

## Chrysalis 1171

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#### Chapter 1171: Authority of the Great One

“Well, that’s a little intimidating,” Sumant remarked as she stared at the Eldest across the pitch, slamming those enormous mandibles together.

“We can’t afford to let the Eldest affect our spirit,” Leonidant urged them.

“Easy for you to say, you aren’t likely to get chomped,” the big soldier pointed out.

“The Eldest won’t bite any of us,” Solant said with confidence.

“How are you so sure?” Sumant asked.

“Because if they did, any of us would be instantly killed.”

“Ah.”

“So what are they going to do?”

“I think... they may decide that we have broken the rules... and now, they can as well.”

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“The Great One is demanding action from the Endless, and now they are about to get it. The Endless are setting their formation, and we are about to see them attempt to achieve the seemingly impossible, to score against this overwhelming and dominant opponent that is staring them down across the pitch.”

[Exactly. The more the rounds go past, the less likely it seems, but here we go. The Endless take possession of the ball and they are off!]

“... or are they? There’s a distinct lack of movement down there on the pitch from what I can see. In fact, are the Endless lying down?”

[Strange, almost bizarre scenes here at the Stadium? Is this a new strategy from the depths of the Endless’ playbook? Or... Wait! I’m sensing something! Look closely down there, they’re sinking!]

“Yes! It appears as if the Endless are sinking into the pitch! The crowd is bewildered here, unsure what’s going on, but it seems as if the Eldest is manipulating the stone directly under their claws and dragging them down!”

[This is... unusual, to say the least. To execute this kind of magic... normally, it would be impossible to trap your targets without them moving away from the ground you were manipulating. Somehow, the Eldest was able to do it with such speed and control that the moment the round started, they were already trapped! If you’d told me before the round that this could be done practically on the pitch, I’d have called you mistaken!]

“Rooted in place, the Endless are completely incapable of advancing the ball. All we are waiting for is the referee call... and there it is!”

**ROOARRRR!**

“They may not understand it, but the crowd is excited to see the Eldest continue to dominate this match!”

[An incredible display of mana control, somehow the Eldest was able to take hold of the Endless before they were able to lift a leg from the ground. It’s difficult for me to explain just how hard it is to achieve this, the speed and precision required are on a whole other level from normal magic.]

“I’ll have to take your word for it. I have to say, seeing the team that has terrorised the league recently locked down and unable to make a play at all is a little bewildering, to say the least.”

[It’s unlike anything we’ve ever seen before, that’s for sure. A part of me wonders how they’re going to counter this approach from the Eldest, but I’m not sure that they can! Perhaps, without the element of surprise, they won’t be caught in the same manner. I’m not aware of how the Eldest was able to snare them so fast, but I can’t bring myself to think they can do it so fast that it can’t be reacted to.]

“For their sake, and for the sake of exciting Tunnel Ball, I hope so as well! We are lining up now for the Eldest’s next offensive possession, and what do you think we are expecting here?”

[That entirely depends on the Eldest’s mood. If they’re satisfied with the beat down they just put on the opposition, we may see regular play. If not...]

**CRUNCH!**

**ROOAARRRR!**

[... then they may just pass the ball back to the Endless so they can smash them again. And that’s exactly what’s happened!]

**CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!**

“Again, the Great One taunts the opposition! What sort of lesson will the strongest ant in the Colony deal to this young group of opponents?”

[It’s easy to forget just how young they are, given their incredible, flawless record here in the Stadium, but the Eldest doesn’t appear to care one whit for any of that! So you’ve defeated a string of hatchlings? What’s that to me? This is how it is in the deep Dungeon, and you little ones need to learn!]

“And the next stage of that lesson is about to begin. Once again, rapid fire rounds here at the Stadium, and we are on track for the shortest match in the history of the sport! An unconventional match in every way, ladies, gentlemen and gentleants!

“The Endless take up their formation, Solant holding the ball, but they seem a little hesitant... very unlike this team to act in this manner.”

[Absolutely. Nevertheless, they set themselves. It’s a wide look this time, and I can already tell they are a little jumpy, not wanting to be caught again. I expect them to jump out the second the round starts....]

“And there we go! Right you are, once again, the Endless have leapt from their starting positions, but they’re looking a little sluggish out the gate, are their legs being held down despite the fast movement? And the Eldest? What’s the play?”

[A COLOSSAL amount of mana is being manipulated here, and we are about to see... yes, it's... it's... A WAVE! A humongous wave has erupted just in front of the Eldest and it is raging across the pitch! Can the Endless summon any possible response? Their movements are uncharacteristically slow, and the mages are struggling to form a barrier of earth!]

"It's no use!"

**ROOAAAARRRR!**

"The Endless are swept away by the tide that crashes into the touchline and sprays out over half the crowd! They don't seem to mind, though, too excited by this incredible spectacle!"

[The Endless are huddled together, floating on the top of the now filled pitch, but the Eldest is very generously using their own energy to disperse the water, so we should be back to normal, dry conditions in no time.]

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**Chapter 1172: Lopsided**

Gweheheh. Feeling a little heavy over there? Is your guilty conscience weighing you down?

Or is it the weight of the gravity well I've snuck underneath the stadium yanking you down to the ground?!

Muahahahahaha!

It's not as if I even need to do it. I *could* turn their entire half of the pitch to muck and bury them in it, or wash them away with a solid wave of water *without* having to bind the Endless to the ground, but I'm doing it anyway.

They dare to try and poison the great me?! I have no choice but to exact terrible vengeance!

At the same time, I also want to get this match over with. The Call is ridiculously painful and I'm desperate to leave this stratum and get deeper into the Dungeon as soon as possible.

At this rate, I might end up calling Brilliant to warp me out of the Stadium in front of the whole crowd the moment the match is done. I'm struggling over here!

I've got three more turns of offence, which I'll obviously skip. I've scored a point already, all I need to do is prevent those hatchlings from scoring one and I win anyway.

Let's get this over with!

When everything is set for the next round, I smash the ball immediately, and then smash my mandibles together in another display of primal intimidation. The crowd loves it, so I give them a little sugar, waving my antennae toward the seats and ensuring every corner of the stadium gets a look at my best profile angles.

Time to humble some hatchlings again.

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“Any idea why we’re being pulled down into the ground when the rounds start?” Washingtant asked. “I can barely move.”

“The Eldest is breaking the rules,” Solant replied, carefully watching their opponent across the pitch. “Doubtless they are using a type of mana that is banned, something advanced that is creating this downward pressure.”

“At this point, I’m not even sure they have to,” Leonidant muttered. “The Eldest is *much* stronger than we anticipated.”

“Yet they refuse to score, and there lies our hope of victory. The Eldest will complete their final offensive round before we do. If we conserve our energy, and conceal our tactics, it’s possible we could even the score on the final play.”

“It wouldn’t be a win,” Leonidant pointed out.

Solant clacked her mandibles solemnly.

“But it wouldn’t be a loss. Unless the cake we fed the Eldest shows some powerful effects soon, I believe it may be the best we can hope for.”

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“We return to the Endless now. It’s their offensive possession, but the Great One has been giving them no room to move, no room to breathe in these last few exchanges.”

[You aren’t wrong, Peter. Overwhelming magical power has been the name of the game for the Eldest and so far, the Endless just don’t seem to have an answer. Their legs appear almost glued to the ground with indecision, something we generally don’t associate with this team.]

“They take up their formation now, hoping to change the flow of the match. Another new look from them, very wide but rather thin, with almost the whole team on the forward line, ready to advance.”

[I’m curious to see how they move in this round, and just what the Eldest is planning to do, we’ve seen different mana types from them round to round and this could be something new again.]

“Here we go! IMMEDIATE wall of fire! Look at the blaze!”

[I can’t believe how fast that was, and it’s within regulation height as well.]

“Right across the midline, a blazing wall of flame so intense the heat is radiating through the shielding, and I’m telling you listeners at home, I can feel the sweat building on my forehead as I speak. What’s the reply from the Endless? Once again, they’ve been slow to get off the mark, very unusual for these ants, but they *are* advancing, forming an earth dome to try and combat the flames....”

[I really don’t think, no, it isn’t going to work! The Eldest is pumping so much mana into that fire the stone and dirt is becoming red hot the moment they draw too close. If they can’t quell the flames, they won’t have any hope of advancing.]

“The mages prepare to do just that. A multi-pronged approach, I believe?”

[Good eyes, Peter! Yes, the Endless are manipulating a combination of air, water and earth to try and defeat the wall of flames. Earth to smother the fire, air to thin out the oxygen and the water to douse the flames. It's unusual to utilise such a roundabout method, but when going against a stronger mage, they may think this will give them a chance.]

"Time is running low, however. They *have* to advance and do it soon. The Endless approach the wall...."

**CRUNCH!**

**ROOAAAAR!**

"AND THE ELDEST SPRINGS THE TRAP! Lunging through the flames in the blink of an eye, the Great One scatters their opponents and smashes the ball! Just like that, it's over!"

[Distracting the opponent with the fearsome fire wall, only to abandon the spell and make a tough, physical play to shatter the ball. The Eldest really is putting on a show in terms of their all around ability in this game. As good as they are, the Endless can't match them in magic, or in physicality.]

"Those lightning fast lunges... I know I've said it a lot, but the action really does happen as quickly as I blink. One moment, the Great One is in one spot, the next, in another."

[I'll have to take your word for it, since I lack eyelids, but yes, I too can't see it happen. In addition to the speed, the *strength*, the *balance*, the *precision*, all of it is at an unprecedented level. I honestly don't know how any ant or team of ants could hope to stop that.]

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### **Chapter 1173: Deception**

*They want me to talk to the generals now. Of course they do. I should NEVER have agreed to do this. What are the generals even going to get from this? You're soldiers, you're smart, you know what it's all about.*

*My intention was for the generals to lead from the front. A big body that could provide auras, leadership, directions and strategy from the thick of the action. I probably shouldn't have called you generals, to be honest; captains is probably closer to what I envisioned, but eh, it doesn't matter now.*

*What does matter, is that you keep doing what you're doing. I've never met or seen a general who wasn't doing everything they possibly could to lead their siblings to the best of their ability. You can't be perfect, I don't expect it and you shouldn't either. Just do your best. We're all proud of you.*

*- Excerpt from the Eldest's message to the Generals.*

**CRUNCH!**

**ROOAAAAR!!!!**

"Once again, the Eldest declines to take their turn on offence!"

[It seems as if the Eldest is warming up to the crowd finally as well. They roar in appreciation as the majestic ant poses for them, showing off those impressive mandibles and shiny carapace.]

Clackclackclackclackclackclack!

“And it seems as though your siblings on the dome are appreciating the display as well.”

[The Eldest has always been... I don't want to say *eccentric*, but considered a leading light amongst the Colony in terms of showing us what we can aim to be. I wouldn't be surprised if there was a young ant out there right now, absorbing every action of the Eldest and dreaming of doing the same one day.]

“I thought you didn't dream?”

[I've picked up the odd human metaphor. Clearly, I spend too much time with you.]

“You wound me, Commentant. I wonder if I've picked up any antlike habits?”

[I've noticed you cleaning your antennae quite frequently.]

“I... what?”

[That was a joke.]

“Ah.”

[The Endless are taking to the field, this is going to be their second to last turn on offence and the big question is, can they possibly hope to deal with what the Eldest is serving them? Fire magic? Too strong. Wind magic? Too strong. Earth magic? Too strong. Water magic? Way too strong. And then those lunging tackles. We haven't seen any counter for that either. What can they possibly do to try and score?]

“The space control from the Great One has been absolutely absurd. It's been such a long time since the Endless have been able to take a step past the midline.”

[Well, they have two more chances to try and make it happen. I, for one, hope they can do it. What an incredible achievement that would be, and what a reaction they would get from this crowd.]

“It would be intense, of that I have no doubt. Here's hoping they can find a way and add even more drama to this match.”

“The Endless are taking their formation now. I have to say, the crowd is most likely anticipating how the Great One is going to stop them as opposed to what the offence will do. They've been stopped *hard* in their tracks the entire second half.”

[We did see some incredible plays from them early in the match, but over the last few rounds, this has been a one-sided affair indeed. The team lowers themselves. Leonidant with the ball, looking to push down the right flank. Does the Eldest shift position to align with the ball carrier? Not at all, straight down the middle.]

“Here we go! *Another* sluggish start from the Endless as they drag their feet across the pitch, but they *are* moving. What are we seeing from the Eldest at the moment? Nothing in response so far! This is surprising.”

[Oh, the Eldest is doing something alright. A furious amount of mana is being vacuumed in and manipulated, whatever is coming is going to be *big*. The Endless' mages are trying to counter, but they are swatted away like hatchlings from the Queen's biscuits.]

“Meanwhile, Leonidant is gaining momentum. Sumant and Taylant are taking the point, and they are making a run for it! They approach the midline, still no movement from the Eldest!”

**BOOOOOM!**

“An absolute cacophony of noise erupts here in the Stadium! What am I even looking at?!”

[INCREDIBLE SPELLWORK from the Eldest! Unsatisfied with crushing with one element, they’ve utilised all four in a grand storm that is smashing the Endless back into their own half! Howling wind! Dancing fire! Crushing earth! Slashing water! An absolute MASTERWORK of base element mana!]

“The Endless are absolutely helpless in the face of this storm! They try to hold, they try to rally! It’s not working! I can barely make out the details down there, the pitch is filled with roiling elements. An earth barrier is shattered before it can properly form, Sumant and Taylant are trying to shelter the others behind their bulk, but it just isn’t working!”

**ROOOOOAAARRR!**

[Aaaand it’s over! The Endless have been driven back to their own touchline, that ends their penultimate offence!]

“The crowd is going absolutely berserk here in the Stadium. They’ve never seen anything like this, and I’m not surprised, since I haven’t either.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, there’s only two words to describe what we’ve witnessed here today: Magic Tunnel Ball.”

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### **Chapter 1174: The Rising Sun**

Hmph.

I have crushed their will. I can see it in their eyes, I can sense it through the Vestibule and I can smell it in the air. The hope has been drained out of the Endless and I take no joy in it.

A little pride, perhaps, but certainly no joy.

It would be a thing of Dark Anthony to enjoy the demolition of this team and their talented, skillful leader, humbling them in front of this enormous audience.....

*Yesssssss. It feelssss good!*

NO! Down, dark one! I reject you utterly!

*Next tiiiiiiiime. I’m alwayssssssssss waiiiiiiting.....*

Phew, that was close.

Can never be too careful in these situations. Dark Anthony never truly sleeps, but keeps one eye open, watching for a moment of weakness. I will not subject my siblings to that evil!

Still, it’s plain as day that the match is over. I have one more offence, which I will skip, thank you very much. I don’t enjoy the sensation of unbearable pain any more than the next person.

After that, I can stuff the Endless into their little box and drag them down to the fourth, where I can finally relax.

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CRUNCH!

ROAAAAARRR!

“As expected,” Solant remarked, her scent flat and emotionless.

“I suppose the Eldest has proven their point,” Leonidant said, “they only need to score against us once, since we can’t get close to scoring against them.”

She glanced at the other members of the team and noted the unusual air around them. She almost couldn’t find a word to describe it. This was something strange, something she’d never experienced before.

Despondent?

Perhaps it was to be expected; they had never lost before, that was true, but more than that, they had never been in a position where they *didn’t think they could win*.

But she did.

“Solant. What’s the plan?”

She *always* had a plan.

“This is what we will do,” the little general said carefully. “There is no plan. Play naturally, in formation, and react to my instructions when they happen.”

Leonidant was confused.

“So... is there a plan, or isn’t there?”

“What I have,” Solant said, looking directly at her scout, “is not a plan, but more of an idea.”

“But can we score?”

“No,” she said, emphatically. “Believe that completely. We *cannot* score.”

She looked at the others.

“Don’t perform in a way that will disappoint yourselves. At the very end, have pride in your own standards, and your ability to keep them.”

And that was all it took to firm their resolve. The Endless took their positions for the final play of the game.

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“It all, comes down, to this. One final offence, one final attack, to save the unbeatable reputation of the Endless. They can no longer win the game, but by forcing a draw, they can avoid losing it, Commentant.”



[Yes indeed, but that doesn't seem all that likely. Staring them across the pitch, the Eldest is clearly done with this game. All the antics, the strategies, the tactics, so far, it hasn't meant anything in the face of overwhelming power.]

"I have to agree. This seems like the end of an era. No one will ever be able to say that the Endless didn't lose to a worthy opponent. There isn't a single team I've ever seen, not the Pink Blitz at the height of their powers, that I would back against this one ant."

[Naturally. The Eldest is the oldest, wisest and strongest in the entire Colony. We may be siblings, but there isn't a one of us who doesn't know of their incredible achievements.]

"The Endless are lining up now, taking a... surprisingly generic formation. I'm sure they have something planned, but this is about as plain an attacking look as I've ever seen from them. Surely they haven't given up?"

[I doubt it. It may be easy to become disheartened in the face of the overwhelming strength they've been fighting, but if there were one team who would rather their carapace break than lose, I'm sure it's this one.]

"Couldn't agree more. Solant takes possession of the ball, very high up in the formation, right behind the two soldiers. Bold, risky play, even against normal opposition."

[AND HERE WE GO! The Endless charge forward, rushing to the midline, and the Eldest waits in their own half. I can feel mana churning once again, something big is coming!]

"Something different *is* happening, as expected of this team! Solant has climbed onto the backs of her two charging soldiers in a classic chariot strategy, and the scouts have fallen in to run alongside."

[The mages are desperately trying to maintain control of the mana around the formation. They know they can't hope to stop whatever the Eldest is doing, but if they prevent a direct attack on the ball... they may have a chance!]

"As before, they are just that bit sluggish... as if weighed down by the immense pressure of the moment. Regardless, they charge forward! It's a stirring sight!"

BOOOM!

[An enormous wall of fire erupts across the midline as the Eldest once again stamps their authority on the game! You WILL NOT cross this line!]

ROOAAAAR!

"But what's happening?! The Endless rush forward, heedless of the danger!"

[That fire is much too hot for them to pass through alive! If they can't dampen the flames.....!]

"Would the Endless really rather die than lose?!"

[I can't watch!]

"The formation contracts even further, the scouts are piling onto the soldiers' backs, and they are raising Solant high! I've never seen ANYTHING like this! Are they SERIOUSLY trying to fling her over the fire?!"

[SURELY NOT! But... BUT YES! Solant soars majestically through the air and over the fire, ball gripped tightly in her mandibles!]

“A brilliant strategy! They’ve finally made it across the midline, but for how long?! The Eldest rises to meet her, mandibles wide! This CANNOT end well for the little general!”

CLACK!

ROAAAAAARRR!

“I CANNOT believe my eyes! She’s fallen like a stone, straight through the mandibles of the Eldest! She’s running through their legs and straight to the touchline! WHAT IS HAPPENING?!”

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#### **Chapter 1175: Slam the Door**

Even now, Solant did not allow herself to think of victory. She tried not to think at all. As she raced underneath the Eldest’s carapace, between their legs and out from under their abdomen, she thought only of moving her legs, two at a time.

The ball gripped tight between her mandibles, the general tried not to focus on the touchline, looming ever larger in her vision.

She tried not to think about her broodmates, those on the pitch with her, and those watching from above, who had entrusted her with their future.

She very much tried not to think about the massive ant behind her, radiating a suffocating aura of power.

How many times had the Endless been pushed against the wall? How many times had they come out on top? This would be no different. It *had* to be no different. She *refused* to lose.

Her core throbbed inside her body, the ichor pulsed within her monstrous flesh. Every fibre of her being *strained* to go just that little bit faster, to reach just that little bit further!

The touchline was so close! She wished it was closer, wished she had already arrived. If she could touch this ball to the stone, then this burden would be lifted, for just a little while, and she could continue to lead her team with no blemish upon their record.

She was almost there!

The crowd was screaming, she was dimly aware. A roar of voices and clacking mandibles that shifted the stone beneath her claws and sent her antennae to quivering. The force of it was overwhelming, but there was simply no room in her mind for it.

She *couldn’t* lose!

One final leap, one final stretch for the touchline. She pushed off with all her strength, flying through the air, ball gripped firmly in her mandibles.

Only a few metres! Not even a second of time, and it would be over!

Except... she wasn't moving?

"Are you done?" The Eldest huffed irritably.

Solant shifted her head and realised she had become gripped by the giant ant in mid-air, leaving her suspended, mere centimetres from her goal.

Held above the ground, no matter how she struggled, there was no way she could overcome the remaining distance. That tiny gap may as well have been an insurmountable chasm.

With one motion, the Eldest raised their head and turned, pulling Solant away from the touchline, and pulling her heart from her chest.

It was over.

She had lost.

"Can you really call it a loss when you never had a chance to win?" the Eldest mused. "Probably, yes. You lose, Solant. Which means you and your little team are mine for the next little while. Are we clear?"

"... Yes."

"Excellent. We'll be heading to the fourth stratum as soon as I can possibly arrange it."

The Eldest put her down amongst her teammates, making sure to take the ball and crush it with a flex of their mana. The crowd continued to go berserk and the giant ant flexed and posed for them for a moment.

"Are you alright?" Leonidant asked as she approached her general.

"I'm fine," Solant replied without emotion.

"I can't believe you got so close, even with everything stacked against us...."

"It wasn't close enough."

"That's not your fault."

"Isn't it?"

Leonidant took a step back, pushed away by the intensity of her leader's scent.

"S-Solant?"

"Whoa, hold it right there." A thick leg slammed down between them, right in front of the general's face, followed by an overly long antenna that poked her in the head. "You're taking this far too hard. In my opinion, you aren't focused on quite the right things, but we can put that aside for now, there's time for discussion soon enough. Before we go, though, there's something I want to know."

"What?"

"How did you poison that cake?"

The Eldest sounded curious, not even mad, but Solant ducked her head a little before she replied.

“I had learned that too much sugar caused ants to lose concentration and behave somewhat erratically, so I had the cake prepared with ten times the normal amount.”

“You... tried to poison me... with *sugar*?”

“I would not put aside *any* weapon in the pursuit of victory.”

“Nono, I get that... it’s just... that’s *adorable*. Alright. I’ve had enough of this. Get your crew together, the full twenty, I can’t take any more of this.”

When the other ten arrived, the Eldest counted them, nodded then raised their head.

With a flash of light, and a ripping sound, the pitch became empty.

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“The most one-sided 1-0 match in history.”

[You aren’t wrong, Peter. Despite her heroics at the end, somehow managing to slip her way past the Eldest for a second, it wasn’t enough. Solant and her Endless have finally tasted defeat at the mandibles of the mightiest ant in the Colony.]

“It’s a shame, really. I can’t imagine seeing the Great One return to this stratum again any time soon, if at all. We, and the audience lucky enough to witness this spectacle live, may be the very last people to see the Eldest’s greatness in person at this depth.”

[I believe you’re right. And what a spectacle it was. It’s been my privilege, listeners, to bring you this commentary and let you share in this unprecedented and unrepeatable moment in the history of our game and our civilisation. Long live the Colony!]

“Long live Tunnel Ball!”

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### **Chapter 1176: Sweet Relief**

I’m not a huge fan of my insides turning into my outsides, or having my carapace replaced with candy floss, or indeed, of being flattened/expanded into less/more dimensions than I’m comfortable with.

Having said that, the moment when Brilliant drops me into the fourth stratum makes it more than worthwhile. Instantly, I feel a wave of relief wash over me as both my gasping core relaxes, and the insatiable gnawing of the Call fades away.

It’s still there, obviously, but no longer is it the maddening, mind-bendingly painful yanking on my soul, merely a comfy nail through the foot.

Nothing I can’t handle!

“Thanks, Brilliant,” I sigh in relief, “I appreciate the trip.”

“Are you feeling well, Eldest?” the little maniac says, prodding me in the side. “This is unlike you.”

“Pah. Don’t you have something you should be blowing up? Shoo.”

“Why yes! I do! If you find yourself in need of my services again, don’t hesitate to call my name! BRILLIANT!”

With a pop, she vanishes from sight and I allow myself to slump to the floor in relief.

Bliss.

It doesn’t last long, though.

[MASTER!]

Glomp!

From nowhere, an enormous blob of shadow flies from the crevices in the ceiling above me and latches onto my carapace. Crinis wastes no time expanding herself to wrap around my abdomen, poking and prodding as she goes.

[I’m fine. I’m *fine*. Nice to see you, Crinis. Stop poking! I haven’t been gone *that* long. I didn’t even do anything dangerous!]

[Then why did you leave us behind? We could have come too!]

[It’s not that easy for Brilliant to haul powerful monsters around. I thought it was better if you three waited for me down here. Did Tiny and Invidia make it alright?]

[They’re fine,] she sniffs. [The Mother Tree didn’t really want to move us, but she’s still in debt to the Colony, so she couldn’t refuse.]

[She’s *already* trying to weasel out of the deal? Lousy matchstick! I’ll go have a word when I get a chance. In the meantime, stop poking me and say hello to Solant and her crew.]

[Who is Solant?]

[Our new Colony champion. She’s an interesting one, tried to poison me.]

[She WHAT?!]

[Hak! You’re going to snap my antennae! Let go! Let go!]

[Should I annihilate this FILTH that dared to harm you?]

[Calm breaths. I mean... you don’t breathe, do you? It’s fine. She tried to poison me with... heh... sugar. It was funny more than anything else. Don’t hurt her.]

[... fine.]

[Alright then. Now behave, I’ve got a few things to do, then I’ll chase down the other two and we can debrief.]

With my madness inducing shadow monstrosity mollified for the moment, I turn my attention to the twenty ants before me. They look a little overwhelmed at the dramatic increase in mana concentration compared to where they were before, which is understandable.

Except for Solant. She's studying everything with that restless, analytical mind of hers. I can practically hear the cogs turning in her head, and they ain't turning slow.

"Well, I suppose some congratulations are in order."

"Congratulations?" Solant asks.

"On your early graduation from the Antcademy. Well done! Who!"

"We're... finished?" another ant pipes up. "Does that mean we can go serve the Colony?"

"In a sense, yes. In another, more realistic sense, no. You've been enrolled in the Colony's most prestigious and exclusive postgraduate program. You get to learn directly from the greatest and best teacher in the entire family!"

"When are they getting here?"

THWACK!

"I'm talking about me! Sheesh! Where's the respect due to the Eldest? Now, Solant, let's have a quick chat. The rest of you relax for a second."

I pull the general to one side where we can speak privately. Brilliant was kind enough to deposit us inside the chamber I evolved in. Spacious, and, it appears, quite abandoned for the moment, we are very much alone inside, which is nice.

"Recovered from the smashing defeat I inflicted on you yet?"

She glares at me.

"No."

"Good! Nothing like a bit of burning anger to drive you forward. I've got high hopes for you, Solant. I see some qualities in you that are... rare, to say the least, in the Colony. You're going to become a *very* important member of the family before all is said and done, I'm sure."

She eyes me a little sceptically and I have to remind myself that unlike the previous two champions, *this* one wasn't raised by me. She's been taught and reared like every other ant, with the love and care of the best monster mums the Dungeon has ever seen: the Brood Tenders! My... unorthodox methods will seem almost cruel by comparison.

"I don't really understand what you mean."

In that moment, I decide I'm going to take an even more unusual approach, the direct approach!

"Are you aware what a Champion monster is?"

"No."

"Think of them as exceptional, unique members of a particular monster type. It happens rarely, but sometimes a monster is simply born *better*, with an already formed core in some instances. But it's more than just better, also *different*. In a species like ours, they go from rare to ultra, super, giga-rare. In fact, inside the Colony, there are only *three*."

"I... see."

Unlike Vibrant and Brilliant, Solant is quick on the uptake. I mean, Vibrant is *quick*, but not in this sense, and Brilliant is... intelligent... but also extremely dense.

"You just met one of them, just a moment ago. Brilliant is a Mage quite unlike any other, obsessed with uncovering secrets and mysteries. She's turned herself into an unearther of arcane truth without peer. Vibrant is another. Obsessed with speed, she's the fastest ant in the Colony and leader of an independent, hit-and-run style force that rushes all over the Dungeon putting out fires. Without doubt the ant who covers the most ground and helps in the most places."

"And the third... is me?"

"Exactly! Your teachers saw the signs long ago, and even you can name them now. A unique approach and methods, a certain, unexplained magnetism that inspired loyalty in followers, and rare, unusual evolutions. Right?"

The little ant is silent for a long moment, before she nods.

"So, what does it mean for me?"

"I have no doubt that when we are done you will be the greatest battlefield general this family has and likely will ever see. Over time, your broodmates over there will be joined by more and more ants who are inspired to follow in your footsteps, until you have your own army, trained to fight exactly how you want. The most dominant and unbeatable fighting force in the Colony!"

"I had always intended for that to be the case."

"Well, it may not have panned out quite how you wanted. You also intended to go undefeated, right?"

"..."

"Exactly."

I pat her on the carapace.

"But that obsession, that willingness to do things no other ant will do, to pay the price that no one else is willing to pay. I *like* that. Some might say it's a form of madness, but so what? Would you rather be mad, or let the Colony fail?"

Unlike my two previous students, Solant takes her time to think over my question and consider her answer before she offers it. When she finally replies, I know that she means it with her whole heart.

"I would rather be mad," she says quietly.

"Of course you would! Me too! Never fear. When we're done, you will *never* lose again."

"Good," she replies, her eyes smouldering.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1177: Training Begins**

“Well, well. Looks like someone was finally taught a lesson,” Sloan said as she appeared in the chamber, looking quite smug.

“What are you on about?” I ask.

“Just noting that a certain, overconfident general, has learned that she isn’t always right, and can’t always win, regardless of the circumstances.”

Sheesh. Since when did generals in the Colony get this petty?

“Yes, yes. The tier four general has learned she can’t overcome a tier seven mythic monster. Whoo. Now scuttle off, don’t you have to manage the defence against the wave?”

The atmosphere between Solant and Sloan is oddly tense and I’m sure there’s a story there, but I can get to the bottom of it later. Tiny and Invidia have found their way into the chamber over the past hour, along with various ants who’ve checked in and filled me in on the goings on down here.

“I’ll be out of your antennae in a moment, Eldest,” Sloan assures me, “I’ll just take Solant with me and we will be on our way.”

I’m confused.

“Why would you be taking Solant with you?”

She hesitates.

“So... I can... teach her? If she’s going to learn the ways of the Colony’s generals, what better way than to learn from Victor and I?”

She’s not even finished her spiel before I’m shaking my head.

“Absolutely not. I’ll be taking care of Solant’s education on the finer points of generalship. The two of you are much too important to be spending time training hatchlings.”

Sloan stares at me, and I can tell she wants to say that I’m the one who’s too important to be training new ants, but I don’t give her a chance.

“Thanks for dropping by, Sloan! Excellent work as always, good chat and all that. Get back to doing what you do best, I don’t want to take another moment of your time.”

With one leg, I push the general to the exit and talk over her protests until she’s out of the chamber and then resolutely turn my back.

“Thank you, Eldest,” Solant says quietly.

“Pah! I’ve no idea why you don’t get along, but I’m hardly going to let the next champion be trained in a *conventional* way. What’s the point?! The great thing about the champions in the Colony is their unique way of thinking. Sloan and Victor would want you to operate ‘by the book’, and you’d turn out to be a fine general, I’ve no doubt, but your mould-breaking tactics and envelope-pushing mentality would go to waste.”

“What’s an envelope?”



“Never mind!”

Then I get to thinking.

“Now... I suppose... the best way to train you to be a better general is... to have you plan and execute as many battles as possible. Level your Skills, get some XP, and test your ideas.”

I nod to myself.

“Well... that makes sense to me, at least. How do you feel about it?”

The little ant hesitates.

“This is... moving a little fast, Eldest.”

I suppose she’s never led her squad into a proper fight. The training the Colony provides is excellent, and they’ve certainly fought monsters many times, but that isn’t exactly the same as fighting against a wave in the fourth stratum.

“Not a problem, we can ease you into it. Collecting information before devising a plan is core to your strategy, right? I’ll take you and your squad out hunting, you can snipe some experience and Biomass while we hunt, and gather the information you need. Sound good?”

“That works.”

She seems a little relieved I’m not going to put her on the spot and demand she start pumping out flawless battle plans immediately. I’ll give her a couple of days before that stage, I suppose.

[Come on, Tiny, Invidia. We’re heading out to fight.]

Tiny leaps to his feet and slams in a quick flex before he starts rumbling toward the entrance, Invidia fluttering over his shoulder. I don’t need to bother asking Crinis, since she’s still wrapped around my abdomen, it’s not like I can avoid taking her with me.

“Go and get your team together,” I tell Solant, “and we’ll get going.”

A moment later, we are striding through the fortress, and I have to say, they’ve done a *lot* of work on this place since I was last here. The fortress feels much more complete, with proper, lane-separated paths connecting the various segments, *carpets* for goodness sake, more finished rooms, along with the ever-present carving, frescos and statues.

At least I see *some* of them that aren’t me. I even spot a Tiny, leaning forward in the classing macho pose, both arms bulging, in the centre of one chamber.

When we get toward the outer parts of the fortress, the fact that this is, in reality, a nest under siege becomes much more apparent. Hospitals are everywhere, ants scurrying all over the place, the constant sound of roaring monsters, hissing acid and the endless clacking and snapping of mandibles echoes down the corridors.

Eventually, I step out of a wide, open gate and find myself on the battlements, looking down the mountain to the fields of carnage below.

An endless stream of monsters seems to rise up out of the waters, or fly down from the sky, to hurl themselves against the mightiest defences the Colony has ever constructed. There has to be close to a million ants in this fortress right now, judging by the Vestibule, and they are hard pressed to hold off this constant assault, despite their defensive advantage.

I know for a fact that the tunnels below the fortress are just as dangerous, with thousands of monsters spawning in the darkness down there every minute.

“Well, this looks exciting,” I comment to the gaggle of tier four ants beside me.

The twenty of them look shell-shocked as they gaze out across the devastation.

“Give me a minute to clear the field for a second, then we can make a plan.”

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1178: The First Lesson**

The whole island is covered in monsters, because of course it is, this is a wave. The size of the beasties is certainly larger than what I’ve gotten accustomed to in other strata. In the first, pretty much all monsters start off smaller than a human, ditto for the second and third. In fact, all demons start basically cat-sized, but they can get a lot bigger rather fast.

Most of the monsters down there are likely tier two or three, considering how rapidly they spawn, but there are some *chonkers* out there. Sea beasts of all sorts charge out of the water and onto the shore, tentacles writhing, shark-jaws snapping, pinchers... pinching. In an endless tide, they emerge, throw themselves against the walls of the fortress, only to be beaten back by the stalwart defenders.

Completely standard defensive mess. The wave is always a battle of attrition and if we’d had even a little less time to fortify this position, we would’ve been in real strife.

Well, I can clear the field a little and then we may be able to get something productive done. Sucking in all the mana I can handle, I whip together a gravity construct and start pumping out as much energy as I can manage. To make a dent in this battle, I’m going to need a massive gravity well, so that’s what I get to making.

When it’s finished, I empower it with the Altar and watch as the crush of monsters in front of me becomes just that little bit more crushed. Nice.

The sudden silence is deafening. I couldn’t surround the entire mountain with a gravity well, of course, but at least this segment in front of me is, blessedly, free of invaders. Oop, more are coming out of the water now, well, that didn’t last long.

“Alright. Let’s get down there and you twenty can stuff yourselves with Biomass, survey the terrain and study the monsters, or whatever you need to do. We don’t have long, though, so let’s hop to it!”

Solant and her crew file in behind me without a word. They really can step in time when they want to! Like they’re marching on a parade ground.

[Come on, you three, I want you to keep the monsters off us for a bit.]

In a line, we make our way down the wall and onto the battlefield itself, now coated in a thin layer of squashed monster. Some of the tentacle... octopus kind appear to have survived, albeit barely. I get Crinis to investigate and see if some of the experience can be funneled to Solant and her group.

“Get to eating, you lot. Tiny, go smash stuff. I’ll keep an eye out here.”

The big ape gleefully bounds off as the little ants get stuck into the Biomass, except for Solant.

“Is that the spell you used on us?” she asks.

“Oho! Quite astute of you. That was the one. Obviously, a very weak version that I intended to slow you down. You were very clever to use it against me, falling faster than I expected. After your ‘poisoning’ attempt, you can’t blame me for retaliating outside of the rules.”

“I don’t,” she shakes her antennae. “But with a power like this...” she indicates the field full of squished monsters, “I don’t see how you could lose.”

Still too naive. It’s good that I brought her down here.

“You’re still very young, there’s far too much that you haven’t seen. I’m not the strongest monster on this stratum, far from it. We fought tier eights on the third, who knows, there might be tier nines hanging around the fourth. That’s two whole evolutions further developed than me! You need to keep in mind that this is a wave, a constant assault from uncountable low-tier enemies.”

I give the little general a little side-eye.

“How do *you* think we should handle this situation?”

She thinks for a long moment before replying.

“Is it possible to get the monsters to fight each other?”

“To some extent, yes. We, and by ‘we’, I mean the Colony, represent a huge amount of Biomass and XP to these frenzied monsters, so the moment they catch wind of us, they come running. Let’s not forget, the wave is also an incredible opportunity for us. A chance to gain an enormous amount of resources and train our Skills.”

“I see.”

“Now, quick, stuff your face, unlock some profiles, and then we’ll get back to the wall. We can observe a bit more of the fighting from up there.”

This time, she follows my instructions and soon, we’re back on top of the wall, looking down as the steady flow of monsters from the waters reaches the walls once again.

Just like that, it’s as if my intervention never took place and the ants are back to fighting fiercely all along the walls, pushing back the attackers with acid, magic and mandibles.

I take the twenty on a circuit tour of the fortress, looking down from all sides at the endless battle. I can tell it’s a lot for them to take in. Not long ago, they were still undergoing basic training, now I’ve brought them to the most vicious combat zone in all of the Colony’s territory.

It's quite the sight, and it isn't improved when I notice several large floating islands drifting our way. As they get closer, the flying monsters who swarm around them begin to drift down and harass the troops on the walls.

Stupid flying lizards! Buzz off!

"Let's get back into the nest," I tell them.

I don't want any of these twenty getting picked off by a stray flyer, *especially* Solant!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1179: Show of Force**

For the next several hours, the wave continues as before, but with the added bonus of these damned sinuous lizards shooting us with water, fire, lightning and I think I saw one using force magic, the fancy-dancy goon. Weird to look at, they almost seem to swim through the sky, with several sets of little wings flapping away.

Are you dragons or snakes? Make up your dang minds!

Whenever they see an opening, they try to swoop down and snatch up an ant, but the Colony has been good at driving them back with barrages of acid and magic. So far, I don't think they've managed to scoop up one of my siblings yet, but as the island drifts closer, more and more of them join the flock overhead. It's only a matter of time until the defenders become overwhelmed and we start losing ants.

Not on my watch.

"Stay back here and out of sight for a minute," I warn Solant and her crew.

She nods in acknowledgement and they huddle behind Tiny who gives them a reassuring thumbs up.

With the vulnerable protected, I step back out onto the wall and glare at these uppity lizards. The rest of the ants out here on the edge give me a little space as they continue to deal with the hordes of monsters below.

From within my core and my gravity mana gland, I begin to pull out huge amounts of energy. The well I used to smash the monsters on the island will work just as well to bring these dumb lizards out of the sky. Once they find themselves within reach, it'll be trivial for the Colony to feast on their pretentious, scaly hides.

I take my time condensing and weaving the spell. The dragon-snakes are zipping about all over the place, so I'll need to cover an enormous area to snag a good number. When I have an absurd amount of gravitational mana prepared, I begin to extend the spell, preparing to bring these pests down to the ground.

At that moment, an air-splitting roar shatters the sky. As one, the flying monsters zip higher into the sky, retreating from the mountain toward their island and out of range from my spell.

Dammit. What the heck was that?

To answer my question, something moves in the distance and an enormous form emerges from over the edge of the island, slithering through the sky.

Holy smokes! That's a big ol' sky-snake! You might actually qualify as a dragon, big fella! More of a Chinese dragon than a western one, but hey, it's impressive looking!

As long as an ocean liner, the monster whirls through slow, graceful loops, holding position halfway between the mountain and its home. The smaller ones, possibly its children, retreat to hover around it, zipping in and about each other in fluid, shifting patterns.

Going to roar at me and my family, are you? We won't be intimidated!

I extend my senses to feel out the monster as I reach up and climb onto the side of the mountain.

CLACK! CLACK! CLACK!

As I set the muscles of my face and slam my mandibles together, the piercing sound reverberates off the mountain and into the air. Not unlike a piledriver slamming steel pylons into the ground, the sharp *cracks* of my mandibles can be heard kilometres off.

When I sense the dragon with my mind, I can feel it doing the same back to me, taking a measure of the foe. Hmm. This dragon may have a slightly more powerful core than I do, but it's close. Tier seven, or eight, but not more than that, thankfully.

The dragon roars once more, and I respond with further vicious clacking as I posture on the side of the mountain, basically signing 'come and get some' with my six legs.

This goes on for almost ten minutes before the dragon turns around and winds its way back onto the floating island along with the rest of the dragon brood. Suddenly, the skies are clear of monsters and, ever so slowly, the island, which was gradually coming towards us, begins to slow its approach and change direction.

Once I'm sure the flying snake-den is moving away, I climb down off the mountainside and into the opening at the top of the wall, where I find Sloan waiting for me.

"Eldest! What the heck was that?! I could hear the roaring and clacking from deep inside the fortress!"

"That *was* a bit odd, wasn't it," I muse. "I think that island has been claimed by that dragon monster as a nest. There's either a spawn point up there or the dragon is laying eggs. At any rate, the creature is smart enough to protect its own kind, since it appeared once I threatened the smaller ones."

Intelligent monsters. The Demons are smart, obviously, and form their own communities, but is there going to be more of that down here in the fourth? I wouldn't think so, since there are so many non-monsters living in the fourth according to Granin.

Perhaps these dragons are so territorial that they don't really cooperate?

"And then what happened?" Sloan demands.

"Oh. We had a stare down, feeling out each other's power."

"And you were stronger?"

“What? No. I was strong enough that the monster didn’t want to risk tangling with me on my own mountain, though, so it backed off. The weirdest thing is the way the island changed direction. I think that dragon might be able to *steer* the dang thing.”

“That’s... worrying. So every flying island is a floating castle that can be used to launch attacks on our fortress?” Sloan frets. “We didn’t design it with the knowledge that was possible. Could they even drop an island on us? They could crush the entire mountain!”

“Whoa, slow down. I don’t think there are many monsters out there who would use their nest as a siege weapon, alright? Humans would *absolutely* do that, though, so it’s worth keeping in mind. We definitely need to think about this a bit more. It’s lucky our first run-in with an island attack was a relatively weak one.”

I see Solant pondering off to the side, her mind ticking away at a million kilometres an hour.

“What do you think, Solant? How should we protect ourselves from these islands?”

She twitches, knocked out of her thoughts as she turns to look up at me.

“Oh. I’m not sure, I wasn’t really thinking about it.”

Curious...

“What *were* you thinking about?”

“I was thinking...” she starts, eyes gleaming, “of what we could do if we seize an island for ourselves.”

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1180: Planning**

“Hah! I like the way you think. What do you reckon, Sloan? Fancy adding a floating fortress to our arsenal?”

The general looks a little sour, but can’t quite manage to conceal the excitement quivering through her antennae.

“It would allow us to do a lot. A mobile defensive platform. We could use it to fend off other islands that attack the mountain, or launch attacks against our enemies. I can’t deny it would be extremely useful to have, Eldest.”

“It sure would. Shame we can’t get one for the moment.”

Both Solant and Sloan droop at my words, their antennae slumping to the ground.

“Be a little realistic, you two,” I scold them. “That dragon has a stronger core than I do, and in case you don’t remember, it *flies*. I can get up there, but I’m not exactly graceful. There’s no guarantee that I’d be able to win and seize the island for us. Besides all of that, don’t we have enough on our plates right now without having to take and operate our own flying castle?”

“The carvers would kill us if we asked them to fortify an entire island right now,” Sloan sighs. “They still haven’t completed work on this mountain to anything like their own satisfaction. There’s whole sections which haven’t been touched since the termite occupation.”

“Right. It’s a great idea, Solant, but we need to put things in order. Finish work on the mountain, fend off the wave, *then* we can look toward getting into the skies.”

The little general nods as if agreeing with me, but I can tell her little brain is still ticking over. Good. She’s meant to be an independent thinker. Doing whatever the ‘Eldest’ tells them is a weakness the rest of the Colony has fallen into a little too readily for my taste.

“Right, now that the flying menace has been dealt with, we may as well repeat our previous exercise a couple times. We’ll rotate around the mountain, doing a different segment with each run. Just like before, I’ll flatten stuff, we run out and get some goodies, scope out the situation, then retreat.”

“As you say, Eldest,” Solant agrees, a little absent-mindedly, and I’m tempted to administer a thwack, but I hold myself back. Nurture the independent thought, Anthony....

We repeat the process four times over the next few hours, giving me a break in between to recharge my mana and Vestibule, as well as letting the little ants digest their Biomass.

Every time we run out, I can see Solant soaking in everything like a little sponge, constantly twitching this way and that as thoughts spark in her mind. She seems particularly interested in the monsters, taking time to study each one, poking and prodding at them as she slowly chews her food.

Know thy enemy, eh?

“Right! We’ve completed a circuit of the mountain. What are your thoughts, Solant?”

“... You’re very strong.”

“That’s it? We all already knew that, right? Nono, surely you have a little more.”

“I have a few ideas, Eldest, but I want to think on them a little more, and discuss with my broodmates.”

“Probably a good idea, but we don’t have time for that just yet.”

“We don’t? Aren’t we done?”

“Done?! Are you crazy? There’s no such thing as *done* when there’s a wave on! Besides, did you think this was the only place where fighting was taking place? Heck no! We’re heading below ground!”

The second front of the endless battle against the wave. The monsters climbing up the mountainside are only a portion of those the Colony is fighting off, the rest are swarming below ground, filling up the tunnels and caverns carved by the termites and spawning in the deep passages that run below the ocean.

Heck, the links between the fourth and fifth stratum are way down there somewhere. Eventually, we’re going to see an assault by the toxic murder creatures from below. In fact, it may not even be far away!

Truth be told, below ground is where the *real* battle is! As it should be! Tunnel fighting is what we ants were made for.

We plunge down through the fortress until we arrive at a grand, central chamber in the bowels of the mountain. From here, Victor has been overseeing an omni-directional war, managing the hundreds of chokepoints, fortified tunnels and approaches to the fortress from below.

“Hey there, Victor!” I wave a friendly antenna as messenger scouts rush between my legs. “What can I do to help out?”

“That way! Go!” The beleaguered general points with one antenna and I turn to see a flood of reinforcements rushing down a side tunnel.

“Gotcha. Hop on my back, you lot, we’re moving quick!”

After a moment of hesitation, Solant and her twenty broodmates clamber onto my carapace, some clinging to my sides since they don’t all fit and even on top of each other. Especially since Crinis refuses to make way for them.

“And we’re off!”

[Keep up, Tiny!]

We sprint down the tunnel, rushing directly over the top of the skittering troops, and soon enough, we reach the frontline, a little closer to the fortress than I was expecting to see.

Much like our defence against the wave in the second stratum, the Colony has opted for a defence in depth approach. A series of walls and fortified positions where the Colony can retreat from one to the next, exhausting the enemy, blunting their assault, and then rolling them back, retaking the walls and fixing them, ready for the next push to come.

It’s brutal for the enemy, but the monsters down here are strong. I can already see the issue. Our tier five troops are struggling to put enough damage into the monsters to bring them down in a timely fashion. As more and more monsters pile up, the Colony has to retreat further and further. Like a tower defence game, once you reach the point where you aren’t putting the attackers down fast enough, everything can snowball out of control extremely quickly.

“Alright. Everyone off! I’m going to help out for a second.”

The moment the twenty little ants are off my back, I sprint forward. I’ve got damage for all! About time I put my mandibles to work!