

## Chrysalis 1141

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### Chapter 1141: Antcademy Pt 1

*The ants of the Colony didn't invent universal education on Pangera, but they were, perhaps, the first to pursue it with such rigour. The citizens of the Silver City, for example, are entitled to learning until they turn ten. For the Colony, things are obviously very different due to their monstrous nature. It doesn't take years to elevate a monster, as they are effectively born ready to fight and as intelligent as they are going to get until they evolve.*

*But the ants approached this situation with the maddening dedication and patience they poured into everything. Even more so, in fact, due to the reverence they hold for their young. Each grub is as well reared and pampered as a princess, as well fed as a festival hog, and as carefully cleaned as a king's cutlery.*

*After they are born, this treatment continues as the hatchlings are put through the most comprehensive and extensive training program in the history of the world.*

- Excerpt from 'Antucation: Teaching and Learning, Pedagogy among the ant' by Karliet Magron.

"Ready yourselves, hatchlings."

The pheromones of the Brood Tender, Poppant, were as soothing and warm as always, washing over the antennae of her charges like a calming wave. Twenty small forms roused themselves from torpor, twitching as they regained control of their limbs one by one.

"Good morning, teacher!" the hatchlings chorused as they fell into two neat lines of ten.

Towards the back, Solant, as the three day old monster had begun to think of herself, slapped herself about with her antennae, trying to sharpen herself for the day ahead.

Exactly eight hours had passed since they'd fallen into torpor, she was confident of that, and sixteen hours of vigorous training and learning lay ahead of them. She intended to extract every ounce of benefit she could. The Colony demanded no less!

When they were ready, Poppant clacked her mandibles happily and turned to lead her charges out of their chamber. Through the narrow entrance they filed, then out into the wider tunnels, other groups falling into lines alongside them as they went.

"Work hard!" one of her broodmates greeted Solant as she fell in beside her.

"I intend to," Solant stated.

The passage widened further as more and more tunnels connected to it. Eventually, it was twenty metres in diameter and every inch of that surface was covered in hatchlings following along behind their teachers. There were ten thousand broodmates in the current class of the Antcademy, Solant had counted them, and she was determined that none would perform as well as she.

After a few more minutes, the hatchlings were led into the vast meal hall, a vertical structure with ten floors, each seating a hundred hatchlings and ten Brood Tenders. They filed in, taking their place at the

table silently, as Biomass was lowered to them from the ceiling above via a mechanism none of the new ants had been able to explain.

“Now, hatchlings,” Poppant spoke once they had all settled into place, “let us be grateful for this meal our family has put before us, and ensure that we do not take lightly the resources that we have taken. If we keep that in mind, we should avoid unfortunate events such as what we saw yesterday.”

Her many-faceted eyes focused on one particular hatchling who ducked her head in shame. Solant shook her head. That silly ant had succumbed to her instincts and flung herself into the jaws of a monster only the previous day. So shameful!

Of course, she would never admit that she too had nearly done the same. Nobody needed to know that!

As one, each of the ten thousand young ants munched down on the Biomass, clearing the tables before they were led away, out of the dining hall and away from their resting chambers.

It was time for training!

“Now remember what we talked about yesterday,” Poppant reminded them gently as the twenty members of her group stood perched outside of the farms. “We must work together to achieve our best. Stay in formation at all times, cover for one another, and we will surely beat our best time from yesterday.”

Their patient teacher ran through several drills that they had practised extensively the previous day. How to advance as a unit, how to fall back, how to smoothly operate a firing line, alternating shots between the ranks. Only when she was satisfied did Poppant allow them to advance into the farm proper.

“Remember not to panic, hatchlings,” she reminded them, “I am here to protect you. There is no need for anyone,” she paused and eyed them all, “to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the group.”

“Yes, teacher,” they chorused.

In the front rank, Solant was positively bursting with energy, her eyes aglow from the blazing lines of mana that split through the walls on either side. She could hear the growls and snarls of monsters ahead, freshly spawned monsters, ready to fall before the might of the Colony!

Surely, they would beat their time from the previous day. *That* had been an appalling showing.

“Begin when you are ready. Time starts... now,” Poppant said warmly.

Immediately, Solant stepped forward with confidence, bringing the rest of the front line along with her. She set a brisk pace and the hatchlings quickly advanced along the roof of the chamber until they found their first target.

“Monster spotted!” came the call from the flanks of the formation.

“Reform the line!” Solant called and the twenty shuffled themselves until they faced their prey squarely.

“Fire!”

Half the first rank fired their acid down at the target, followed by half the second, then the other half of the first. Staggered firing in this manner had been the first thing the hatchlings had learned, and thanks to the patient teachings of the Brood Tenders, they had learned it well.

After being pelted with acid, the unfortunate monster who received the barrage could only collapse in a heap as the deadly fluid ate into it.

“Secure the prey!” Solant cried, leading the group down the wall to advance on the downed monster.

From out of the darkness came a rattling hiss, followed by an ominous clacking sound. A moment later, a claw centipede emerged, tail raised high, ready to strike.

The twenty hatchlings clacked their mandibles furiously back at it. Stupid centipede! Hated enemy of the Eldest!

“Firing posture! Unleash the storm!”

Solant wasn’t sure who gave the order, but she followed it unquestioningly. The front rank dropped their posture low and turned, presenting their combined commercial empire toward the foe. The back rank did the same, except they raised themselves to stand tall, firing above the heads of their brethren.

The moment they were in position, they fired, covering the centipede with acid and sending it stumbling back into the darkness.

“There may be a centipede nest forming. Be careful as you advance,” Poppant warned them.

“Roger!”

The hatchlings maintained their formation, moving as a unit at all times. The first of their prey was secured a few moments later, the group training their bite skills to finish the monster, then devouring the Biomass in moments.

When all was said and done, they defeated their previous time by five minutes, eliciting a heap of praise from their beloved teacher.

But Solant wasn’t satisfied. No sooner had they finished the first chamber than she was itching to go to the next. She had to get better!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1142: Antcademy pt 2**

*Given the nature of the ants as a social insect, one with a particular obsession toward the care and rearing of their young, it may be understandable, even expected, that they would focus so intently on education. However, the depth and complexity of their methods is astounding, no matter how one thinks about it.*

*Even among monsters, not all are born with the same interests and passions, and this is especially true for those above a certain threshold of intelligence. The Colony were quick to realise this fact and naturally sought to implement measures that would not only accommodate, but maximise the potential of this difference.*

*Thus was born the concept of 'differentiation'. Certain ants excel at one task, whereas others are lacking in this area. The Colony quickly identifies these gaps and moves to specialise their curriculum from the earliest moment possible.*

*Using this method, the ants are able to find the most suited path for an individual and guide them along it within days of that hatchling emerging from its cocoon.*

*- Excerpt from 'Antucation: Teaching and Learning, Pedagogy among the ant' by Karliet Magron.*

"Congratulations, hatchlings!" Poppant praised them, her antennae wiggling with joy.

The twenty young members of the Colony preened under her attention, basking in the approval of the Tender who had cared for them since they were eggs.

"That was quite an achievement, I am extremely impressed with *all* of you. A new Antcademy record for a third day clear! Of course, there are things we can improve on and each of you will need to write a four page report on what you can do better next time when we get back."

The hatchlings cheered.

"Now off we go!"

With that cheerful declaration, Poppant began to march back to the Colony, her pheromones wafting happily behind her as the twenty tired, but excited ants marched in their wake.

Well, nineteen of them were tired but excited.

One of them was frustrated and disappointed.

The movements had been slow, her orders had been late and the firing discipline had been sloppy. It may have been a record setting pace for the third day of training, but Solant was far from happy. Imperfections were everywhere, she couldn't think of a single manoeuvre that the group had executed without flaw.

And that knowledge burned in her like acid in the gut.

As the ants returned to their chamber, they marched under the great and watchful eyes of the Eldest, carved into the ceiling above. The statue had been updated recently to ensure it depicted the oldest and greatest member of the Colony in all of their current glory, colossal in size and regal in posture.

Solant cringed away from those judgemental eyes.

The Eldest demanded each ant in the Colony perform to as high a standard as they did, at least, that's what the Tenders had told her. She knew that so far, her broodmates had utterly failed to meet that standard. It couldn't be allowed to stand!

After Poppant had led them through their drills, rehashed several key moments of the fighting, and inspected each of their written essays (Solant produced twenty pages of dense pheromone lines for hers), she left to allow the hatchlings to enjoy their eight hours of rest.

Before her siblings could settle in for torpor, Solant stepped forward.

“We aren’t performing well enough,” she declared.

They turned around and faced her in the centre of the chamber, antennae wiggling with surprise.

“We aren’t?” one of her siblings asked. “Didn’t we just get a record? I thought that meant we were doing well...”

“We’re working hard,” another piped up.

“Our teacher is proud of us...” another said.

Solant slashed those words away with a swipe of her antenna.

“And? Didn’t you all just write a report of all of the things we did wrong?! Didn’t Poppant just demonstrate a long list of mistakes that we need to improve on tomorrow? How can we possibly say that we are doing well?”

She clacked her mandibles in irritation.

“And I’m not excusing myself from this criticism. If anything, I’ve been the one making the most calls, and many of those were either late or unclear. If anyone is performing the worst in the group, it’s me!”

“That’s not true... my aim has been extremely poor...” one hatchling lamented.

“I lose the timing when we change formation...” another sighed.

“I tripped over my legs when dashing... I hoped nobody noticed.”

“I noticed.”

“Dammit.”

“The point is,” Solant declared, trying to get them back on track, “that our current rate of improvement isn’t enough. Even if we turn around and set another record tomorrow, I don’t think we should be satisfied. Unless we perform *flawlessly*, we should never be satisfied!”

“Are you suggesting... we... *skip*... sleep... and practise?”

Solant recoiled in horror.

“What? Never! I’m saying we need to use our training time more effectively than we have been. Our focus hasn’t been sharp enough, our drive not committed enough! If another group would work their carapace off for the Colony, then we need to work until our muscles melt!”

“FOR THE COLONY!” the hatchlings roared in response, their eyes blazing.

When Poppant came to greet them after they woke, she was a little unnerved to see the cold, burning light in each of their eyes.

It was normal for ants in the Colony to be fervently dedicated, they worked themselves as hard as they could and took pride in it. In fact, manic dedication to the family was absolutely the standard that each hatchling possessed from the moment they were born.

But this... *focus*... was something else.

“G-Good morning hatchlings!” she greeted them. “Are we ready to work hard again today?”

Instead of the normal cheers and calls she would expect from her charges, she got only steely, determined glares.

They were so *unified*.

When they marched out to meal time, they moved as a perfect unit. They radiated an intimidating aura as they ate, unnerving the hatchlings around them, unsure what to make of this cold and laser focused group.

Once they reached the farms, they trained with a brutal and cold efficiency that Poppant had never seen before.

Often, when she gently pointed out an error, the ant in question had already begun to correct it, and apologised to the whole group as they did. Whenever this happened, the rest would nod firmly and carry on as if the mistake had never occurred.

When she finally unleashed them on the monsters in the farm, they cut through them like a gleaming blade. The fourth day record had been smashed.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 1143: Antcademy pt 3**

*Postgraduate, or postgraduate, education was another concept the Colony adopted in a manner very differently to most other societies. While it is normal for there to be scholarly communities, such as the Tower, who accept only the finest minds and greatest learners into their ranks, those who are able to make the most of these opportunities are very few in number.*

*It has been noted many times that only the wealthy can afford to tutor their children to the exacting standards expected of these institutions. A farmer's children will be put to work on the farm as soon as they are able, seldom completing even basic education. This lopsided representation amongst the scholars of most empires leads to bias and gaps in thinking, with those lacking in material understanding of common tasks called on to devise policy or advise on matters they do not comprehend.*

*Among the Colony, further education is available to any ant who wants it. Once a hatchling has completed their training, they will be a tier four monster with a set caste and a well understood list of capabilities and responsibilities. At this stage, most of them will journey to those places where their skills are needed, ready to contribute and join the general workflow of the Colony. Some, however, choose to remain and pursue ideas and concepts until they are satisfied.*

*Perhaps only the ants could tolerate this generous attitude, since they are always supremely confident the studious hatchling is working to better themselves or the Colony rather than shirking work.*

*- Excerpt from 'Antucation: Teaching and Learning, Pedagogy among the ant' by Karliet Magron.*

Poppant observed as the hatchlings watched the battle unfold below them. Like shadows, they clung to the ceiling, hiding themselves amongst the folds in the stone as dozens of monsters fought desperately beneath them. They weren't completely passive, though.

Whenever it seemed that one combatant would overpower the other, an ant would intervene, firing acid down to help swing the fight back to a neutral playing field. In this way, they dragged out the battle until every combatant was exhausted and injured. Fruit ripe for the plucking.

“Dragon Claws!” Solant bellowed.

The hatchlings moved seamlessly through the manoeuvre, sliding into four columns of five each and collapsing on the prey from the flanks. Their jaws flashed as each five ant unit worked seamlessly in tandem, scything through the monsters with brutal efficiency.

It wouldn't be a time record, due to the nature of their strategy, but it was certainly the most effortless victory she had ever seen. This group was acting... differently, than expected. She would need to make a report.

“Well done, hatchlings!” she praised them with genuine affection. “An excellent strategy, and one you executed so well! I'm particularly impressed with how well you were able to deploy your acid, and with such accuracy!”

“We've been working on pairing spotters and shooters to try and improve our aim,” one hatchling explained. “Two sets of eyes are better than one, after all.”

“Allow the enemy to defeat themselves,” Solant nodded with satisfaction as she looked down on the waiting Biomass. “Why should we fight when our enemy is strong? Instead, we make them weak, and then strike. This seems like a viable way to do battle.”

“Oh, it absolutely is,” Poppant agreed, “though not always feasible. Now, scurry down there and eat. Don't let any of it go to waste! Then come back here to me, I have an exciting announcement to make!”

The hatchlings hurried to do as she had told them, ensuring they divided the food as evenly as they could. It was almost time for them to evolve for the first time, after they'd formed their cores the previous day, and it was paramount that each member of the group achieved a full set of mutations. When the food was consumed, they returned to their teacher.

“Now, in light of your achievements, it has been agreed by the Tenders that you will be granted special cores for your evolution!” she clacked her mandibles joyfully. “Isn't that wonderful?”

Rather than the exuberance she had expected, the hatchlings simply nodded, a cold and determined energy rising from them as their eyes glinted in the dim light.

“No time like the present,” Poppant said, not losing her bubbly positivity for even a second. “Let's head back to the chamber, the cores should be ready and waiting for us!”

And indeed they were. Enough cores to max out every one of the twenty hatchlings and then a special core for each of them, giving them the best possible start to life. An exciting opportunity to be sure, and not one that they would waste! Before they touched them, the hatchlings ensured that they had maxed out their mutations first.

The ants settled in and absorbed the cores needed to reach the limit for their tier, then eyed the special cores warily.

“No need to worry,” Poppant assured them, “it is certainly painful and uncomfortable, but I have something that might help!”

Humming cheerfully, she deposited a cup of tea in front of each hatchling, and then, with a wink, stirred in a teaspoon of sugar for each of them, deftly manipulating the cutlery with her mandibles.

“I’ve always found a spoonful of sugar helps the special core go down,” she announced. “Drink as you absorb, and then evolve straight away!”

They did, grimacing with discomfort as their cores swelled beyond the size that was normally acceptable. Once the task was done, each of them quickly fell into slumber as they selected their evolution and customised it to their own desires.

A few hours later, twenty Superior Hatchlings awoke, appearing not that much different from before, but brimming with potential.

Solant examined herself carefully, noting every change to her status, and found she was pleased with what she saw. This evolution didn’t provide the greatest benefit at tier two, but would start to pay off from tier three onward. That meant securing further records and competing against the rest of their broodmates would be more difficult in the short term.

She relished the challenge.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1144: Antcademy pt 4**

*All in all, there is much we can learn from the Colony’s approach to training and teaching their members. I’m aware that many dismiss the studies and examination of the ant’s methods as inapplicable to any other, non-monstrous race, but that simply isn’t the case.*

*Because the ants don’t only teach themselves, they welcome and teach their allies also.*

*The ant-riders, the devastating cavalry unit formed of human, golgari, folk and even one example of a brathian rider and ant ‘mount’, are a perfect example. Interviewing those who chose to become members of this respected and renowned brigade, it quickly became apparent the respect and admiration they had for their ant tutors. Many spoke of the harsh and unforgiving nature of the training that demanded the riders meet the same standards as their chosen ant allies, but reported how effective and motivating the monsters were.*

*The training is almost universally seen to result in a rapid development of Skills and abilities related to the unique Class. That would be enough for most, but trainees are not permitted to leave the Antcademies until they have met the truly exacting standards of the Colony.*

*My greatest frustration is that all members of the brigade that have been spoken to refuse to detail the exact methods used in their training. Perhaps some secret techniques are utilised and the Colony refuses to spread their knowledge?*

*Regardless, the existence of this successful program speaks volumes to the efficacy of the ant methodology.*

*- Excerpt from ‘Antucation: Teaching and Learning, Pedagogy among the ant’ by Karliet Magron.*



“ARE. YOU. READY. TO TUNNEL BAAAAAALLLLLL!?”

Solant did her best to ignore the humans going wild around them. It had been vaguely explained to her what they were here for. Entertainment of some sort? Apparently, this training exercise was popular to watch even amongst the Colony deeper in the Dungeon, which surprised her somewhat. As she understood it, this drill was an excellent test of cooperation and strategy, something her broodmates excelled in.

Which was lucky, since they were currently weaker than their competition.

“Box formation! Prepare the Dragon Claw!” Solant yelled to her allies as the chaos across the field began to resolve itself.

The two frontlines smashed into each other, chitin grinding on chitin as the largest and strongest ants in both teams pushed as hard as they could. Currently, her team had possession of the ball, and so far, they hadn’t failed to run it to the other side a single time, but their opponents were catching on to their tricks and grinding them down with their superior bodies.

Solant was forced to get inventive.

“Teatime on the left flank!” she called from her position perched on the stone ball and watched as her team flowed to execute the strategem.

Pharlant, the fastest member of the team who had recently named herself, feinted left, then right, before attempting a shoulder charge against the juvenile scout who was marking her.

With her well trained dash Skill, thoughtful leg mutations and agility, combined with Solant’s formations, and manoeuvres that maximised those strengths, Pharlant had been their main scorer in this game. Now, she was tightly followed by at least one opponent at all times.

Followed by another quick superior hatchling, Pharlant attempted to push hard into open space, only to be checked at the last minute. Straining too hard, the hatchling went down in a brutal fashion, legs flailing as she collapsed. Solant winced, that had looked dreadful.

“Pharlant is down, injured! Reinforce the centre and we’ll push down the right side!”

Her squad moved seamlessly to shift their pressure to the other side of the field, acting with complete trust in her instructions. Their faith warmed her heart, but her mind remained razor focused on the game. They couldn’t fail. She would *never* fail.

In the middle of their line, Sumant was the rock that anchored the formation and they pivoted around her.

“AFTER A NASTY SPILL ON THE LEFT SIDE, TEAM TINY IS LOOKING TO SHIFT THE PLAY! CAN THEY SCORE YET AGAIN, EVEN WITHOUT THEIR STAR RUNNER?”

Solant wished the humans would be a little more quiet, there had to be a thousand of them up there. She was trying to concentrate!

Every minute shift, every tiny adjustment was caught by her as she hyper-focused on the field of play. There was no excuse for mistakes, and no reason for them.

She could see the opponents were beginning to sense victory. With their larger bodies, they were starting to grind down the centre, pressing Sumant back step by step. All she needed was for a slight gap to open up, then they could strike.

And then it came. Overeager, the opposing team leapt at the first break in the line, desperate to prevent their tenth straight loss. It was subtle, but it was overcommitment, they came too far forward too quickly, leaving open space behind them.

“Flick the tail!” Solant called, before she leapt off the ball and it was swept up from under her, racing toward the right side of the field.

The timing was tight, a tenth of a second slower and the enemy would have intercepted, but they didn’t get there in time and then the ball was past them. After being taught several painful lessons, the opposition had begun to defend in depth, and the second wave closed in on the ball runner, trying to hem her in.

Then Sumant was there, throwing herself forward to block the line, crashing into the smaller, more agile of the opposing ants to buy just a little bit of time and space, which the runner used to expertly flick the ball in her mandibles.

A high difficulty pass that required expert mandible control, executed to perfection. The ball travelled from the right side, through the centre and onto the left, where it landed in the waiting grip of Pharlant.

She was finally unmarked.

The nimble ant sprang to her feet and dashed forward in an instant, putting her incredible speed to good use. Caught unawares, the opposition could only watch the speedy ant complete the run, taking the ball across the line with ease.

Solant watched the play unfold with a cold gleam of satisfaction in her eyes. She had made the team's greatest strength appear weak, and the opponent had fallen for it completely.

“AN UNBELIEVABLE PASS HAS SNATCHED VICTORY FROM THE JAWS OF DEFEAT. THE UNMARKED SPEEDSTER HAS SCORED THE EASIEST RUN OF HER LIFE AFTER THE MIRACLE PLAY!”

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1145: Antcademy pt 5**

*Resource distribution amongst the young in the Colony is far more generous than one might expect from ants. Of course, grubs are given high priority for food, ensuring they grow into their full potential in the proper time. Hatchlings always form a core before evolving to tier two, and they always do so with maxed mutations.*

*Naturally, this requires a tremendous amount of Biomass. That phrasing doesn’t really do justice to the reality.... The Colony requires an OCEAN of Biomass on a daily basis, not just to fuel the growth of the young, but to feed the millions and millions of grown ants. Vast tracts of Dungeon are routinely swept clean by them, with an efficiency that none can rival, but even that isn’t enough. Other solutions, such as the aphid herd, are required to extract additional Biomass in unconventional ways in order to make up the shortfall.*

*Cores, of course, are the true limiting factor. The Colony would love to have each and every ant evolve with flawless cores, fully reinforced and with a special core absorbed on top, but it simply isn't possible.*

*There is only one type of ant who is given this luxury as a matter of course: the Queens.*

*- Excerpt from "Evolutions of the Ant" by Granin Lazus*

"An impressive win-streak, to say the least!" Poppant praised the hatchlings, and they nodded seriously. "A completely undefeated run! I know how hard you all worked for this. The other Tenders are wondering just how long your streak will be."

"Endless," Solant said simply.

She didn't intend to fail, ever. Anything less than perfection would be a blemish on the Colony as a whole, and that wasn't to be tolerated. She'd expressed this view to her teachers several times, and they had warned her it was dangerous to hold unrealistic expectations, that a belief in an unobtainable victory was as deadly as an undefeatable enemy.

What they had said was wise, yet Solant knew, deep down, that if there was a chance to win, she would find it. The longer the training course went on, the more her ideas were put to the test, and the more they were proven correct. The Soldier trainers told her to be more direct, less reliant on trickery and deception, the General trainers said her strategies were too elaborate, with too many points of failure, the Scout trainers said that she couldn't always rely on perfect information, the Mage trainers said that as they and their opponents grew stronger, the battlefield would become too difficult to predict, the Carver trainers said she couldn't be smart enough to foresee every outcome, the Shaper trainers said her allies weren't pets and couldn't always execute her intentions flawlessly, and the Healers told her that victory without sacrifice was the ideal, but often unattainable.

Even still, she would win.

The more her confidence grew, the more her broodmates believed in her. An unshakable unit with complete trust in each other, a group with complete and total knowledge of the capabilities and intentions of every other member.

"Our victory is determined by our training and preparation," Solant said to Poppant, "every advantage we use was honed there."

Poppant looked down on the little superior hatchling, her antennae wagging cheerfully.

"Nobody knows how hard and efficiently you train more than I do," she said, "I've been with you the whole journey, after all!"

Of course, there was a little more to it. It was unusual for a single hatchling to have such wildly divergent ideas, and to command such respect from their peers. By this time, the administration of the Antcademy heavily suspected they had a Champion on their claws. The first that they knew of to come through their classes and not found by the Eldest.

"But now it's time for your next evolution, and as a reward for your exemplary record in Tunnel Ball and every other training exercise, you've been granted special evolutions once again!"

Some of the ants winced, but Poppant hastened to reassure them.

“Fear not! I’ve brought the tea and sugar,” she said, as she clacked her mandibles happily and bustled from one ant to the next.

It was painful, extremely so, but Solant endured the process as best she could before she engaged the menu and chose to evolve.

[Congratulations on reaching the maximum level for your current species. Evolution will allow you to change your form and increase your stats as a monster.

Warning: evolving will make securing XP and Biomass difficult as fewer rewards are given for preying on creatures less evolved than yourself.

Your evolution options are as follows:

- Superior Soldier (Special)
- Superior Scout (Special)
- Superior General (Special)
- Superior Ant Mage (Special)
- Superior Core Shaper (Special)
- Superior Carver (Special)
- Superior Brood Tender (Special)
- Superior Juvenile Queen (Special)
- Superior Healer Ant (Special)
- Juvenile Great General (Special)
- Juvenile War Brain (Special)
- Battle Leader (Special)
- War Planner (Special)

Some interesting special evolution options had appeared and Solant looked at each with interest. Despite how well the Eldest designed the Superior evolutions for each caste, she knew it would be a waste to throw away the precious opportunity to select a special evolution. Each of her choices related to leadership in some way, and she wondered what had caused the System to lean that way.

Perhaps her relatively high ranked leadership or tactics Skills? Or the Eagle Eye mutation which allowed her to envision the battlefield as it would be seen from above? Or the Tactical Awareness mutation she’d added to her brain?

Whatever the reason, she examined each carefully.

The Juvenile War Brain was easy to eliminate. Despite the hefty bonuses it gave to Cunning, it required her to become semi-immobile, basically transforming her into a symbiotic entity that would be grafted

onto another general that she would possess. It didn't gel with her picture of herself, nor the Colony as a whole.

War Planner was suited to directing the course of an entire war, away from the battlefield itself. It helped to organise logistics, plan movements that played out over days and weeks. Important, necessary even, but that wasn't for Solant. She wanted to feel the heat of battle on her carapace.

The Battle Leader was an interesting evolution, giving solid bonuses and auras that would allow Solant to become a potent presence on the front line, enhancing her allies and directing the fight from up close.

It was good, but not exactly what she wanted.

Instead, her gaze fell on the Great General evolution. Only a juvenile, which meant there was potential growth in the future.

[The Juvenile Great General is a leader who has displayed tactical brilliance and a grasp for grand strategy. Lead your troops in a brilliant dance, bewilder and confuse the foe, achieve victory.]

Now *this*, spoke to her.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1146: What Lies Below**

Rip and tear. Rip and tear. Rip and tear.

Holy moly, I'm getting sick of all this ripping and tearing!

The stupid demons are endless! I'd go so far as to say that the demons start coming and they don't stop coming! It's not even that there's just an endless *sea* of demons swirling around us, it's the percentage of those that are overwhelmed by the big daddy demon and come wading through their kind to get at us. And maybe that's only one percent of every demon we see, but that still adds up to INFINITY demons.

Even I'm getting tired, and I'm basically immune to fatigue, for now at least. The further we plunge into the third stratum, the further from the Colony we get and the more tenuous my link through the Vestibule becomes and the more nervous I get.

I've been kind of hoping that I'd connect to the ants below me, in the fourth, since I know our territory is roughly vertical as it descends, but I've got nothing yet. We've known for a long time that the third was deeper than we thought, but this is getting ridiculous.

So far, we've descended four times, and everytime we get down a layer, the mana gets thicker and the environment more unwelcoming.

[Just how deep does this place go?] I complain to AI. [If it gets any hotter, my cooling enchanted rings are going to melt off!]

The giant eyeball of fire stares at me. I can barely even feel the heat coming off him at this point, it doesn't make any difference when the ambient temperature is this high.

[I do not know precisely how deep the third stratum goes, as I have never exited it into the fourth. We are almost as deep as I have ever been, however.]

Well that's something at least. To be honest, I probably don't want to go much further. We're too far from the Colony for the Altar to be as useful as I need it to be. Only the support of Tiny, Crinis, Invidia and Al gives me the confidence to venture this far out, but that faith is starting to wane.

I can endure the constant barrage of attacks pretty well, the others, not so much. And the heat is literally melting Crinis, she's barely able to keep her form together on my back, dripping down my sides like an oil stain. I'm having to maintain a mini ice domain just to keep her going.

[Do you still have the trail?] I demand of the demon.

His eye flashes.

[I have it.]

We didn't come this way on a hunch, we did manage to get ahold of Torrifex's scent. Al and Crinis were the ones to detect him, getting a whiff of his mana on the edge of their awareness. Unfortunately, the big coward is still retreating, probably to meet up with his nefarious siblings.

They won't get away. I'm going to flatten those tier eight demons if it's the last thing I do!

The air is thick with ash and smoke. Lava flows are everywhere. In some places, they still jet up into the air, hundreds of metres high, before falling back to the strata floor. This deep, with the mana so dense, everything I hate about this place is magnified.

[Oop. Look out, Tiny, I think there's another one coming up.]

The ape turns his head with interest, despite the sweat dripping from his matted fur. Poor guy. As we run, we see yet another abandoned fortress.

They've become more and more common as we've descended, which makes sense, since the juicier resources of the stratum are to be found deeper down. Clearly, whoever owned these places has decided that it wasn't worth defending them in the current climate, and fair enough too. Built into cliff walls, or atop jutting peaks that thrust up from the plains, these are often intimidating-looking fortifications, possibly housing gates and precious resources that are now swarming with demons.

At least the little monsters aren't spawning on them, but the more advanced ones are climbing up there to do battle with each other and get a quiet moment to evolve. Two objectives rather at odds with each other.

To keep Tiny's mood up, I've been letting him go and have a nice therapeutic rampage when we pass close by one, just so he can vent his frustration.

All this running with too little battling isn't good for the big ape's mood and it's a real downer when he starts pouting all over the place.

[I think we'll cut close by this one,] I tell him, [so go and have some fun. Invidia, back him up, would you please?]

[I willsssss.]

[FIGHT!] Tiny cheerfully announces before he starts bounding off, electricity sparking from him.

I watch him go before turning my attention back to our surroundings. There's nothing here right now, but that could change in an instant, need to be alert.

[Do we think they're on this level?] I ask AI.

[It is... possible,] he returns, and that's the best news I've had all day. Climbing down those damn pillars is an absolute nightmare.

[Alright then, we'll continue our sweep. Let's hug close to this fortress so we don't get too far apart. How are you doing, Crinis?]

[I'm... just fine, Master.]

[Rubbish. You're struggling, and that's fine. Let me know if I can do more to help. Are your senses still sharp?]

[I'm keeping... an... eye out.]

[Excellent. That's all you need to do, alright? Don't tax yourself.]

She wouldn't even have that ice domain if I hadn't just gone ahead and done it without asking her. Suffering in silence is the Crinis default, and it's a habit I hope she grows out of. Everyone needs help. Heck, I need it all the time.

Hopefully, we track those damn demons down soon, because I am building a lot of pent up rage myself, and I can't wait to unleash it!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1147: Scent of the Beast**

After further hours of roaming back and forth, trying to get a sniff of our prey whilst fending off the endless tide of demons, we finally get another hint.

It's AI who manages to catch a glimpse, and he lets us know with his usual even demeanour.

[I found something,] he says.

[Oh yeah? Like what?]

[I believe I have detected a trace of almost pure ash mana. It is... unusual.]

[Get at the point, man, enough of your waffling!]

[What are... **waffles**?]

[Argh! Damn your endless curiosity! What is so unusual about this ash mana?]

He glares at me, which is quite the intimidating glare, I might add, and I know that the question of breakfast foods has only been delayed, not resolved. Nevertheless, he continues.

[Its purity.]

I swear to gandalf, I'm about to flatten this damn eyeball into a pancake. Perhaps he senses my rising ire, because he elaborates without further prompting.

[I suspect it has come from Pyrixan. Only she, that I'm aware of, could manifest such a powerful and concentrated form of that mana.]

[Goody.]

Is it nice to know we got a hint of our enemies? Yes, of course, but I'd rather it didn't come in the form of manifested destruction in the form of concentrated ash mana.

[Where are they?] I sigh.

[I found the trail at the edge of my awareness. Several kilometres that way.]

[Holy moly, you can sense that far?]

[I can.]

[Impressive stuff. Well, let's get a bit closer and see if you can sniff out anything as we go.]

[Agreed.... Now, **waffles.**]

[Oh for -... fine.]

We begin a more restrained hike in the indicated direction as I explain to the giant eyeball of flame about the joys of breakfast baking. I've been told that waffles are great with syrup; personally, I never had the chance to try it, but these are the little details AI is all too happy to gobble up.

After ten minutes of careful travel, AI pipes up again.

[It's them.]

After all the running around, it's almost a shock to hear him say it so casually.

[What? Are you sure?]

The eyeball flares with intensity.

[I am.]

[Well... that's good news! We finally caught up to them! How about that, gang!]

Tiny gives me an eager thumbs up, Crinis flops a limp tentacle and Invidia simply flutters his wings as he holds his little body aloft, glaring into the distance. That serves as a timely reminder that we aren't in peak shape. Tiny might be eager to battle, but he's been healed dozens of times over the last few days and isn't exactly fresh in terms of stamina. None of us have properly rested for three days, which isn't the worst thing for us to deal with, but we've been more or less constantly fighting for that time.

To top that off, we're almost certainly walking into a trap.



I mean, after dragging me all this way down into the bowels of the third, away from my Colony, it had better be a trap. If they went to all this effort just to inconvenience me, that'd be annoying as heck. I fully expect, nay, *demand* a trap be sprung when I go to fight them.

[Hey, Al, I just had a thought, is it a trap, if you know it's a trap?]

He stares at me.

[I... am unsure what you mean.]

[I mean, is the element of surprise an essential component of a trap, or is it a trap regardless?]

Al just looks confused, so I let the matter drop.

We've been doing our best to restrain our mana signatures, Al and I sharing the burden of handling Tiny's since the big ape can't do it for himself. As we draw closer and closer to the spot Al has detected our fearsome trio, we redouble those efforts.

Not that it's hard to spot us if someone wanted to. Amongst the seething ocean of demons, we stick out like a sore thumb. I'm huge, for one, and we're covered in a moving purple dome of energy that flattens everything around us.

Could I bring down the gravity domain in order to make us less conspicuous? Yes, yes I could.

Will I?

There is no way in heck I'm bringing that thing down. We'd be swept away in a tidal wave of nibbling demon larvae. No way, no how.

We creep forward until we crest a ridge of stone, and there, below us, lies a basin filled with dense, burning hot mana, with thick clouds of ash and smoke curling through it like a malevolent snake.

Even the larvae don't seem to want a part of that basin, since it's one of the precious few places the ankle biters don't appear to spawn.

[M-master,] Crinis wheezes. [I can sense the enemy....]

[You mean those three gigantic demons in the pit? Yeah, I can see them.]

[N-no, not them.]

[We are surrounded. *Interesting.*]

I look behind and I can't see anything except the seething tides of monsters. Al and Crinis have managed to spot something, though.

[Surrounded by what? I mean, other than the obvious....]

[There are strong demons hidden beneath the larvae, thousands of them, all around us.]

[Oh, thank goodness.]

For a second there, when I saw the three big demons down in the basin, I'd feared the worst. Thankfully, they didn't let me down. The trap is a bit simple, a little basic overall, but hey, kudos to those demons for being willing to hide beneath the nasty little biters.

[Alright then, we see them, they see us, I assume, it's time to get down there and get to business. Tiny? You are not allowed to start fighting until I tell you, alright?]

He looks disappointed but nods.

[You do realise these monsters would rip you in half without blinking, right? They're *two* tiers more evolved than you.]

He shrugs.

[Whenever I can't decide if you're brave or stupid, I talk to you and the answer becomes crystal clear. Let's go.]

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1148: Face to Face Except No Faces**

In the centre of the basin stand the three biggest, ugliest, most vicious-looking demons I've ever clapped my thousands of lenses on. Torrifex looks much as I remember him. A brutal, gigantic monster who towers over the rest of us, even Tiny, smoke billowing from his back and curling around his feet.

Now that he isn't moving around as much, I can see a little more detail of the big guy. His skin kind of looks cracked, with burning light shining through, as if he's got lava running through his veins. Those jackalish features aren't any more appealing than they were before, and his wickedly curved claws tipping each of his four arms don't look any nicer than they did before.

His sisters, if anything, are worse.

Pyrixan is hard to even look at. Not because of her terrifying appearance, but because of the slowly revolving cloud of ash that covers her at all moments. I can catch glimpses of the demon within, and what I see isn't great. My impression is of a withered blob of flesh covered in eyes, each of them weeping black ichor.

Lovely.

Somonax, on the other hand, appears in her full glory, not bothering to conceal herself beneath cloaks of ash or smoke.

She's... terrifying.

The first thing I see is the blades. I mean... there's a heck of a lot of blades. Thousands of the damn things. They swish and swirl through the air in elegant motions, like a dance... of DEATH. Thanks to their movement, I can make out the wire-thin threads that link them back to their host. In the middle, Somonax stands like a spider in the centre of a web.

Of the three, she's the most humanoid, two arms, two legs, one head, boring, standard stuff. She's still huge, of course, as a powerful tier eight monster should be.

Her face is... well... let's just say she looks happy! Half of her head is taken up with a wide rictus grin of needle-like teeth, the other half is pretty much just red eyeballs.

It's... a unique look.

A thought intrudes on my mind.

**[Welcome, little worm!]** Torrifex appears to be in a fine mood, bellowing across the mindbridge the moment I allow it to snap into place.

[You're awfully cheery,] I grumble, [quite different from the last time I saw you. As I recall, you scurried away after I dispensed a right whopping.]

The gigantic demon doesn't appear too pleased with this description of events, but his arrogant tone doesn't alter a whit.

**[The Demon God wished you to be tested, and so you were. I had not been sent to kill you, that is the only reason you still live.]**

[You slithered away like a little worm, *that's* the only reason *you* are alive. And now what? Arconi-butt wanted me tested, and I passed, naturally, and then you drag me down here and trap me with your two sisters, for what, exactly? Is this another test, or have you gone off script?]

The Ancients *want* another monster to rise to their level. I don't know exactly why, but they actively try to create claimants to that vacant throne. The Call is just one tool they use, sticking this damn hook in my guts to 'encourage' me to descend and grow stronger. The various monster cults were literally created by the Ancients for this purpose, putting members of the surface races to the task as well, all to find and foster the twentieth Ancient.

So it made sense that I, as one they've put their greedy eyes on, would be tested. What doesn't make sense is that after passing the test with flying colours, Arconidem would then want to lure me down here for a rather uneven three vs one battle to the death.

Which leads me to suspect that Torrifex and his merry crew are no longer acting on the orders of the Demon God. In fact, they may be going *against* his wishes in a particularly narrow way.

**[The Demon God has ordered this stratum be made clean for his return. You and your Colony are not demon, so you will be removed.]**

[That's true. But he didn't order you to kill me, did he?]

The big demon grins all the wider, the fire beneath his skin growing brighter until flames begin to lick through the cracks in his skin. That's all the answer I need.

These morons are jealous that the big daddy demon god paid attention to someone else. As heralds, they were supposed to be the special children, the favourites, but they were sent out to test a piddly little ant.

Or perhaps they aspire to sit on the throne alongside papa? Be the second demon to ascend to Ancient. Would be a rather special achievement, sure to elevate them in the eyes of Arconi-butt.

I sigh.

[Well, come on then. You three are giant sacks of experience and Biomass, just waiting for me to claim. You cannot imagine how hard it's been to afford my mutations.]

In a separate message, I speak to AI.

[Make sure you hit them with everything you've got. We need to unleash everything we have.]

To Crinis, Tiny and Invidia: [Keep the reinforcements off my back for as long as possible. Don't push yourself too far, Crinis, if you don't survive, I'm going to be *super* mad at you.]

[I-I-I won't, Master!]

[What, won't survive?]

[I mean I will!]

[Good then. Let's get to it.]

And just like that, I swagger down into the basin, with three tier eight demons waiting for me. Their auras are staggering, battering me. Torrifex is the same as before, heat and dominance pressing in on me like a vice, but the others are just as bad. The pressure emanating from Pyrixan feels like it's eating away at me, nibbling at the edges of my mind. Somonax... hoo boy. Violence, blood, murder, death. A manic, rabid, gibbering need to cut and thresh boils the air around her, rolling off in waves that try to push me back as I step forward.

I resist them all, staring the three of them down as I languidly click my mandibles.

[Well then. Shall we?]

**HOOOOOOOOWWWWWWLLLLLLLLLLLLL!**

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1149: Spend It All**

It's not easy to create and conceal something like a gravity bomb. The raw mana I pour into the damn thing, and its generally unstructured form, don't exactly lead to a stable, easily hidden spell.

The gravity bomb has always been a weird bit of magic. I first discovered this technique, and mana compression, when I blasted a croca beast directly in the face with a ball of pure mana. It's probably possible to do something similar to a gravity bomb with any sort of mana, a fire bomb, a water bomb, a lava bomb, or whatever.

It's not like I'm utilising some fancy, gravity only spell-form, all I'm doing is taking a huge chunk of mana and packing it into a dense ball before letting it rip.

But for some reason, I can't imagine any other type of mana working nearly as well as my special, purple, crushing magic. Once I compact it, smush it together, the mana itself takes over, sucking in everything it can get, compacting by itself, just like a black hole.

And when I release it, the bomb emits that terrifying **pull**, consuming the air, stirring up the wind and eating even the light. I can't possibly imagine any other mana type could come *close* to the devastation of this spell!

**HOOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWLLLLL!**

The bomb screams through the air, creating a vortex of twisting wind as it goes. This one is *dense*, with a ton of mana packed into it and empowered by the Altar. I didn't hold back even a little when preparing it, and now that this delectable dish has been served, I hope that these three demons manage to enjoy it.

By the by, am I shifting forward by any chance?

I shift my body to look down and, sure enough, my legs are being dragged forward, carving their own little furrows in the ground. In the distance, the bomb continues to fly away from me, and the more I look, the more I realise that I can't really see it properly. The thing is sucking in so much light, I can't even see the edges of it anymore, it's more like a... dark blob, a void, that moves through the air, rocketing toward the target.

So... this thing is pulling me forward... even though it hasn't expanded yet....

Oh... my... Gandalf....

[Duck for cover! Run! Dig! This is a code purple! CODE PURPLE!]

So saying, I spin myself around and throw my massive ant frame forward with all my strength. The moment I hit the deck, I start digging into it, face-hands flying as I rip through the rock, moulding it with earth mana as I go.

Tiny jumps in beside me and starts tearing into the ground with his thick fingers, a look of cold determination on his face, for once. It wasn't easy to impress on the big ape just how serious a code purple is, but I eventually explained that it would crush all his muscles to nothing and he nearly fainted on the spot.

[Invidia, are you down here?]

[Yesssss.]

He doesn't sound happy about it, but I'm glad. In just a few seconds, it's not like we can dig far, but anything is better than leaving ourselves uncovered. I dumped as much gravity mana into this as I could while still concealing the spell. With Invidia helping to hide the mass of power, the bomb absorbed so much mana it had become a pure black sphere, rotating within me like a cold and indifferent beast.

**HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWWWLLLLL!!!!!!**

I turn around, my head poking out of the hole we dug just in time to see the bomb zipping over the final metres. The wind has been whipped into an absolute frenzy, to the point the bomb appears to be the centre of a newly formed hurricane. The winds are so fast, I swear I see larvae being lifted up into the air by their force, carried away to goodness knows where, or, most unfortunately, thrown toward the centre of the mess.

I don't even know what the three demons have done in response to my opening gambit, the chaos caused by the bomb is so total, it's impossible to pay attention to anything else.

When it reaches its destination, the bomb flickers for a moment, and I dig my claws as deep into the rock as I can.

Here it comes....

In a flash, the bomb expands, manifesting itself as a slowly rotating void, like the eye of an all-devouring god.

Then it expands again.

My eyes almost boggle out of my head at the size of the thing. This is *double* the size of my previous biggest bomb.... DOUBLE!

I'm way too close for this! Every damn time, the thing that gets the closest to killing me is my own damn magic!

As the gravity bomb reaches its full size, the most terrifying pull I've ever experienced takes hold, and everything goes wrong. The ground cracks and splits, the air screams, lava boils up, only to be dragged into the void.

Light is gone, sound is gone.

In the vicinity of the spell, *everything* is gone.

Holy moly. What have I created? I'm not sure if I'm more horrified or terrified, as that sickening dragging sensation is working its deadly magic on me as well! I've been rather impressed with my new body, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out that my mass has gone up rather significantly in my last evolution. The Gravity Compressed Diamond is so dense only Tiny can compete with it.

It's great stuff, but it doesn't exactly help when I'm trying to avoid being dragged into a miniature black hole.

[Master Grip (IV) has reached level 11]

Now *that* helps. Precious Grip, save me now!

The scene in front of my many-lensed eyes is a nightmare. The ground is being ripped up, the light is disappearing and the air is being dragged in so fast I can't hear anything except the high-pitched scream. If the wind speed picks up any more, then I'm going to lose an antenna!

I really should have tested a full strength Gravity Bomb before I let one rip.... How many times am I going to fall for this?!

With a mighty bellow, Tiny thrusts his hands forward and buries his fingers deep into the stone below. Must be nice having unbreakable bones! Now if only he had those bones on the outside....

Invidia is protected by clinging to the big ape and Crinis is stuck to me. Al... I'm not sure where Al wound up, I hope he can keep himself far enough away.

Holding tight, I pour every ounce of strength I can muster into holding my ground in the face of the *thing* that I created.

With a little luck, even those tier eight demons wouldn't have managed to survive it.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1150: Who Survives?**

When the black hole finally flickers and fades away, I release my death-grip on the rock with a sigh of relief.

The basin as it had been is pretty much gone. What remains is a twisted, blasted landscape, ripped and torn apart by the strength of the gravity bomb. It doesn't look like I cast a spell, it looks like a natural disaster took place. This is on the same sort of scale as the mountain-exploding eruption magic I hit the termites with.

In fact... if I'd cast this bomb inside the mountain, it may have just hollowed the damn thing out.

Huge chunks of rock have been ripped up, pulled by the unrelenting force of the bomb. They almost look like fingers, curling up from the floor and reaching toward the place the spell had detonated.

Phew.

Considering how much of my precious, non-replenishable Altar resources I poured into that one, the effect needed to be worthwhile! I hardly expect it was enough to kill the tier eight demons, but I'm hoping it was enough to do some damage, at the very least.

Before the ash, smoke and dust can settle, I emerge from my temporary bunker and begin to cautiously advance. My gravity sense is going crazy as the normal order of the planet reasserts itself, causing that sense to be useless, but my vague sense of the future is still present and I rely on that as I edge forward.

### **[Quite the blow, insect! But not enough!]**

Well... I'm glad you're dumb enough to announce it, and give away your general location via the bridge.

[Al! Time to go all out. Unleash everything you've got on them!]

With no need to hide anymore, I conjure a wind to blast the debris away, clearing the field in an instant.

The three demons stand defiant.

A little battered... but defiant nonetheless. I think Torrifex might be regrowing an arm....

Somonax appears to be covered in ichor, but I'm not sure that isn't just her natural state, given all the blades. Pyrixan... is still surrounded by a cloud of disintegration death.

I hadn't expected that bomb, as devastating as it was, to be enough to finish these powerful demons off, but I'd hoped. Ah well, I guess we go in and do it the old fashioned way.

I snap my mandibles together before I begin to run forward, while Al gathers power into his eye and unleashes a heatray as thick as a car at Somonax. The grinning demon slashes out with her thousand swords, slicing through the mana and cutting the beam apart, but it's enough cover for me to get closer.

All of my mind constructs kick into overdrive as they weave innumerable threads of mana, each contributing to the greater whole. I don't have bottomless gravity reserves, so I'll need to rely on my omni-elemental construct at times in this fight. The little stuff won't do, either. Bolts or even spears of ice won't do squat down here, the demons are resistant to heat as well, which leaves me having to rely on something a little more solid.

Spears of stone, as dense and thick as I can make them, begin to hurtle at Torrifex. The big demon brushes the first few aside contemptuously, but they don't stop, and he quickly grows frustrated, fire billowing from his maw.

I use the chance to close in on Pyrixan, jaws open wide as the swirling cloud of ash sits waiting for me to approach.

### **VOID CHOMP!**

Empowered by the Altar, the bite attack is dramatically more powerful. The void forms between my mandibles, drawing Pyrixan in and tearing away fragments of her ash-shield, revealing a little more of the amorphous eye-blob that she is.

How do you like these apples?!

My mandibles slam shut with a deafening roar and Pyrixan... just takes it. The swirling ash condenses around her and, though it buckles under the weight of my bite, it doesn't break.

OUCH!

I release my grip and leap back as the ash begins to eat into my mandibles, dissolving them just through contact. Nasty stuff.

But the demoness doesn't want to let me go, the cloud of ash surges after me like a living thing. Wherever it touches my chitin, it strips away a tiny fragment of the diamond, but enough tiny fragments will add up quickly if I get surrounded by the stuff.

I pour more power into the gravity domain, but it's ineffective at keeping the drifting clumps of malevolent mana away, so I turn it off and switch strategies.

Time to introduce this demon to the business district!

POW! POW! POW! POW!

I fire wide blasts of acid in all directions, coating huge chunks of the ash in the stuff.

At first, it might seem like a nonsense move, but my acid has some beneficial properties. For starters, it eats away at mana! Not quickly, but it does do it, and secondly, it propagates itself, which means the ash that I shot will be destroyed eventually, the acid won't run out and isn't likely to be removed.

Gweheheheh!

How do you like that, you disintegrating demon of doom? Give me a little more time and you'll have no ash left at all!

Oh wait, she's producing more.



DAMMIT.

With her shield dispersed to attack me, the full glory of Pyrixan is revealed, and I have to say, I'm not a fan. She's like... a stalk, or... a chunky, twisted and bulbous pillar, covered in eyes. From the top of the stalk, a solid stream of ash is emerging, billowing out of her like smoke from a chimney.

Why the heck do you look so freaky?! Demons have such a ridiculous variety of evolutions and appearances, it's crazy! Are you really trying to tell me that this *thing* and AI AND Torrifex all share the same underlying species?! One is an eye made of fire, one is a four armed, smoke-billowing, jackal-headed juggernaught and the other is a... *thing*.

Only one solution to this mess.

More acid!

As if there's a holiday special and my produce is marked to clear, I unload rapid-fire acid shots at the demon, the wide area spray covering every possible avenue of escape.

Of course, Pyrixan doesn't look that quick, so she doesn't bother to dodge. Instead, she uses her newly produced ash to form a new shield around herself, which promptly gets coated in acid. So she starts to make more.

Of course, during this time, I'm still running and dodging from the remnants of the first batch she trained on me.

So annoying!

Oh, it looks like Torrifex got sick of smacking my spears away. That explains the giant fireball heading my way.

EMPOWERED DASH!