might allow scents to linger. Recognizing that the door was almost never used yet still clearly part of his colony, he put his head inside, testing the air. There had been little or no conversation in the room. Some sense of deep concentration hung about mid height, and a few clear images that seemed to have no relevance to the situation at hand swam thickly through the air around him. One of these scents communicated the compulsion to head south and closeness to the river, another caused his front legs to tap a fast rhythm on the hard floor, but meant nothing else to him. He hated that, it only meant he was being influenced by scents vastly outside his vocabulary. It made him feel inadequate.

What struck him most was an underlying aroma, and the only thing he could comprehend of that was that it simply, yet unbelievably, smelt of everything.

The walls seemed to be filled with some form of racking which was set sideways so that each rack would slide out from the wall, row after row. He knew this because a colony member, slightly strange looking, swollen around the neck had pulled one out and was examining what it contained. Also, the room was vast, although its roof was low. Its size and the fact he

could scent everything he had ever known and much, much more besides, all in one place filled him with a terrifying sense of scale.

He felt tiny, yet knew he had to find the courage to enter so moving cautiously he stepped inside and then quickly scrambled to the ceiling where he felt safer.

‘Where are we Trapper?’ He had scampered to a point directly above his mentor in a mild state of panic.

‘Trapper?’ His mentor scented the question discreetly; it was the first time the nestling had used this name. ‘Did you name me that just because we met by the Sun-trap or did I earn it for a more thoughtful reason?’

‘First name I thought of Trapper.’

‘Good, best reason. You asked about this place?’

‘Yes Trapper.’

‘Tell me what you think it is’

Angryfood ran down from the ceiling and stood next to Trapper, to experience it from the same perspective. ‘Me? I don’t know.’

‘Stop scenting that Nestling because you always do. Just scent something.’

‘Like a place where everything is stored. The ‘everything room’

Trapper actually laughed, and spun in a circle, his six limbs tapping on the stone floor until he faced Angryfood and rubbed his antennae with his own frantically. ‘Yes Nestling, yes, good. Ha, perfect name, the ‘everything room’. He ran over to one of the distorted creatures nearby. ‘Hear that, this young thing gave your dismal home a name. Make up a scent plaque and hang it on the door. The ‘everything room’” The comments recipient looked up briefly, the tips of its antennae remained rigidly fixed, pointing towards the worktop it had been concentrating on. It said nothing and looked back to its work.

'Boring lot' whispered Trapper as he returned to Angryfood's side.

'Trapper? Is this where Scent plaques are made?' It was unusual for scents to be stored in a permanent form, but it had its uses. Angryfood had heard that there were specially trained colony members who could produce the resinous material that preserved a scent, preventing its decay for years, indefinitely if the creator was skilled enough.

'Yes Nestling and more, much more. This is both a laboratory and a library. It contains special plaques that hold the key to every scent I have in my vocabulary and perhaps three times more again. It is also the only place that parts of your history are recorded, locked into resin, so that if they are no longer retained in the group consciousness we can recall them. Here you can learn of our past, and then cross reference to the scent library plaques to learn how to reproduce the scents, although many take a lot of practice and cause a very painful gland ache. I know.'

'I wish I knew how to read them.'

'You can, there is one I want you to see. You don't need to be able to create the scent to receive the required mental image when reading them.' He headed down one wall, Angryfood following until after about 300 racks they stopped. Trapper edged left and right, leaning close to the wood that fronted each rack and swiftly ran the tip of his forelimb down each narrow series of plaques. Angryfood studied the long scar that ran down the outside of Trappers forearm, where a bladed ridge would be if Trapper was the larger bodied, heavy worker class like himself, but he wasn't, he was slighter of build like the majority of normal colony members. Finally Trapper located the correct rack and pulled it out from the wall.

'The trick is to run the sharp edge of your fore-claw down each column, starting left and working right, just like I did on the title plaques on the outside of the rack. Trail the joined

tips of your antennae behind your fore-claw, and see what happens.’ Trapper stepped back.

‘Try the title plaque first’.

Angryfood did as he was instructed and nearly got it right. ‘500 generations, battle was vital with attacking spikytooth horde, in river chasm?’

‘Nearly, try again, keep your antennae together. And sweep the plaques smoothly.’

He tried again. ‘500 generations ago, the deciding battle against the winged clawtooth horde. Southern river chasm?’

‘Good, that was easy, you won’t be able to recite the main story back to me, you won’t know the scents and some of the images will be distorted, but try it anyway.’

Angryfood edged round the rack to face the columns of plaques that constituted a 500 generation-old story.

As soon as he started scraping his forelimb over the series of small scented mounds he immediately became embroiled in the images that filled his mind. He could vaguely make out the racking through the images and so could keep his place as the story unfolded, but the scene was captivating.

He found himself surrounded by a seething mass of colony-mates, all surging towards a battle line. Those around him had just started to make their way down the side of a rise in the terrain and had a clear view of where the real action lay ahead. Hundreds of huge scythe-clawed, eight-legged, flying beasts had descended upon their battle ranks from a high cavern in the ravine walls that rose up either side of the river ahead of him. His own army was modest, consisting of tens of thousands and although the ravine defenders bodies were twenty times as large as his own and vicious in their murderous skill he quickly realized that it was these monsters who were under attack from his own colony army. Even though these sharp

jawed, heavily bladed beasts appeared capable of splitting the bodies of vast numbers of his kind with single blows. It was clear who would be victorious.

He noticed the larger of his kind, like him, heavy worker class, their anatomy better designed for crushing and piercing were leading the attack. He recognized his place when he saw it and immediately realized that had he written this story it would be taking place down there with the real action. Two further regiments, carrying roped harpoon spears were charging around the left and right flanks, ready to drag fleeing or regrouping opponents out of the air. Occasionally one of the massive defenders would try to gain height, to make another swooping attack, but with each attempt they would find twenty or thirty small black bodies clinging to their legs and flanks, climbing onto their backs, destroying their wings, attacking their eyes.

Two of the defenders could be seen half dead, floating like rafts, drifting down stream towards him, a crowd of his compatriots clinging to, and riding upon its bleeding form as they inflicted their final blows. One held a wing high in the air as the very thing that kept them afloat began to flounder and sink. Not all of them made it back to shore.

Angryfood realized that he must have skipped a column as the image jumped and he was now climbing over the bodies of the fallen, and the defenders were on the retreat back to their cavern. Within the cavern the advantage of flight would be lost for the defenders and their complex would fall.

‘Enough Angryfood.’ He felt the tips of his antennae being separated, the images degraded to vague color and sensation and the library swam fully into focus. Nevertheless the spell was not fully broken and the scents of the battle remained in his system. Angryfood, using skills only his body knew, bashed Trappers forelimbs away from his antennae and then, bracing himself with all four of his front limbs used his rear legs to pin Trapper by the neck, lifting

him bodily from the floor and up against the racking. Then, releasing him, he clambered the open rack in front, and then flipped himself from his elevated position, landing on Trappers back before he could even rally a counter-attack.

He scented straight at trappers face, 'Those larger colony members, the ones fighting at the front, they are like me, larger, and their mouthpieces and forearms are different, like me.

They have the thorax marking, like me. Tell me, was that what I was born for?.'

'Yes nestling, ouch, yes your body remembers, oh yes ouch, steady young one, I enjoy pain but now is not the time to disable me. Too much must happen. Release me, let me, ouch.'

Trapper blasted an unrecognizable scent at Angryfood, forcing him to remember some blissful pain of his own, no less real for its memory status. Distracted, Angryfood's hold relaxed and Trapper forced himself upright and backwards, ramming him into the racking.

They disentangled. Trapper turned and flexed his joints. 'Getting old, nestling, even winning a fight is blissfully painful.'

One of the caretakers had arrived at the scene, scenting dissatisfaction. He briefly examined the plaques on the abused racking. As it moved away, satisfied that no damage had been done it blasted one image-scent at them both. It carried a simple image, a thorn-tree growing. Angryfood's head swam, the tree had sprouted from where its seed had fallen on the dry earth, had slowly become leafy and then over countless ages grew immense and mature, all at a natural pace. It was like he had sat and watched that tree grow for hundreds of generations, yet his visual senses, the insubstantial image of the room he stood in told him it must have happened in mere moments. The message was clear. 'This is history, older than you can imagine, be careful.' and the result was powerful, Angryfood's aggression was now an entire tree's lifetime behind him. He was calm again.

Trapper scented after the retreating caretaker, 'Don't scare the young one with your clever scent-tricks, I need him clear headed.'

Angryfood, slowly recovering from the brief feeling he was 200 generations older than he had been moments before, remembered his line of enquiry. He approached it with less aggression. The battle that had fired him up was where it should be, generations of history past.

'Important Trapper, tell'

'Yes Nestling, in a better age you would have been born 'warrior class' not 'heavy worker class'. Most importantly, physically you are only separated from breeder class by a few moments. This is noticeable from your thorax marking. Trapper tapped Angryfood's upper rear thorax. Born 3 days earlier you could have carried the 'Scryat' marking itself, unlikely but it happens, and then you would have left to found a new colony. Each day either side of the moment of 'Scryat birth' the marking changes a little and those born within 3 days either side have a mark close enough to be marked as breeder class. You my young warrior, born just one shift in marking too late were unceremoniously slid down a tube from within the breeders enclosed tunnels to land with, I don't doubt a hefty thump, onto the floor of the workers nesting site, there to be raised as a the heavy laborer you are today. It is not that act that robbed you of a birthright however, do not be angry for that, you are better here than in there, but the decayed modern ways of the colony have robbed you of your right to be a warrior. That is what your body tries to fight against. And this is what we must change, restore the balance, renew the old ways, fight, die, breed and thrive.

'Question. You are not warrior, yet you fight, and you also healaddict' why? Important, tell.'

'During war, everyone is a potential warrior, except the breeders who then fulfill their purpose, to breed and maintain the colony. Your class would play crucial roles in battle, you

have the reflexes and strength, but most of the colony will fight. The difference is that you would have a daily role, patrolling, defending, seeing off small invasions and subduing threats. It is believed there are no more threats out there, and that fighting is not necessary. The truth is we have to make enemies. We are forgotten here, we no longer forage in large numbers, and we do not attract enemies. We may have to travel to find them, but we will find them, and we will lead them here. First however we must recreate battle in the collective mind of the colony, and for this I have a plan, a plan and allies. We will have a battle unlike any in thousands of generations and it will shake the breeders to their intestines.'

"Trapper, I still do not understand why breeders are dangerous."

"Yes, let me tell you about the breeding class Angryfood. They are a delicate group. Not physically of course, they are very similar to you, but in temperament. They are sensitive to change and prone to thought, contemplation and dangerous introspection. The fact that most heal addicts are Heavy Worker or Warrior class as you now know yourself to be is because you are so close to breeders in nature and so in temperament. This is why you are such a good indicator of what is going wrong and that there are problems in the breeders' enclosure. The correct working colony will keep the breeders separate, hidden away and there is a reason it has always been that way and why it is best left that way.

The colony operates without obvious thought, planning or instruction. That is the nature of colony. The breeders must be kept busy at their task, breeding, else they may begin to interfere. As thinkers they can....let me elaborate.

You will not know this but there was a colony once that did not respond to the warnings we are both now witnessing. The result was disastrous. The breeders, bored and with too much spare time to think, left their private tunnel complex where they were safe from the constant bombardment of build and harvest scents. To begin with they wandered the teeming caverns

and tunnels of their offspring like ghosts. The colony had its business at hand, the scent mass was good, working, all feedback mechanisms keeping the status quo. Then, following a discussion about how cramped it all seemed, especially compared to the style of the breeders tunnel complex, a small group decided to intercept a small party of workers.

They gave them new instructions, directives that did not arise from the natural order of the scent mass. The instruction was to redesign the complex and to open larger spaces. It had no colony purpose other than to fulfill the whim of a bored elite. They started this small work party on this new task, widening caverns, opening tunnels to create vast open spaces. The problem was that the workers heard this new imperative task from those that they instinctively knew to be their creators, they were powerless in the face of their betters. The new instructions were so powerful, and yet also totally outside the natural order of the scent mass that they tipped some sort of balance in the community. The work party spread the scent, expressing with equal passion the compulsion they felt themselves. In time more and more of the colony set to the task, and a new stasis developed fuelled by the eager scenting of these captivated workers. As the growing number of workers took to the task these naïve breeders realized that they had started something they could not stop. Soon the whole colony space rang with nothing but the drive to do the breeders bidding. With the entire population set to the task the very sub-structure of the colony became undermined. You see the breeders could never have reversed what they had started. They were like a sickness and no-one, not a single soul could restart the natural order that had begun thousands of generations earlier with the colonies very first generation doing what they must to survive within their early tunnels. What would you scent to this mass of millions to reinstate the unfathomable complex entity that makes up the colonies scent consciousness? Of course the outcome of this story is made inconsequential by the message. The prime tower collapsed down into the weakened cavern spaces and the colony was lost, but do you see Nestling it is the scent mass you must protect.

The chemistry that exists within the scent mass has its own path, subtly and painstakingly forged one generation after the other. What matters is not the individual. Our colony is the being, and we have been tasked to do what must be done. It is but a process and it may not be the universes plan that we succeed, but the scent mass has finally responded to the impending threat.

“Solution Trapper, this must not happen.”

“I scented you already. We make them breed, the harder the better. And to do that we need a war and you my young warrior will finally get your birthright, to fight and die defending this great colony and our ancient and wondrous scent mass.

Captivated by Trappers beautiful and spiritual logic Angryfood was lost. It was like he had been shown a god. Not the breeders, mysterious in their hidden tunnels, they were just tools, but a wondrous ancient life-force that grew out of their very scent glands, each one a tiny message giver in a sea of antennae. The breeders must not be allowed to become an unstoppable growth in this scent-lord. Nestling had fallen in love with his new God, and was now powerless in the face of the one who had opened his mind, Trapper.”

And so Nestling had not questioned for one second when Trapper dragged him away from that very God and out into the scentless spaces of the outside. It would be painful, he knew, Trapper did not hide it, but they were now tasked the ultimate task, to save the very colony-god-being itself.

LIFO and Callmaker

They had traveled at night of course, their destination known only by Trapper, the details of the task equally esoteric. When, at the end of the day Nestling saw that they would be caught out in the morning Sun, Trapper brought them to a river.

“This will hurt Nestling, you will feel like you are dying but you won’t if you do as I task you. All I can tell you is to stay still, attempting to move may do irreparable damage. Now get into the shallows and leave your mouth-parts above the water so you can breathe.”

Angryfood did as he was told, finding practically no difference in temperature between air and water. Trapper then scooped up some wet earth from the shoreline and then blocked the growing light from his vision by smearing it over both lenses. It felt strange but not uncomfortable.

“Do not move until I scent so. Your insides will swell, particularly your joints. It will hurt. Now I know you Nestling, you may be tempted to enjoy the pain thinking the damage similar to the shell damage you inflict. It is not the same, do not move, you will damage your joints permanently and we will not complete our task.”

Angryfood lifted his mouth parts to scent, “Yes Trapper.”

“Do not move your head either. If the water rises for some unknown reason use your legs to reposition your head, not your neck, the damage will be less severe. Understand?”

Nestling learned quickly and did not move his head when he replied.

He felt the water moving around him and knew that Trapper had joined him in the shallows. They waited, Trapper stopping a short distance away, but far enough up wind to reduce Nestling's desire to attempt conversation. Trapper did not spend the time so lazily however. For most of the night he released what was to Nestling an undetectable scent message. This drifted over Nestling's antennae throughout the heat of the day. Inside, his body responded to this clandestine message by creating a chemical that stored itself in each and every movable joint in his body, and there it waited, primed and ready to complete its function.

“Fire! Trapper look, smoke. Careful, Fire!”

The day had passed successfully, and at nightfall they had headed off as soon as the air had cooled sufficiently. It had taken them the whole night to reach their goal and they had even run through the lesser heat of the next dawn to reach their destination. Nestling had been horrified to find this fire, such a raging source of heat threatening to add to the already dangerous ache that was growing in his joints.

“We’re here Nestling, we made it.” Trapper disappeared over a ridge and Angryfood obediently followed, finding a tunnel.

The growing heat outside had began to feel painful and Angryfood’s leg joints were aching badly, already indicating potential damage. The air in the tunnel did not seem cooler. He clambered over Trapper, having to speed up, creating a burst of pain in his knees as he clambered onto his back.

“This tunnel? Will it be OK? No Tower, we will have to travel very deep! Already limbs ache.”

“Trust me, there is water to stand in, and further preparations have been made.”

With that Angryfood realized that he could feel a distinct breeze, but it was coming from behind them, from the surface, warm and uncomfortable and heading underground towards their destination. He felt unnerved but had long ago vowed to trust Trapper.

Moments after, they reached a junction. The tunnel they traveled down joined another heading steeply from below up to the surface. He stopped. From the down slope of this new tunnel a cold wind raced upwards from the depths and onwards towards the surface. He immediately realized that the smoke he had seen must have been coming from the end of this tunnel. That was it! A huge fire had been lit near the end of the tunnel, he could see its red glow. It was drawing air from deep underground carrying the unmistakable scent of water. He briefly wondered how the fire would be kept burning considering what an inferno it must be in the oxygen rich gale that it created but Trapper distracted him by nearly sealing him into the hot side tunnel with a large wooden barrier. He scrambled through the small gap Trapper had left just before it was slammed into place, blocking the down draft from the side tunnel and increasing the updraft from below considerably. Then without comment Trapper was off with Angryfood eagerly in tow.

Two minutes later they were neck deep in cool flowing water, Trapper relaxing uncommunicative, and Angryfood staring at two figures in the shadows of a small dry island around which the water flowed. Upon this island, other than the two strangers were two stone cauldrons suspended above two small fires. Trapper's silence was beginning to irritate Angryfood who had been scenting him repeatedly, fighting against the breeze. "Who Trapper? Who? Who? Important, Tell!"

Finally, loosing patience Angryfood filled his foraging Sack with icy water, briefly savoring how it cooled his insides and then spat a hard stream straight into Trappers face.

“Impatient Nestling” At last a reply came. “I will introduce you.”

Angryfood waded out of the water behind Trapper and looked closer at the strangers. One of them looked very small, like a true nestling but he was clearly not, simply by his bearing and the clear authority he possessed. The second was the same size as Trapper, smaller than himself, but unlike Trapper this one had the distinct sharp limb ridges and forearms of a warrior, only he was too small for a warrior surely.

“Nestling, this is Callmaker”, he pointed to the smallest, “and this, a fellow warrior, Last-in-first-out”, he indicated the undersized warrior.

“Last-in-first-out? Why?” He held back his desire to question their diminutive size.

The small warrior spoke. “It is an old and honorable name, never-to-be friend of mine. It is to signify the bravery of the one who retreats from the sun last and ventures out earliest at the next dusk. Unlike your name which I believe could mean the Grub who has had too much of its insides sucked out!”

Last-in-first-out spoke like Trapper, too eloquently. Callmaker had not spoken but Angryfood feared he might not even understand him if he did. He wanted to communicate that his name came not from the thrashings of a dying Grub but from and dimly remembered species of many-legged beetle that had tasted delicious but could cost the lives of three colony members simply to catch and provide food for two. They had indeed been angry food, but they got wiped out eventually.

Trapper in true style proved to be his savior again and produced a scent image so fine that it actually seemed like one of these creatures had invaded their island, all three of them retreated into the water before the image faded. He punctuated the image with Angryfood’s name.

Last-in-first-out bowed his forelegs and presented his antennae. “You will be a worthy opponent when we finally meet in battle.”

“What does he mean Trapper. Who are they? This is a warrior but he is wrong. This one is tiny, I could crush him. Tell me, NOW?” Angryfood needed answers and his size and recent reaffirmation of his names true meaning made him bold and aggressive.“

“He doesn’t know?” Callmaker spoke. “Does he know where you’re from Battlebreeze?”

“Battlebreeze? What does that mean? Trapper?”

“That is me nestling. It describes the breeze that carries destructive and disorienting scent messages to your enemy during battle.” Trapper edged round the fire and stood next to Last-in-first-out. He bowed his head to show a white symbol at the top of his thorax, sharp in contrast to his black shell, despite the remaining film of oils or whatever had been used to hide it from view. First-in-last-out bowed too showing an identical marking.

“The markings of the warrior class Nestling, a warrior from the ‘Colony Gertaal’. Your nearest remaining neighbors, not that you’d have heard of us. You could call us cousins.

“Suppressors, enslavers, in some cases destroyers of Colony Tantik, Yussil, among others, both Colonies Scrythan 1 and 2, your nearest relatives with only 2000 generations since your separation, and now enemy to Colony Scryat. I am sorry to deceive you but I know you are intelligent Angryfood. I do not think an apology is necessary.”

With all he had learnt over recent days Angryfood understood the way of it without explanation. No doubt colony Gertaal had been fighting the very malaise that was now developing in Colony Scryat for many more generations. Maybe they were more advanced and the rot had set in earlier. The solution, a constant and ongoing search for new enemies to ensure that the higher caste maintained their breeding cycle, a constant supply of resources, and fast turnover of population, allowing the colony to function. Battle was necessary to protect the scent mass and prevent a disaster similar to the fabled downfall of the colony Trapper had described.

“You think I am tricked Trapper, ‘Battlebreeze’, but the danger you fight is happening to us too, you do us favor by informing me of our fate. Why did you not attack us by surprise? We will prepare and we can win.” With this, Angryfood charged at Trapper, hoping to disable him before his tricky scenting could prevent the attack. Part of him knew the others would be just as proficient with their scenting, and it must make an unbeatable weapon in battle but he was warrior and he would fight and die. He did not think about the risk that this could prevent his return to the colony to warn them, however he was not given the opportunity to either fight or die.

Before he could cover half the distance between himself and Trapper one short blast of scent hit him and the hidden chemicals stored in his joints while he rested in the river completed their task. Immediately he was frozen, not one of his many joints would move. His forelimbs were thrust forward, seeking a weak spot in Trappers armor, frustratingly only one step away yet fully out of reach.

“Now to business. Last-in-first-out, other than protection you are aware why we needed you?”

“Yes Battlebreeze.” With this simple reply he held out a forelimb horizontally in front. Trapper removed a large shining blade from the water behind him and with a swift blow he removed the entire last segment of Last-in-first-out’s limb. The remaining stump oozed fluid for a moment before his body shut the flow to the wound. He stepped back, and Trapper dropped the forelimb into one of the cauldrons.

“Now Nestling, there are a few reasons why I brought you here. This is the first.” He drew a second similar blade from the depths and subjected Angryfood’s extended limb to the same

brutal treatment. Having placed the body part in the second cauldron he turned to check that Angryfood's limb had stopped pumping internal fluid.

Angryfood's limb screamed with pain. This was nothing like the pain he self-inflicted, and this was not just pain, this was now true disability. He was less effective, especially in battle. He was of less use to the colony and he raged with anger. The scent that his frozen body managed to release was crude in it's message but surprisingly skilled in it's creation.

Angryfood did not know where he found the vocabulary for this particular image, but the others recoiled from his inert shape as they witnessed a vast wall of fire sweeping, prime tower high, across the vast dry land above them. For a moment they really believed that this naïve creature could truly sweep destruction across the land, burning all in his path. Trapper recovered.

"Nestling, wonderful! He tapped Angryfood's head in a way that was intended to belittle him, but Trapper was still feeling the fear in his body.

"Do not be too Angry. Let me tell you the other reason I need you." He picked up a stick and stirred the content of the first cauldron, then not finding another handy he used the blade he still held to stir the contents of the second.

"You see Nestling, I need you to return to your colony. First you must take this mixture I am creating here in these cauldrons to those miserable creatures in the 'everything room'. It is in our nature that we need the scent of an enemy for our fighting frenzy to be realized. This cauldron now contains the essence of our colony and will drive your population to a murderous frenzy. This one now contains the essence of your colony and will allow us to once again rise to a fresh assault and ultimate victory. You may wonder why we do not simply raid your Colony base. That will have to wait until the majority of your defensive force is dead, in open battle. The natural defensive capability of the colony structure could

possibly hold our siege at bay and we do not want to be caught outside with nowhere suitable to hide when the dawn comes. No we cannot risk it.

“I think the last question you must want an answer for you is why should you not return home and ignore these plans, go back to normal and wait for us to bash ourselves against your walls?. Well Angryfood, warrior, everything I have told you is true. Your colony is at the brink of disaster. If you wait and we do not come it may be too late. You too need this battle. Also, young friend, what amazes me is that I know you believe you can win.”

The other two strangers, clearly now enemies in Angryfood’s mind, drummed their forelimbs on the rock floor in both amusement and as a taunt.

“And maybe you will surprise us, although as you know we have skills you lack and can have you slashing at imaginary beasts with one amplified scent while we pick you off one by one, but I really do hope you surprise us. We have suffered so few losses in battle that we keep having to exile part of our winning army into those colonies we defeat simply to ensure the breeders feel the need to replace losses. I would say that would help as we could then have another colony to fight but it is so difficult to get close relatives to fight each other, the scent is all wrong you see.”

Angryfood hated listening to this, it was just bragging, but deep down the information was helping to form a plan. Trapper was saying too much and the colony could use this information against them in battle, somehow. The idea was so very close.

A loud clicking noise came from somewhere in the cavern and the three enemies all seemed to become more alert. It was like an amplified claw tap, it drummed within his head, felt at the base of his antennae.

Callmaker spoke. "We must go." He produced two flexible sap-sacks and began to fill each one from the liquid in the cauldrons.

"I have a present Nestling." Trapper washed the large blade he held in the water and from behind Last-in-first-out he produced an arrangement of sturdy straps. Attaching the blade to the strapping and then tightly fixing the whole onto the stump of Angryfood's forearm he stood back to view the finished product. Angryfood's forearm was now replaced, with a murderously sharp blade.

"You look dangerous young-one. Yes, very formidable. Use it well, and if I am to die when our colonies meet I hope the last thing I see is that blade and your impressive bulk bearing down on me. Kill well my friend."

Moving back from Angryfood, Trapper then inscribed four full circles in the dirt of the island floor. In four moons time I hope to see your Colony battle ready. There is a place we passed, after the river, a large plateau. You commented on how flat it was, you remember?" He blasted a memory scent to be sure and the image of the plateau formed in Angryfood's mind. Well it is a short distance from the river, so your army will be rested I hope. That is where we will meet."

The loud tapping came again, a fast pattern of sound, again felt as small waves of pressure in the sensitive nerves at the base of the antennae. And with that sound Trapper, Callmaker and Last-in-first-out stepped backwards into the water and moved away to the surface tunnel. As the echo bounced from wall to wall, and he heard the sound clearly within his skull he realized how they could win.

* * *

The army that finally stepped onto the plateau near the river was the first of its kind. Damage was traditionally done by sheer weight of numbers and this army's weaponry was not unusual. There was very little. While their method of attack had not changed their defense was cutting edge. Angryfood looked around him and saw the sea of black bodies. They're protection, vulnerable but effective, came from nothing more than two carefully fashioned tubes of reed, sealed with wax at the base, entirely protecting their treacherous antennae from the deadly scent weaponry of their aggressors. He knew that they would win, not easily but they had the advantage of both size and numbers. Trapper's army had expected to stop them in their tracks and had not brought a big enough army.

As the first mighty clacking sounds came from the observation points behind, amplified clicks replacing scent as the communication method of war, and he felt their vibration at the very base of his antennae he thought back to that dismal time in the caves with Trapper, LIFO and Callmaker. He thanked Trapper for his careless talk and also for the one important lesson he taught them. They must not fight too well. Returning to the colony with no losses would not solve their problems. They needed casualties for the plan to work and in reality they're reed protectors were easily dislodged. Many of them would fall foul of Trapper and his kin, becoming immobilised, confused or turned against their own by his battle scent. However the most important lesson of all was that they must not destroy Colony Gertaal. Once enough damage had been done they would let them retreat, and when the time came they would be able to fight again.

As he ran into battle part of him looked forward to returning to the scent mass. It felt uncomfortable to deny the natural order, but the battlefield was not a place for tradition, the scent mass must be saved. What then? Was it enough to simply return to the old ways? He

felt that someone, a group perhaps, needed to stay in control, to protect the colony masses, observe its development and to keep an eye on those potentially treacherous breeders. He briefly considered that they should perhaps be forced to stay within their complex. They could be persuaded to breed surely, and if they couldn't leave they clearly couldn't do any damage. That thought made him uncomfortable.

Someone needed to remain permanently outside of the scent mass, constantly objective. Now he had been awakened to the terrible responsibility of awareness of the way of things would it not be selfish of him to dive back into the comfort of scent-life. Who better than him and maybe a collection of his warrior class to protect the masses. They were born to protect after all. He could use these antennae shields to keep himself distanced from the scent-lord. That made him feel even more uncomfortable.

One truth he could not forget. There were new dangers out there. This scent subterfuge that colony Gertaal used could have terrible consequences if they infiltrated the colony again. The breeders could poison the delicate machinery of the masses too easily. No matter how uncomfortable he felt, regardless of the painful sacrifice he would have to make, maybe it was his destiny. If he did it, it would be what the scent-mass wanted.

Momentarily, he brought the bloody blade up to meet his antennae. It would be easy, and after all, in his new role as defender of the colony it would not be the first body part he had sacrificed.