

The Lost Scent of War

By Giles D Hobbs
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Unearthing the Tale

Jenti Tendercase surveyed the underground excavation site in front of her. Her small black, shiny head with its two antennae rising from its peak tracked back and forth through the air, acutely aware of every current as she sampled the ancient scents that swam through the dusty cavern. Her thorax and abdomen, also black and hard-shelled swayed slightly, effortlessly balanced on her six long and jointed limbs. The cavern rumbled and dust, streaming from the roof cascaded over her head and antennae. She looked upwards, cursing the closeness of the launch pad directly through the rock above her. She had chosen its location herself so there was no one to blame. The jet would already be screaming through the atmosphere of her species original home planet. It had long since lost any atmosphere capable of sustaining life so the shuttle would head for orbit to meet with a cruiser that was stationed there for the benefit of the science team. She did not lead the team, but she was the chief intellectual here, a priestess of the 'Temple of Rescent'. She heard the shuttles boosters kick in, giving it the velocity to escape the thin atmosphere. Its pilot would find no interest in the lifeless landscape, having seen it too many times. The vast and still imposing prime tower would now be to their aft, hence out of sight. Whatever their feelings about the view, both the crew and any departing archaeologists from her team would be thankful to get away from the harsh environment where all movement was restricted through airlocks and tunnels full of stale processed air. The process of making this recently discovered cave complex safe to work in had been tortuous. Each attempt at pressurizing a work-zone would reveal yet another small fissure in need of sealing. Yet the perforated nature of these caves was what had provided fresh and

cooling subterranean air for her ancestors until the ancient colony had slowly given way to habitats cooled by more sophisticated methods. The shuttle had possibly already broken from the rarified atmosphere and her staff would not be able to help looking down, she knew this from experience. From orbit this continent was an awe-inspiring sight. The prime towers, one of which she now excavated beneath were widely spaced over the whole landmass and so great was their stature that they were clearly visible, even from space.

She preened her antennae. The clinging dust that had showered down from the roof clouded her senses, overwhelming her with its own rock scent, communicating nothing of interest to her. Leave that for the geologists. She scented to one of her three assistants to bring her a cloth and it approached with intense submissiveness.

“Raise your antennae fool. You know I will not stand for this slave mentality.” The first half of her statement was scent-speech, chosen to ensure obedience in a command of that nature. For the second part she used a series of drumming taps on the cavern floor, heard as vibration in the nerve packed base of the antennae. This was a form of communication that did not immediately communicate their difference in status. It could not influence him directly through his biology, like scent-speech could. It would allow his intellect to respond, and make it possible for him to hear the statement as the reasoned feelings of a colleague and not the unquestionable order of a superior.

The assistant scented back to her, feeling guilty but knowing that she wanted the response in scent speech. Nevertheless it was an act that left him feeling strange. No scent-sensitive worker could ever scent to the ruling classes, not because it was forbidden but simply because the ruling classes no longer had their antennae. It was only possible between himself and Jenti because she was a Priestess in the ‘Temple of the Rescent’, and as such her antennae had been left intact.

“Of course Priestess. Again I am humbled by your respect.”

Jenti dipped her antennae, signaling acceptance of his statement and he moved away.

She had three assistants assigned directly to her. They were all scent-sensitive, yet skilled and educated. Nevertheless they still existed within the strata of society that were nothing more than slaves.

This society of hers was corrupt and evil beyond words. Once, it had been a pure thing, like a complex machine that followed an intensely beautiful natural order. Now, the elite class that ruled the working masses, gave orders, tormented, tortured and destroyed at whim through the power of their most ancient form of communication, scent. The true perversion, and what Jenti despised most was the fact that at one particular historical

turning point, which she was only now beginning to understand, the elite class had first been formed and began the most distasteful practice imaginable. They had permanently turned their backs on the one thing that kept their species in touch with each other. Not just in touch but it linked them right down to the biological level. They had started to amputate their own antennae.

Jenti, as a priestess, was an exception. The clergy of the Temple of the Rescent kept their antennae. Those of her class were meant to be responsible for the continued research into the power of scent and as such needed to be able to appreciate it. Daily medication prevented them from falling foul of any orders or commands that they may encounter drifting from an air duct or self replicating through a crowd at any time and place on any one of the colony planets in the system. What they learnt about the nature of scent was naturally abused by the elite and this was not what her kind had set out to achieve. It had started out, and still was, a religious movement but their knowledge was valuable and if they wanted to continue with the freedoms they were granted and to worship as they pleased they had to pay a price.

She drummed her forelimbs on the cavern floor telling her assistants to pack up, again consciously avoiding the use of command scents.

Once more she surveyed the room. It was a vast cavern with a low roof that had fully collapsed at the far end but closer to where she stood the space had filled with easily removed silt. In its day the chamber had clearly been filled end to end with stories, dictionaries, and learning, all of it stored on small scent-plaques, collected and racked in a meaningful order. Each plaque was designed to be a permanent form of the scents used by the colony and thousands would be arranged to form each story or record.

Many ages ago, when they were still fresh, simply scratching a row of plaques would release a complex stream of scent. She had been lucky to find the story that she now carried in her scent analyser buried at this end of the room. At the end where the roof had collapsed the carefully ordered collections of plaques had ended up in irreversible disarray. They could never be fully recompiled, without an irresponsible level of guesswork, but the fragments allowed them insight into the scents of the time and hence ideas about the lifestyle they had.

She was certain that the story she now carried took place during that exact pivotal point at which their ancient and natural civilization turned a corner and began to slip into this warped and grotesque slave-race it had now become. If they had catalogued and translated the plaques correctly, distilling the minute traces of remaining scent from the encased discs then what she carried was the story of a monster. From their brief initial analysis, the changes that ensued from the events of the story were

initiated by one individual, clearly a deceitful power hungry individual. How else could today's horrors have begun? She hoped to use the example contained within to fuel the revolutionary backlash that she and a few selected clergy were secretly planning. When the colony saw how things used to operate and experienced for themselves the hatred she knew she would feel for the very first of their traitorous tormentors, she and her allies would offer them a way out.

She turned from the cavern and into an antechamber that housed an airlock and elevator system. Two broken bodies lay twisted and twitching in the corner of the room. One of the site commissioners had been displeased with the attitudes of these two unfortunates. They would be easily replaced; the life of a non-elite individual was entirely expendable. Their species could breed with astounding speed, even though only a small group of the population was capable of doing so. The breeders who were kept entirely segregated from normal society were not entitled to do anything else. At least her recent studies were showing that this had been a traditional part of their races culture, but she was not sure that it had always been the tradition to restrict their food and health care when they did not keep up with the greedy demands the elite imposed.

Within moments she was back on her shuttle, resting by one of its thick windows and staring out at the night and at the ancient colony site, which was gigantic beyond imagination. Even the lowest living mounds where the colony members once scurried and worked were immense, growing from the dried earth, like mountains. Her legs flexed as the shuttle lifted from the parched earth and it was soon throttling upwards with some speed.

Nevertheless the nearest mound still towered above her. What was most astounding of all was that these monstrous colony spaces were dwarfed to insignificance when compared to the colony tower itself.

She commanded the shuttle pilot to maintain their current aspect and to continue powering upwards, but informed him he could turn the shuttle and break for orbit after a measured amount of time. The tower wall raced past them and curved out of sight to the right and left. The tower was just too big to view its full width from this distance. The peak of the tower, obviously out of view from this position, would be lost in planets hazy upper atmosphere even if they were far enough away for it to fit into her field of vision. Nevertheless she ordered the pilot to pull the shuttle a little further back from the tower wall.

At least now she was able to see its circumference and she remembered that on her first visit she could not even believe, regardless of its size, that it was an artificial structure at all. It looked too natural. The closest thing she could compare it to would be a vast stalagmite, as if the moons

themselves had melted and dripped their rocky substance to the lands below.

The machine behind her emitted a powerful, low click. Without turning she used her right rear-limb to switch the scent analyser onto its output setting.

The scent story it contained had been fully compiled and was now being reconstructed and sprayed towards her antennae as a stream of image-laden air. As the scents flowed and her antennae twitched her real vision out of the shuttle window began to compete with the images the story was creating in her mind. She had intentionally taken less of her medication today. The story would lose its passion if her scent-vulnerability was too suppressed.

Her real vision, becoming insubstantial in comparison to the image in her mind, showed a large hole that loomed up in the tower wall. The story began in exactly this spot, a visual scene intended to place the characters in time and place. She had seen this part of the story as part of a test compilation and this was why she was starting the story now, as she watched the tower. The tower in the story showed her the same hole, only slightly smaller and housing a complex crisscross pattern of black tubes.

The shuttle speed continued to increase as another of the gaping apertures loomed up. She prepared herself for what she was about to see. The next hole, as vacant as all the others in real life was very different in the story images she was seeing. In the story the hole was not fully visible because it was covered in a vast black living curtain. It was difficult to see any detail but she knew that this black curtain was a construction scaffold, and most importantly she knew it was made up of nothing but hundreds of thousands of living bodies, workers bodies, not dissimilar to her own. She could just make out movement over the curtain as more workers carried clear shiny objects upwards to the top edge of the aperture using their co-workers limbs, heads and bodies as foot-holds.

She knew, because the names mentioned early in the story had appeared in some of the scent they found later, that the creature responsible for setting their once beautiful civilization on its terrible slide into corruption was almost certainly there-now. He was probably already plotting, suspended along with its multitude of co-workers in the cool of the night.

As the shuttle began to turn she was already fully lost in the story. And although she had did not know exactly what was to come she did know that a terrible chain of events was about to start.

* * *

The Scryat colony 'sun trap' construction team was little more than an

interlocking wall of black, rigid shelled, six-legged creatures, spread only one individual thick but many hundreds high and wide. It was reaching the end of a 6-hour work-phase, ready to dismantle before the fierce sun rose above the arid horizon. The scaffold they created formed a curtain over a vast hole within the Prime-Towers wall, itself one of twenty such holes.

Scurrying over this living scaffold structure, small teams of the same creatures carried large delicate looking transparent lenses.

Somewhere near the top of this construction wall, with each of his six limbs interlocked with those of his numerous neighbors was one particular individual, if not unique in appearance then at least in position. He was 187th from the right on the 20th row from the top. He did, nevertheless look somewhat different from the majority. He, like one in 25 of those in the scaffold wall was larger, had more prominent sharp ridges along each forelimb, markedly more corrugated shoulder plates, and a small white marking near where his thorax met his head section, distinct against the hard black sheen of his body-shell. Physical characteristics aside, he was perhaps most individual in that he alone, excepting his neighbor and antagonist, was engaged in a serious argument.

‘Selfish, dangerous, stupid Angryfood! You said you would stop’ The words did not come in sound but as a wave of complex scent directed at Angryfood’s head, more exactly, directed at the two slender and agitated antennae that reared from its peak. His dark, glistening eye-lenses were featureless but his mandibles clicked with frustration. The speaker repeated, ‘You said you would stop’. He instinctively went to move its forelegs to suffix the scent with a time signal, a simple count 1,2,3, communicating in combination with the scent that the sun had passed only 3 times since, but this most basic part of his language was restricted by not having free use of his limbs.

Angryfood studied the upper segment of his own left forelimb, close to where it attached to his dark and rigid thorax and acknowledged the already well healed crack in its hard shell which 2 days ago had been oozing restorative fluid. This new wound would heal and join the many other older scars that intersected his body plates. Yes, he said he would stop.

‘I remember what I scented you Tunnelcool, I had need, complex’. Again he looked to the healing wound that he had personally inflicted in what had slowly become a ritual.

‘What did you use this time Angryfood? Elevator mechanism again?’

‘Not important’

‘Yes important tell!’

Angryfood spat his reply back at Tunnelcool. ‘A sharpstone, not easy.’

‘Attacked own limb with a sharpstone? YOU GRUB!’

This insult, lacking the cautious direction of their previous scent-speech traveled upwards on the rising breeze that surrounded the tower in a wave of acrid smell. As it washed over the bodies of those higher in the construction wall some reacted in agitation to the viscous nature of the insult. They didn’t need to look round to know where it had come from.

The speech-scent would decay in a precise manner indicating the distance of the speaker and their scent organs, the antennae, could test its direction perfectly. In the silence Tunnelcool realised he had not added a name-indicator to the message. He should have clearly stated Angryfood as the intended recipient. There would be nothing to stop anyone hearing it from assuming that the insult was equally meant for them. His antenna thrashed wildly for a moment.

Work in the construction wall was tedious. To relieve this, the workers commonly produced a constant, gentle mix of meditative scents and motivating jaw clacks. Now, curiosity at the reasons behind this outburst resulted in these mingling scent patterns and noises fading, a sign that those around them had become interested in Angryfood and Tunnelcool’s unusual discourse. They postponed their debate until the interest of their neighbors had passed.

As the general murmur began again Angryfood broke their silence. ‘Not me alone. Many do it, is a symptom of our time. Hundreds here-now do the same, more each day.’

‘Then here-now are too many also selfish, dangerous, stupid, Angryfood.’ Angryfood continued. ‘Also many more are becoming...’ he did not have the scent vocabulary to explain the phenomena, so he resorted to “...sleepy, unproductive, those that just gather and question. The colony is wrong Tunnelcool”.

Ten construction workers climbed over them carefully carrying a large transparent resin sheet. Their feet were not so carefully placed as they ascended the curtain of bodies, taking a foothold wherever was most suitable to their needs.

One of the climbers scented at the two of them, ‘Chatter chatter, wall creatures, do not loose your concentration’. Again the two combatants stopped until they had passed.

‘I still do not understand Angryfood, why hurt yourself?’

‘Hard explanation Tunnelcool. Many reasons but mainly just helps’

‘How? Important, tell’

The scent that hit Tunnelcool in reply expressed just how important Angryfood felt his reasons were, communicating a deep, real pain but with it was the scent of pleasure and of release, an unburdening. Release from one pain through another. Angryfood’s scent glands almost closed up

towards the end, choked with confused emotion.

Before Tunnelcool could rally a response to this confused statement a blast of scent hit them both from above. Only then did they notice the older creature one row above them in the scaffold. His carapace was scarred in numerous places and they both recognized the signs. Since there had been no wars, no surviving predators to threaten the colony, nothing other than the elements as a threat, and considering that no one suffered that many accidents, he too must be like Angryfood, a 'healaddict'.

Angryfood's antennae probed towards this new figure with curiosity. This old one spoke with incredible eloquence. 'Change your scent nestling, I am trying to forget that feeling. I have managed to stop for 100 of our burning suns but even after so long your pleasure scent is not helping. It opens old desires.' A visual scent describing a sightless burrowing creature, unseeing and ignorant punctuated the elder ones cutting remark. Angryfood was speechless. This wise old thing must have spent years attacking his own body. He must know real pain. Angryfood vowed to know more from this wise creature yet he had no idea how to approach it and with his great age came a complex eloquence in his scent-speech that immediately made discussion intimidating.

Angryfood was also shocked that he had also managed to express his long abstinence from self-harm without the use of the normal forelimb movements. Instead he had manipulated a small decaying scent, tied to an image, a rotting fruit, which showing them exactly how long he had meant.

Amazing! Angryfood could barely open his glands through fear of sounding ignorant. And, not only was this wise creature eloquent he was skilled. The powerful scent stream carrying his message had traveled against the breeze to a point just behind Angryfood and Tunnelcool so it had then washed back over their bodies, remarkable precision.

Tunnelcool was less hesitant. 'You're right seasoned one, nestling he is,' Tunnelcool split his scent-stream in two directions, wanting to be sure that Angryfood heard despite the breeze. 'but with respect this grub here knows no better, but you?'

The stranger's anger was abrupt. 'NO, you are the grub! Nestling's actions show comprehension and understanding. That you do not express fear about the colony shows you as the ignorant one.'

'Important, tell' Angryfood was not going to miss out on the advantage of having the wisdom of age backing his position.

'NO, instead question. Why bad for nestling to attack self?' It was directed at Tunnelcool.

'Makes him ineffective'

'NO, he is here-now working. Again, why bad?'

'He might kill himself, reduce the Colony size.'

'Why bad?'

'We need all colony members'

'Why?'

'Our birth rate is dropping, don't ask why! No one knows why breeders breed less now.'

'No-one? Ask nestling'

'Me?' Angryfood waved his antennae in agitation. 'I don't know'

'Don't know? feel'.

He could only answer with a question and felt ignorant. 'Why Breed? What purpose in breeding?'

'That's what I scented!' Tunnelcool's antennae drew back over his head in indignation.

'But not what you meant! Nestling is correct. Why is high birth rate important?'

'To replace losses to the population.'

'No real losses in population now, again, why nestling attacking self bad?'

'Because birth rate is low, colony cannot sustain losses.'

'I will re-scent – Birth rate is low because there are no losses. No wars, no predators, all is safe. We have civilized. Individuals forgetting their purpose, to breed, build, feed and fight! Boredom and lack of purpose breeds wilting Nestling's. This is wrong. When we were a great colony we fought, we died, we ate and were eaten, and because of this we would breed, fast and often. Without that the breeders will begin to look elsewhere for meaning. They have always thought themselves of a higher caste, but that is illusion, breeding is just more essential colony activity, like this.' He scented a 'toil image'. 'They will search for more, and the result will be our downfall. Nestling knows this. Colony will become non-colony.' The elder-one waited for some response but smelling nothing he continued.

'This Nestling's behavior feeds a deep need in his body, which craves to feel it has been damaged to help his colony. The process of healing is the reward of the warrior, indicating sacrifice. Yet also it is a way to alert the colony, it is a sign that we have lost our purpose. What Nestling does here is our alarm for what is happening to our breeders and we should listen to his message.'

'If attacking self is so wise, why you stop?'

'Because I have had enough of debating with ignorant grubs like you, and more importantly I now know what I must do.'

'What your name old one?' Angryfood's antennae formed two rigid spears directed at this new awe-inspiring individual.

'I have not asked yours, and when we have accomplished our task our names will be forgotten. That is how it should be.'

With that he turned his head and he spoke no more.

The rally call

The 'sun-trap' construction team had dispersed and somehow the old creature had avoided Angryfood and vanished. He had decided, if he wasn't to be given a name he would give him one anyway. He called him 'Trapper'. Trapper may have escaped him but Angryfood had not escaped Tunnelcool so easily.

'Avoid the old one Angryfood. His fancy scents smell good but I have seen his type before. He will have you off on some wasteful task, away from your work. You'll find yourself lonely in an out-tunnel 3 days since your last decent toil. How will that feel? Or worse you'll end up with those others who spend their time gathered in a cave scenting nothing but 'why?' at each other all day and night, unproductive. Just stay in touch with the scent and keep working.'

"These sad ones tell us something Tunnelcool, but I will not be like them. Still I want to do something."

As Angryfood headed away Tunnelcool scented after him, "You are doing something, you are working."

Having headed back into the tunnels of the main complex Angryfood had located his favorite inter-labour rest spot. He regurgitated some grub sap from his storage pouch, an organ rarely used for its original purpose, to store foraged food for return to the colony. Dipping his mouthparts into the pool he had created he shut down his awareness and ran through the events of the day. A passing grub-farm labor team trampled him with fifteen sets of feet as they passed down the tunnel but this did not rouse him for a moment. Soon enough an appropriate rallying scent would run through the colony calling him to whatever was his duty of the moment. For now he rested as the constant gentle cooling breeze filtered from deep beneath the colony.

The suntrap he had been working on was an addition to the mechanism that caused that breeze to exist. Without its cooling current the colony would become like an oven, heated from the outside by the relentless baking of the sun. To his knowledge the utilisation of a 'prime-tower' was not a technological advance but something his race had done as a matter of survival since..., well forever. Those ancestors that had by nature built tall structures had created the very same phenomenon, a convection current that cooled their nest. They had survived and passed on their genes. It was simple. As a general rule the Prime-tower was darker than the rest of the colony and as such it absorbed more heat. The heat contained within it rose up the full height of the towers impressive

dimensions and in doing so dragged vast amounts of air from lower down.

This colony had been built above some extensive and still partly unexplored cavern systems, and the cool subterranean air was the perfect replacement for the escaping stale air that disappeared up the Prime-tower.

This had been more than adequate for countless generations, but nothing remains unchanged and the climate was no exception. In time the sun grew hotter and the earth more parched so that the river that ran through one edge of the colony became less than the raging torrent it once was and the air within the colony grew more uncomfortable.

Some unthinkable number of generations ago alterations had been made to the Prime-Tower. Openings were made in the Towers wall, where the sun was given freedom to shine upon networks of sealed black tubes. These increased the heat produced and the current grew faster. Opening more caverns increased the available cool air and the colony beat off the growing heat. Now, after all this time it was again necessary to improve on the process.

Large transparent screens were being placed and secured one by one over the previously opened holes in the towers wall. Each hole would need thousands of such screens, and the raw materials had come from a solution of their own excrement, which was itself an opaque resinous material carefully mixed with grub sap and refined. The inner lining of a dead colony member's carapace was even better than excrement, creating a hundred times as much resin from the abundant grub-sap but with less turn over of population they had to make do. Estimates suggested that it would take 100's of generations to cover all of the apertures, mainly due to the need to accumulate enough excretions. In spite of the unfathomable time scale, as each lens was fixed in place, covering a small fraction of each hole, the intensity of light was increased in a small way. As each full aperture became sealed it would create an enclosed space of such sweltering heat that the tower had the potential to sing with the force of air that would rise up to its impossible peak.

His thoughts returned to the wise old creature he and Tunnelcool had met among the scaffold crew, 'Trapper'. For the first time he had met a heal-addict who was not confused by his habit, who would defend his actions with wisdom and confidence. For as long as his despised obsession had lasted he had been frowned upon, seen as the weak link in the colony chain, a selfish creature. So great was the shame carried by the heal-addict that one would never discuss it with others of their kind. At best, meetings between Heal-addicts were punctuated with an involuntary release of an increasingly common 'shame' scent, which would communicate the experience they shared but then linger like a painful mistake for all to witness. Both parties would often then initiate a furious

and embarrassed blast of puerile conversation that would be thrown into the space between them in a futile attempt to mask the guilty emissions of their untrustworthy scent glands.

When had he first hurt himself? He had been younger still and was on his first ever shift in the Grub-works. Deep in the caverns, interspersed between the numerous fields of the fungus-farms were the grub-works, little more than row after row of carefully formed tubes running along a vast cavern floor. This was one of five hundred such work areas spaced throughout the caverns. The grubs were penned within this large area but were otherwise free to roam on top of the tubes, where they were safe from molestation. Here the tubes were sprayed with an acrid potion made from more of the bitter excretions of the tall trees in order to discourage the fungus, the grub's only food source, from growing. As the only way for the grubs to eat was by entering inside the tubes where the fungus was nurtured and lush, this they would happily do, once their relaxed flopping and squirming had built up a significant hunger.

It was when they were inside these tubes contentedly scraping the fungus into their vast guts and releasing the steady stream of appetizing gasses from their rears, that they could be harvested for their sap. They were huge, 3 times in length than a colony member's own body, and fat, soft and fantastically delicious. It wasn't unknown for young workers to sneak inside an occupied tube and bask in the sweet flatulence they released.

Despite their vast mass the grubs were not at all dangerous, however trying to harvest one without it being restrained in the tubes, would cause it to thrash and squirm in a horrible way. It would be very unlikely to result in injury, they were a tough race, but it made the task inefficient.

His mentor for the day had pointed to his tool for that morning's lesson, one of the suck-harvesters. Another tube, slim and flexible, it dangled from the roof and emitted the commonplace high whine of a suction device. It contained nothing more than a powerful rush of air, harnessed from the ever-climbing gale in the prime tower. One of these could be found every 20 paces, and this thinner, flexible tube fed into a larger one, suspended along the roof of the cavern. The end of the suck-harvester with its sharpened nozzle would be carried to any number of holes that ran along the fungus-tube walls. All it took was to scurry around, until you could see one of the Grubs passing one of those holes as it bloatedly wormed its way along, eating the fungus from the tube walls within, its fat body pressing appetizingly against the hole in a juicy bulge. Then with minimal effort the farmer could simply open the nozzle and plunge it into the side of the Grub. 'Not too hard, not too long' warned his mentor, as the vibration of fatty Grub-sap could be felt traveling through the tube. 'Why? Tell, important!' 'Internal organs not to be damaged, only outer 30 percent is suitable and

only 10 percent of Grubs mass to be suctioned at once.'

'Good hatchling, now complete, while I look for next.'

It was after his mentor was gone and Angryfood had released the Grub, slightly lighter but hungrier because of it, that he had the misguided idea to press the suction tube against his arm. The nozzle snapped against his rigid exoskeleton. Realizing his mistake he had strained to remove the nozzle, his antennae beating against each other wildly. When he finally managed to pull it free he heard a crack and saw for the first time his healing inner juices flowing from a vicious break in his armor.

He didn't understand why it had felt good, but leaving the Grub-works later that day it seemed as if something inside had changed. Despite the pain, his body was crying out that what he had done was good, both for him and for his species, he buzzed slightly. The constant fears he carried were now replaced with the simple task of ensuring he got better, because that was good for the colony.

Over the next few days the feeling of wellbeing continued, but decreased.

As it passed he began to feel empty, as if he was no longer a useful member of the colony. A sense of decay and lack of meaning surrounded him, requiring real action. It seemed as if the colony and reality itself would dissolve, leaving him alone, an individual with nothing but his six limbs and an empty foraging sac. So, without even knowing it was happening he began to allow his body to open up to an experience that their modern civilized and stagnant colony no longer provided. It was the only really true experience for a creature of his demeanor, the illusion of healing from battle and strife, for the best of the colony, temporarily allowing him to feel that the colony was good, cohesive and not degrading, stagnating and ultimately dying around him. His mind thought none of this, but pushed aside his malaise and returned to work. Yet his body now saw the everyday objects around him in a new way, as tools that if suitably misused would place him in just enough peril to cause injury and thus a tragically fleeting relief from the growing emptiness inside him.

* * *

He awoke from his thoughts, back in his rest place, the exertion of the scaffold a distant memory. A rallying scent drifted past him and traveled down the tunnel on the constant breeze. It contained what he needed, information regarding location, nature of the labor to come and tools required. His body reacted independently, racing with urgency towards his destination, lower tunnel, 320 degrees, river side, three quarters out, tunnel excavation work, tools already present. A localized scent would direct him as he got closer.

He was half way there before his mind reached full awareness and he began to think about the rallying scent. He had reacted with such urgency for one reason only. The scent, which would cause an immediate physical response in any colony member, was unusually pertinent to him specifically. A rally scent would always attract those suitable for the work involved, but above that it would hold a normal time marker, caused by the precise deterioration pattern all their scents contained, the same one that allowed them to sense the distance that speech-scent had traveled. If a call to work had traveled a long way the body would not respond with such urgency, it was normal to wait for a repeat signal as it would be expected that the quota would be filled by those who had received it earlier. If you were closer to the source the body would react quicker, knowing that there would certainly be a space in the team. He now realized that this scent must have originated from very close by and was designed to decay fast and not travel much beyond the tunnel he was in. He briefly glanced back realizing that he had moved so fast that he had undoubtedly passed the very point where the scent had originated, running up-breeze as he had been. He also reflected that it was possible that he had reacted so quickly for the simple reason that the scent, designed to travel such a short distance, was not meant to be detected by any other colony member, it was intended for him alone.

It took him some time to start moving again. In that moment of strange comprehension, knowing the maker of the rallying scent was now behind him and had some purpose for him, his body had come to an immediate and rigid stop, an alert listening pose. Slowly one antenna waved in the breeze, one forelimb lifted and then, from static to run in an instant his body was in motion again, scurrying towards his destination having shed any trepidation, leaving it like a lingering scent behind him. He was running towards the unknown and doubtlessly towards danger, the unknown was danger and nothing was going to hold him from it.

He had reached as far as the instructions could take him, where he would expect the localized scent to lead him forward. There were four choices of tunnel, all leading to outlying, unused colony space, except one, which led to the extreme edge of a farm complex. He had lifted his upper body and head high, waving his antennae hoping for something that would direct him. It finally came, drifting lazily on the breeze emanating from the fissures within the unused tunnel, urging him forward, and with it came an image intended as a name, 'Nestling'.

He entered the tunnel, clicking his mouthparts in the usual non-scent query-sound, 'Where? Who? Where? And then it happened. From above, something fell, dropping on his back and grappled both sets of forelimbs,

leaving him completely disabled. He was confused, he had expected the old creature he had met in the construction-wall, and the scent had contained the name that he had used in their conversation.

A sharp pain ran down his right antenna, like an electric shock. The pain, inflicted on one of his main sensory organs clouded his thoughts and reactions. His mind sang with phantom words, images and he fought to stop his body reacting to them in the expected way. He was immobilized and could do nothing but allow himself to relax. His remaining free antennae sought the air for something to identify his assailant but all he could smell, curiously, was a scent that reminded him of the lubricating oil used on the few elevator mechanisms within the colony, a strong, overpowering scent. Many errors in communication happened around those elevators, its aroma somehow interfered with normal scent patterns, but it only did so very close up.

‘Enough fun Nestling.’ Suddenly the pain in his antennae eased slightly, and with one swift movement the weight was gone, along with the elevator smell. Angryfood ran forward, up the tunnel wall and reversed himself onto the roof, looking back to where he had lain helpless. He felt exhilarated. If there was some sort of invasion going on he would die in defense of the colony, but before he even saw old Trapper waiting on the tunnel floor, he knew he would be there and the whole event was intended to make a point of some kind.

‘What for old one? Should I learn?’

‘Certainly you should learn to fight, but no point meant nestling, unless....’

He blasted a recall scent towards Angryfood, encouraging him to relive the feelings, ‘what do you think?’

‘Feels significant, strange behavior, unexpected’

Trapper looked thoughtful, ‘I think I was just looking for a fight, I’m sure of it.

Hoping you might have inflicted some pain in return, but not selfishness on your part, just ineptitude.’ Trapper moved further down the tunnel ‘I want you to follow me, can you live without work for a while?’

‘I don’t think so’

‘Then think of this as work, it is for the good of the colony. Follow now.’

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 begun 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.

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