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Chapter 241: Sudden Attack

The monsters came from the north. They swept south in a hungry pack, seeking, destroying and devouring everything in their path like a tide of beastly Vikings.

As the monsters drew closer their snarling and growls rang louder in the peoples ears and panic quickly raced across their faces. The fear spread so quickly from person to person around me, clouding their faces and twisting their expressions.

So quickly they lost the will to fight, these people.

I shouldn't be too surprised. These people had lost their homes and families to these creatures. Small and weak it may have been, but they had also lost their country. Against a foe that had taken apart something so much larger than themselves, it's only natural that they would be intimidated.

But I wouldn't sit idly by.

[Tiny bring Crinis to me. We need to fight.]

If those stupid monsters thought that they could get this close to my colony then they are outside their damn minds.

I loudly clack my mandibles several times in succession.

CLACK *CLACK* *CLACK*

The sharp, staccato noises ring out loudly, cutting through the rising fear. The circle of people turn back to me sharply.

[Priest. Tell the people to go hide and stay out of my way. I will defend my colony but if any monsters get through, the people will need to defend themselves.]

The priest nodded enthusiastically.

[Of course, Great One! The blessings of the System belong only to those who are prepared to earn them! Your wisdom is as deep as the Dungeon, as broad the Endless Sky expanse and as ...]

[Just tell them already!]

[Oh! Right!]

I break off the mind bridge with the mouthy priest and turns to the people to explain what I've said. Gradually some life returns to the faces of the people around me, when I push my way out of the circle, they fall back respectfully to grant me space.

And good thing too!

The monsters are upon us.

As I see the swarm rushing towards the village, I can't help but feel a wave of nostalgia roll over me.

All of my old friends are here!

The claw centipedes! So many damn centipedes! Like a carpet of pinchy death they slither and climb all over each other, snapping madly at the air as they approach.

The Dragon Wolf cubs and their evolved versions are here as well, I think I spy an Earth Bear Tyrant stomping amongst the horde.

Even the little rabbits are here! Awww, the little fluff balls! Devilish, murdering little fluff balls.

Not to mention the Croca Beasts. The stupid creatures are here as well.

It feels as if this is a collection of monsters from the forest expanse area. Perhaps they are gathering the monsters over there, just as they did here, to assault the surface.

Dangit!

I thought I was finally free of your meddling!

The thundering of monstrous feet is growing louder as the horde kicks up dust as they rush towards us. Only a hundred or so more metres and they'll be amongst the villagers. Not willing to wait, I rush out towards the onrushing horde.

I don't have time to power up a Gravity Bomb. I'm going to have to do this the old fashioned way.

With speed I dash forwards. My brains kick into gear, each one crafting a gravity spear as quickly as possible. I haven't had that much time to rest since battling against the Croca Commander but it's enough to deal with these trash, even if there are thousands of them.

My brains work overtime, swiftly weaving together the magic, layers flowing together as if in fast forward.

Gravity Spear! Times three!

As soon as the dark purple projectiles fly out I'm already working on another set. The spears fly home, not that they could miss, slamming into the front line of the wave, snaring large clutches of monsters and binding them together, forcing them to stumble and breaking their running momentum.

Even as I dash forwards the next wave of spears take shape. I pour forth my gravity mana and empower the spells, letting them fly just as the wave crashes into me.

Or is it me who crashes into them?

My sub brains continue spinning more spears as I smash into the thick of the monsters and their blows begin to rain down on my carapace, battering me left and right.

As if I'm just going to sit here and take it!

Shattering Bite!

Ceaseless attacks fall upon my diamond shell but I stand firm, the bulk of the damage failing to pierce through. Centipedes rise to clutch at me and I crush them with a single bite. When a fearsome bear

smashes into me from the side, sending me sprawling, I channel mana into my mandibles and dive back at it.

Bite after bite, I crush its defences, my stamina draining away along with my mana until the beast finally falls.

Eventually the chip damage begins to pile up. A chip here and a chip there shave away at my health until I'm forced to trigger my regeneration gland. I'm not worried though.

I can feel them coming.

"GRAAAAAAH!"

BOOOM!

With a titanic crash, Tiny announces his arrival to the battlefield. Leaping high, he falls to the ground like thunder, his newly regenerating foot stomping down and crushing a Croc beneath him as he lands.

Then Crinis is there.

Like a nightmare given form her tentacles explode outwards, snapping onto any monster they touch and rending them apart, or lifting them into the air to toss them into the bottomless void of her maw.

My heart lifts to see them on the battlefield alongside me.

As long as they are with me, we can defend the colony against anything. I truly believe that.

Shattering Bite!

Before my jaws can even clamp shut on the Dragon Wolf before me a blistering lance of light impales the creature, dispatching it in a single hit.

Why the hey?!

Adjusting myself slightly I look back to see a straight path through the monsters has been created by that piercing attack. It must have speared directly through five monsters! What the heck!

As the monsters gradually close in once more I catch a fleeting glimpse of Morrelia, rage burning in her eyes and her hand extended, her sword clenched in her fist.

That was one powerful strike!

I hope she wasn't aiming at me...

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Chapter 242: The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

"RAAA!" Morrelia bellowed and her muscles bunched and shifted beneath her skin before she stabbed her hand out once more.

To describe it as a stab wouldn't be doing it justice. The strength, the control, the sheer force of that strike went beyond what I had imagined was possible. As if she were cutting apart the very air, the

sword pierced the atmosphere. As it did so, pure light coalesced around her arm and hand, flowing onto the sword itself, rapidly building in intensity until it was blinding.

The light reached a critical mass just as the sword extended, forming a point at the tip of the blade that shone like a miniature sun. Then, in just an instant, the beam lanced out, piercing monsters straight through, seemingly without resistance. Just as suddenly as it had come, the light faded and a line of twenty monsters slumped to the ground.

What the heck is that skill?! How the heck does she do that?!

As the monsters swirl and growl around me I see Morrelia's crew arrive to back her up, firing arrows into the crowd with incredible speed, their hands a blur. It looks as though they took a little time to gather their supplies and uncase their bows but they are in the thick of it now.

On impulse I decide to rush back to where the five of them have gathered, tearing my way through a dense cluster of centipedes to do so.

clang!

An arrow smacks into my carapace as I dash forwards, reflecting cleanly off one of the diamond portions of my carapace and ricocheting off into the swirl of beasts harmlessly.

O!

Slowing my approach, I wave my antennae frantically to signal my peaceful intentions. I'm willing to give the benefit of the doubt on the first shot but any more than that and we are going to have trouble here. Thankfully, the archer's eyes widen as she recognises me and turns to shoot a fresh target.

I mean, an apology would have been appreciated but, I suppose under the circumstances...

You're fighting a giant horde of monsters and a massive ant, I suppose I'm basically the size of a couch, if not quite as high, comes charging at you, you're going to shoot the heck out of that ant. It's fair enough.

As I reach their side and unleash a few more gravity spears into the horde, binding monsters, slowing and restricting them, Morrelia turns to me and nods briefly before unleashing another solid beam of light into the throng.

She's like a freakin' laser cannon with that skill!

It's rad as hell, I have to say.

She pauses for a second, as if feeling or sensing something, before barking an order to one of her crew, a grizzled looking guy with a face full of scars. He nods and steps forwards, gripping a heavy looking axe in two hands.

"Haaaaa!" he bellows before sprinting towards the onrushing horde and unleashing wild horizontal swings his axe.

With every swing a furious arc of light slashes out in the shape of a phantom axe, splitting the monsters apart and giving the group breathing room, allowing the two female archers to continue to unleash their bolts of death.

With this respite I continue to build Gravity Spears, hurling them into the horde to bind the monsters together, occasionally firing at a patch of ground to bind the monsters to the earth, creating knots of creatures throughout the mass of monsters that can't move freely, tripping and blocking the press of beasts behind them.

"Haaaaaaa, Haaaaaa."

Next to me I can see Morrelia, eyes closed, going into some sort of breathing meditation. The air seems to whistle between her teeth as they slowly clench and her breathing becomes heavier. Before I even have time to mock her within my mind, I feel something change in the air. A bloodthirsty aura rises. A tangible sense of rage and violence that seems to warp the very air around the powerfully built woman.

As each second passes the air around her grows more dense and her body begins to release a soft red light that stinks of blood.

What.

The.

Heck.

...

As I grow more bewildered and confused, the two archers shout out a warning and the axe swinging man turns without hesitation and sprints to get behind Morrelia.

Just as he does so her eyes open and they are frickin' glowing with a murderous red light. Snarling like a beast she tears a second sword out of a sheath across her back and explodes into motion.

The nearest wave of monsters simply explode into chunks of Biomass as she smashes into them like a cannon ball, blades flashing as her murderous aura rises all the while. All technique and finesse seems to have left her she rips her blades through the air, cleaving foes up to ten feet away with wild swings.

Instead of the light of her skills being pure white, as every other time I've ever seen a skill activated, even her own, the light that flows from her swords is bright red. The monsters almost seem intimidated to find this creature amongst them but it's too late. She swings with wild abandon, slashing left and right, leaving herself wide open to attack.

Some attacks actually do manage to get through, the occasional monster making it to her and raking its claws against her arms or across her leather armour.

She doesn't care.

She doesn't even seem to notice.

In fact, my startled eyes notice that as that hungry red light continues to tear apart monsters with every flash of steel, her wounds are closing.

The hell is this?! This is freakin' hot to death.

She's some sort of Vampiric Berserker?!

And she thinks I'M the monster?!

I have to say though, watching her in action, a snarling rictus of pure rage locked on her face and her eyes alive with hate, actually glowing with the light of rage.

Well, it's enough to bring a tear to my monstrous eyes. That's the way to fight.

[Tiny, Crinis! Watch out, one of the humans is a flat out berserker and she is killing everything that gets anywhere close to her. Make sure you keep some distance, I don't think she can recognise friend from foe.]

[Acknowledged, Master!]

[Grrrrr FIGHT!]

I can only roll my eyes at Tiny as he resents my intrusion on his battle. In my minds' eye I can see him bellowing with rage, the air around him alive with crackling electricity as his fists cause devastation amongst the thronging monsters.

As well as we are doing, the wave is immense.

In the tunnels we were able to use the narrow spaces to funnel the enemies into manageable numbers, forcing them to charge directly onto our spears, so to speak. Out here, it simply isn't the case. They surround, they flow around and separate us. Even worse, some of them ignore us, rushing past the small number of fighters and charging into the village.

The front of this horde is so wide that even the ant hill might be threatened at this rate. As monsters continue to break away from our melee and rush towards the closest targets, I can see some of them dashing towards the colony.

Not only that, I can tell that these monsters are not the freshly hatched creatures that we battled in the tunnels. Despite being regular first strata beast type monsters, they've got levels and Biomass behind them, probably from destroying and consuming the people of Liria.

Their advanced skills and mutations is making them just that little bit harder to crack, and every minute difference begins to pile up rapidly in a melee like this.

This isn't going well.

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Chapter 243: The troops arrive

Nineteen of the Ancients rose during the Cataclysm, The Rending. They were nurtured in the heart of this world, the oldest beings of the Dungeon, they were old long before the Dungeon broke the surface. In darkness they had battled whilst the people of the surface were taking the first steps on the path to civilisation.

Their power was overwhelming. None could stand before them, when they moved, cities fell, nations crumbled and people died. Like immutable law they were heedless of the plight of mortals, more akin to the forces of nature than creatures.

We record their sacred names here, that future generations might fear and venerate them as they deserve.

Yarrum the Eternal Worm.

Theorazn of the Decaying World.

Syssernix the Dark Spear.

Morribolg of the Fetid Earth.

Carriflare the Hell Flame.

Rigorite the Mountain Breaker.

Tarriflyx the Hunger.

Arconidem the Demon God.

Zothoth who Feasts on Sanity.

Torra the Dread Dog.

Gon the Sightless Freak.

Yolesh the Ever Dying.

Lerrewyn the Grasping Tree.

Horgran the Butcher.

Perrianon of Blood.

Kygar the Storm Bringer.

Ruminominex Shaper of Earth.

Braxxin who Froze the Sky.

Odren the Father of Monsters.

Excerpt from 'The Gods of Rending' in the imperial Library of Shuth, Author unknown.

Despite my misgivings about the current situation, I can see that Crinis is having a field day. I've been steadily making my way towards the area my two pets are active, trying together knots of monsters and hitting the occasional heavy hitter with a pair of gravity bolts, effectively locking them down for a period of time.

When I finally get a view of Crinis, she is merrily carving away at the monsters around her, rending them, twisting them apart, throwing them into her unending maw of eldritch terror and in general threshing the wheat that these monsters are to her. Only when something larger and more powerful approaches does she have any difficulty.

As I approach, a mighty looking Lion Ogre charged at her, its heavy feet thundering into the ground as the powerfully built creature reached out with its clawed hands.

[Watch out, Crinis!] I shout.

Naturally she was totally aware of the creature through her tremor sense. Something that large and heavy had to be lighting it up like a firework. Before it can grasp her, ten tentacles explode out of her main body and wrap around the creatures legs, pulling them together.

CRASH!

Howling with fury, the Ogre can't maintain its balance and collapses to the ground, shaking the earth so hard that several nearby monsters lose their feet. Despite hitting the ground so hard, the monster is largely unharmed. Snarling, the beast tries to rip at the tentacles binding its legs together but Crinis is already there.

Yet more limbs snap out, twisting and winding around the monster, holding its wrists and torso. Crinis isn't strong enough to win a contest of strength against something as physically imposing as a Lion Ogre, certainly not one of this size, but she doesn't have to.

A horrible buzzing sound erupts from the tentacles as Crinis unleashes her barbs. The tiny, hooked blades but back and forth at incredible speeds and by the looks of things, the Lion isn't enjoying it too much.

Not content with this level of existential terror, Crinis unfolds her main body, exposing the black, empty void ringed by distended fangs that is her mouth, and clamps it down on her foes shoulder, tearing into it without mercy.

The display is made even more horrific by the fact that she's still got tentacles out harvesting monsters around her, even as she takes on this big fish. I think her fear skill is kicking into effect actually, several creatures nearby are looking decidedly intimidated, hesitating as the bloodlust that filled them only moments before is drained away by the sight of this eldritch terror.

You do you, Crinis. You're alright in my books.

Even so, I might turn myself around. It's hard for me not to be able see what she's doing but if I angle my body just right she falls into one of my more blurry patches of vision and I'm spared the full details of the gory scene.

My face is already starting to ache from repeatedly using my biting skills. I've had the mana flowing into my mandibles for some time already, improving my cutting power but eventually I'm going to run out of stamina.

Gritting my mandibles together I start to cut my way out of the horde, moving towards the colony.

The Gravity Javelins have been having a better than expected effect. After firing twenty or so into the creatures there are many little knots of monsters that are frozen in place. They aren't smart enough to reason through the situation, so rather than try and move together, they just run about, smacking into the monsters around them and then getting pulled back together. The groups I stuck to the ground are even more debilitated. The further they get from the point I targeted, the stronger the pull. They've effectively been taken out of the fight.

Each spear hasn't done that much work but cumulatively, the effect is substantially reducing the numbers of the horde.

Ha!

Finally!

I burst out from amongst the monsters and dash with all of my strength to get ahead of them.

Only to find workers running in the other direction, towards the horde.

Dammit!

The colony is already getting into the fight?!

Gah! My feet scabble against the ground as I dig my claws in and try to turn around as more and more workers charge past. In the distance I can see the ant hill swarming with workers as they pour out of the many chambers within, rallying to the defence of the colony.

It wasn't as if I thought I could keep them from the fighting, well maybe I did, but what I really want is to make sure as many as possible will survive.

So I turn, and I charge alongside my siblings. All around me now they are silent, the occasional clack of mandibles and the faint rasping of carapace as they run. To my antennae though, they are roaring.

FIGHT! FIGHT! FIGHT! ENEMY! ENEMY! FIGHT!

The air is thick with the chemical signals of their rage. Their home is threatened and their Queen needs defending, so the colony will rise. The first workers smash into the edge of the monster wave, their mandibles working like machines. Wherever possible two or more ants will gang up on another monster, subduing it, latching onto its limbs and pulling it down before yet more workers approach to finish the job.

Before I crash back into the horde, I see something else developing in my side view.

The humans are also charging. Led by, believe or not, the one armed priest, they are wielding their motley collection of busted swords, farming implements and crude spears. Faces twisted with fear and desperation, but also courage and anger, they sprint as fast as their human legs will carry them towards monsters so much larger than themselves.

The last thing I see is the priests face, alight with joy and righteousness, before I'm back amongst the melee, chomping away and crunching monsters as fast my mandibles can move.

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Chapter 244: Battle of Unity

The frustrating thing about a battle such as this, where the numbers on both sides were relatively high and the fight was spread over a wider front, was just how hard it was to keep track of what was taking place.

My senses were overwhelmed on every front. Heat was thick in air from the exertion of thousands of bodies, my eyes were filled with the blur of rapid movement in every direction and my antennae were drowned in the pheromones of my fellow workers. Not to mention the vague impressions of the very near future I received, confusing, shifting images that fluttered against my mind like ghosts. It was a sensory overload and if I hadn't quite as powerful a mental rig as I did then perhaps I wouldn't have been able to process half of it.

Thankfully, I could.

I could parse all of it.

It was a strange feeling, to say the least. My brain was able to accept and sort all of this information in a fraction of a second. I could see everything around me, track every enemy, see the subtle shifts of their future selves, observe their body heat and react. Claws fell from all around me and I shifted my body at high speeds. A little to the left, slant my carapace a touch on the right, and blows slid off me, or scratched harmlessly against my diamond shell.

Muahahaha!

I am all that is ant! Behold me!

Phew. Need to cool off. Even in the midst of battle, it's a heady rush. In the back of my mind I can hear the announcements of Gandalf, letting me know that my skills are improving, but that is the one thing I don't have the attention to spare for, I can go over that later.

Right now, I need to kill! As fast as possible!

If I had the time I could try and form a Gravity Bomb, but with the humans, Tiny, Crinis and now the colony involved, the risk of collateral damage is too damn high. This battle is simply one that we have to grind out, unfortunately.

Luckily the workers are perfect for this. As soon as they arrive, they get stuck in, and they don't stop. I move as fast as I can, ripping into beasts with all of my strength, more often than not just debilitating a monster before moving on. I can leave the remains to the workers but if I can disable as many foes as possible then I will, the survival of my siblings comes first.

My sub brains are ripping out Gravity Bolts as fast as they can. Every five seconds they blast out a pair of the spells, rooting some unfortunate monsters to the ground, easy fodder for the follow up wave of workers as I wind my way up and down the front between the horde and the ants.

[Work your way back towards me guys. Be careful you don't catch any of the workers in your strikes.]

Tiny and Crinis acknowledge me silently and I can feel them begin to shift slowly towards me. The two of them are still buried deep in the melee, surrounded by foes but for now they are still holding on. I make

sure to warn them not to injure the colony since the last thing I want is to lose family members to Tiny's lightning or Crinis' maw.

The two of them will need to act more cautiously, slowing their killing speed but I want them on this side to support the ants. The more help we have, the fewer colony members will fall.

Idly I wonder how the humans the humans are doing on their side but I quickly push it out my mind. They have to look after themselves. Morrelia and her crew are over there and the villagers gained some levels and weapon skills when Beyn had them fighting Dungeon monsters in the village. It will have to be enough for them.

My family will come first. As always.

Holy moly, I'm tired.

I have to switch from using Shattering Bite to less draining skills. The punchier bite skills does a wallop more damage but comes with a hefty cost to boot. I can maintain constant use in an extended fight like this, my face already feels like it wants to fall off.

It would be nice if I could 'see' my stamina as a resource. According to Beyn, it's a 'hidden' resource in the system, unlike mana and health with are quantified and made visible to everyone. Apparently it's possible to do the math and calculate how much stamina you have, how quickly it regenerates and how much your skills cost but I rejected Beyn when he (very eagerly) offered to run the numbers. I didn't want to be a lab rat for the priest, and the look in his eyes was off putting to say the least.

Ripping Bite!

Using the new, and slightly more brutal, ripping bite I continue to tear into the monsters as they appear before me. Evolved centipedes and Hounds are swarming around now, apparently they were huddled in the middle of the pack, letting their weaker evolutions suffer the first counter attack.

I grit my mandibles.

Going to grind this out the hard way.

And we do.

After a solid hour of biting, tearing, acid spraying and more biting, the ants from the colony and the human warriors meet each other in the centre of the field. All around is a carpet of ruined monsters, covering the ground with their ichor. The humans are covered in wounds, filth and are gasping for breath, their chests heaving under sweat stained clothes. The ants are fine. Their antennae flicking this way and that as they begin to turn and deal with the precious Biomass.

Luckily I'd anticipated this moment. Since I was moving just ahead of the ants in the fray, I'd managed to run into the humans first. Cue me, desperately running backwards and forwards spraying 'Don't fight! Food!' pheromones all over the place. The workers were a little confused but by that time there were so few monsters that Tiny was able to sprint along and pound them to slag before the suddenly idle workers were attacked.

Morrelia is there, her vicious, red eyed rage has run its course and she looks haggard, as if her own life force had been sucked out of her. I suspect it might be a cost imposed by activating her berserk state.

Still, she stands tall, shoulders square, like a spartan, watching as the ants pick over the Biomass and begin to work, dragging it back to the colony for consumption and distribution.

After all, we've got some special larvae to feed over there.

Exhausted, I fumble my way into forming a mind bridge with Morrelia.

[You'd better get the humans to back off from this area] I say wearily, [It's only a matter of time before one of the workers bumps into a human and attacks. If your people leave then they will focus on harvesting the food.]

Even as visibly drained as she is, she still watches me carefully.

[Why aren't they as smart as you?] she asks, nodding towards the workers. [why are you so different?]

[I don't know] I lie, [look, there have been casualties for both my family and the village today. Let's not complicate things. Ask your people to move away before someone gets hurt.]

Her jaw clenches stubbornly.

[Some of these monsters have useful parts. The people could use them. We should get our share.]

My temper flares hot, but I try to tamp it down.

[You aren't wrong, but I can't sort out a sharing arrangement right here and right now. Ask your people to step aside and I can ensure your village will get a chance to harvest from the Dungeon, but if you don't do it right now then people will die while you stand there wasting my time.]

Her eyes flash hot at being spoken to like this by a monster but I'm right and she's not so full of pride that she can't recognise it.

Her crew are standing behind her, the two female archers the grizzled axe guy and the swordsman. They are battered and bruised but they are still trying to put up a show of force behind their leader. It's paper thin.

For their part, the villagers are just happily staring at the workers as they go about their business, so drained and shell shocked from the battle that they seem to have forgotten not to get too close to the monstrous ants.

That changes when Morrelia turns to speak to them. Eyes widen with understanding and they begin to step backwards cautiously, trying not to make any sudden moves to antagonise the workforce. I can even see the priest moving amongst their ranks, his robes torn and bloody. The man is like a cockroach, I swear he's un-killable. He might have more in common with insects than humans.

Wearily I throw up my status to check my skill changes.

Looks like I got three levels in Shattering Bite, two in Ripping Bite, one in Mana Miser, three in advanced exo-skeleton defence, two in Rapid Dash and two in stamina. There are a few skill upgrades to take of there, I'll do it later when I have a bit more peace.

A fairly good haul, I have to say. I don't notice anything else odd about my status. Wearily, I turn to the Biomass. Better help get this stuff stowed away.

Name: Anthony

Level: 22 (Special core)

Might: 41

Toughness: 29

Cunning: 44

Will: 35

HP: 58/58

MP: 220/220

Skills: Excavation Level 8; Improved Acid Shot Level 6; Advanced Grip Level 4; Shattering Bite Level 11; Advanced Stealth Level 5; Splintering Chomp Level 4; Tunnel Map Level 6; Mana Transformation Level 6; Forceful Mana Level 8; External Mana Manipulation Level 2; Mana Sensing Level 5; Core Surgery Level 3; Advanced Exo-Skeleton Defence level 10; Pet Communication Level 3; Rapid Dash Level 3; Advanced Water Magic Affinity Level 3; Stamina Level 4; Pet Growth Speed Level 1; Mana Miser Level 5; Cerebral Endurance Level 4; Deep Meditation Level 2; Precise Shooting Level 3; Ripping Bite Level 5;

Mutations: Omni Focused Eyes +10, Precognitive Infrared Antennae +10, Mana Eating Restrictive Acid +10, Absorption Legs +5, Savage Infused Mandibles +10, Hardened Diamond Carapace +10, Rapid Limb Regeneration Gland +10, Pheromone Language Gland +5, Deep Gravity Magic Gland +5, Divergent Coordination Cortex +5, Regenerating Inner Carapace Plating +5;

Species: Dispersed Mind Ant (Formica)

Skill points: 24

Biomass: 356

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Chapter 245

All work and no play makes Anthony, something, something.

Things have been way too busy! I need some rest!

Not to mention they're only going to get more busy from this point... I need to help the humans out a little, get them up and running so they can look after themselves, especially now it looks like there will be more attacks from those damnable crocodiles, over the surface this time. I need to train up my own skills and fill myself with Biomass to get to the point where I'm ready to evolve. Not to mention I need to prepare for my evolution and decide what to do with the rare core. Not to mention, all of this has to be taken care of before the next generation of workers arrives!

Almost makes me feel as if I wasted my time evicting the stupid Croca beasts from the expanse below, but I know that isn't true. If we had to worry about attacks across the surface as well as from underneath, I'd be too stressed to let the workers out to hunt.

So it's not all doom and gloom.

I've got a heap of Biomass to spend, I've got some skills that I can advance, and I'm sure the same is true for Crinis and Tiny. Vibrant is going to be super upset about missing the battle. All the action and food she missed out on? That's gonna sting.

Thinking of Vibrant, she's been unusually responsible and active around the colony since we got back. I might want to ask about that.

For now though, SLEEP.

With Tiny and Crinis in tow, I depart from the scene of the battle where the workers are still picking over the last scraps of Biomass, cutting it up and carrying it in their jaws back to the anthill. I spent some time helping out, as well as snacking, which earned me another ten Biomass. Even Tiny and Crinis were helping. Tiny can carry an awful lot and Crinis is exceptional at... separating the food into ... more manageable sizes. I'll phrase it like that.

Hopefully none of the villagers were watching or they might have been put off their lunch.

Down we go, into the massive mound of earth that is our home, through the Queens chamber and into our own little nook at the very bottom of the colony. Underground where the mana is still strong enough to sustain us.

Crinis descends into the chamber as a mass of ink black tentacles that quickly withdraw until she appears as a tennis ball sitting atop a single stalk. Tiny just slumps into a corner, throwing himself onto the floor and I swear he was snoring before he hit the ground.

For my part, I find a comfy spot between them and grow very still, letting my thoughts slow until they too become frozen in place and my awareness stretches out to nothing...

HAGAH!

I'm up!

Snapping awake, the energy returns and my mind(s) snap into alertness with a suddenness that causes me to stumble slightly as my legs can't quite keep up. Whoa!

No problem!

"Senior! What happened when I was out!" Vibrant loudly exclaims.

Wazzat?!

Turning rapidly, I see Vibrant has taken up a position on the wall near the entrance to our chamber. She probably noticed me awake and immediately asked what was on her mind.

I decide to play dumb.

"What do you mean? I don't remember anything interesting happening..."

"What, what?! The entire colony stinks of Biomass and the workforce is so fat they can barely move! Somethiiiiiiiiing must have happened!"

So full of curiosity is she that she's practically vibrating in place, her legs scritch and scabbling against the wall so quickly she may as well be dancing.

"Okay" I relent, "there was another mass monster attack but across the surface this time. We fought them off and the humans helped... a little."

"Whaaaaaaaaat?!" she cries, appalled.

Heheheheh. I knew this would bug her.

"Huge battle it was. Massive. Why, the horizon was filled enemies, from left to right, nothing but monsters, come to challenge the colony. The workers were heroic, standing tall as any ant has ever stood, why, each worker must have accounted for thirty monsters at least!"

"No way, no waaay!"

Unable to take my expansive boasting she leaps off the wall and starts slapping me with her antennae, thwack, thwick, thwack!

Gweheheheh.

"All right! Enough already!" I fend her off with my own antennae and for a moment it feels like two ten year olds have a slap fight until she finally gives up.

She sighs, deeply.

"If I'd stayed here instead of helping with hunting I would have got waaaaay more food."

Which reminds me.

"Why did you decide to help out with the hunting. Usually you just stick around here but you actually went and helped out on your own."

Vibrant thinks for a moment, her antennae drawing lazy circles in the air.

"Don't know!" she exclaims, "I just felt like the colony needed more food and the rest of the workers needed help!"

Fair enough. Perhaps this is her advanced intelligence coming into play? Perhaps it's something else. There is a different sort of air around her now that wasn't present immediately after she evolved. She seems a little more... grounded... and the workers seem to follow along with whatever she's doing.

Even now there are two workers sticking their heads in here just to check up on what she's doing! What's going on up there guys?!

Maybe later I'll have to check in on her core and see if something is up in her status. Speaking of which, I've got points to spend!

"The battle is over now and the food has been distributed, but there might be a bit still left up there if you want to go eat or help out."

She's immediately excited.

"Kay!"

Aaaand she's gone. Motoring up the wall and out of the chamber, her followers racing along behind.

First thing is to upgrade the skills that need it.

[Ripping Bite -> shredding bite. Grants the user familiarity and knowledge to more effectively use bite type attacks to tear and break apart their foes.]

Yikes.

[Mana Miser -> Mana Scrooge. Increases the ability of the user to use mana more stringently, reducing waste whilst retaining effect.]

Handy.

[Advanced Exo-Skeleton Defence -> Expert Exo-Skeleton Defence. Grants high level expertise in using an external skeleton in a way to maximise defensive properties. Greatly increases the ability to disperse energy from hard strikes.]

Very nice!

[Mana Sensing -> Empowered Mana Sensing. Grants greater expertise in reaching further with mental senses, searching for mana patters and concentration. Increases the sensitivity of the sense, allowing for more accurate readings of smaller stimuli.]

Also good.

The warm rush of new knowledge melts over my mind. It never gets old, feeling a rush of information just unfold in my mind is incredible. If I could learn this quickly as a human it would have handy to say the least. I might not have dropped out of school! Well... I probably still would have... who cares!

I've got Biomass to spend, baby!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 246: Ways

When you spend your entire life learning to kill something, then killing that thing, it's awfully hard to turn around and refuse those instincts, Morrelia reflected.

Thinking back to her childhood, the long days spent drilling skills with her brother in the practice court whilst Mother watched, laughing at their exuberance. When her father was home he would take them the Legionary fort in Liria and they would practice with the trainees. Even from a young age the two children had been a match for those twice as old. She could remember once defeated an eighteen year old sword apprentice when she was only ten, not yet grown into her class.

Her father had smiled broadly and ordered the trainee to double his practice time before lifting his daughter in one massive arm and kissing her on the cheek. She'd been so proud.

Her brother had shone even brighter, his skills rose so quickly as he trained with such ferocious intensity that he'd been accepted to the Legion two years early, and immediately became the strongest trainee the moment he walked in the door.

When he died it was like the light went out of their family.

Father withdrew, mother left and when the time came Morrelia refused to enlist in the Legion, instead she soldiered around, fighting was the only thing she knew how to do and she was damn good at it. Eventually she settled on her current work, offering her services to villages and small towns on the border to deal with monster infestations. The pay was terrible and the experience was worse, with her skills she could have been a royal guard, but it wasn't so bad, she felt useful.

When she found a Dungeon entrance out here in the wilds, things had become better. She would sneak out here and delve, on her own at first and then later with her team. The experience had been much better, not to mention the money, it allowed her to take poorer paying jobs helping the more remote villages on the edge of the wilderness and not go hungry.

Now here they were. While she was out fighting, the entire kingdom had burnt to the ground. Father was who knows where in the Dungeon and she was stuck here in a refugee camp that worshipped monsters.

Sitting in her tent, Morrelia sighed and rubbed her temples. By the System she was tired. The berserker rage always took a lot out of her but this was more than just that. The city of Liria had been her home, she knew so many people there. Her classmates, the guards who taught her gambling skills behind her parent's back, the Legion members she spent so much time around. All of it gone, flattened by Monsters.

It just didn't seem possible.

Refusing to sit and dwell on it anymore, Morrelia forced herself to her feet and walked out of her tent., pushing the flap aside with one calloused hand. Even if she was only twenty three years old, it had been a long time since she'd been home. She'd been out selling her sword since she was fifteen. The city was gone, the people were here and she'd be damned if she wouldn't do what she could to help them.

Dianne had set up their camp just outside the village proper. The refugees were busy erecting buildings almost full time but it was never enough, more and more families arrived and they needed the shelter far more than her team did. They had their tents and bedrolls, they'd be fine.

Despite the vicious battle only hours before there was a decided buzz about the place. People rushed about, building, cleaning, distributing supplies and caring for the wounded. Morrelia's feet took her to the large open area those who were injured in the battle were being tended.

As she approached she could see dozens of men and women, on their backs, lying on simple wooden beams placed together to make a raised resting place. Morrelia grimaced, there was nothing here that could be called a bed, not even close.

To her shock there had been fewer casualties than she had expected. Once the berserker rage had fallen from her eyes and she realised the villagers had come out to fight, her first instinct had been that she might have killed some of them. Thankfully not. They'd fought well, the priest in the vanguard, chanting and swinging a hammer one handed.

He was here now, by some miracle still standing, moving amongst the wounded, talking to them.

She approached him.

As she walked closer he caught sight of her and smiled.

"Miss Morrelia. I had no idea you possessed the Berserker class. Quite a rare thing indeed."

She paused, not expecting him to comment on it. Then she shrugged.

"I've always had a temper, it just unlocked one day."

The light in the priests' eyes shifted and she knew he was aware of the lie but he let it pass. Instead, he walked closer, drawing her attention once more back to the thing she had been trying to avoid thinking about.

"Now you have seen our saviour, the Great Ant, in battle. He is powerful, is he not? Even acting out to prevent the deaths of humans. I wonder how you will resolve that fact with your narrow view of monsters, Ms Morrelia?"

Her immediate reaction was to sneer.

"Don't call me Miss."

Eyes bright, Beyn nodded, waiting patiently for her to answer his questions.

She sighed.

"It's a tough little bugger and no mistake", Beyn coughed at her disrespectful language but she continued, "the magic it uses is weird, but effective. To be honest, those pets of his..."

They might be even stronger than the ant was, which was ridiculous. The gigantic ape bat was clearly evolved from a lightning fist ape but it was a variety that she had never seen. It's powerful electrical attacks and immense strength were frightening.

And the tentacle creature. Morrelia shuddered. Seeing that thing, cutting, tearing and stuffing monsters into its seemingly bottomless mouth had been a disturbing sight to say the least. How the ant had managed to defeat such a strange variety of shadow beast she had no idea.

There was no doubt in her mind that if it wanted them too, those two pets would flatten the village and destroy everyone in it without the creature having to lift a finger. Not that it had fingers...

Thankfully it appeared to be one of a kind. If the rest of the colony were to be as powerful as that one ant... It boggled the mind.

Eventually she just laughed.

"I just don't understand it" she finally admitted to the priest. "I've never heard of a monster that would act to protect humans. I don't know how, I don't know why. If I hadn't witnessed it for myself I would never have believed it."

Beyn nodded eagerly, his youthful face alight with energy despite the dirt and grime all over him. It was easy to forget that his man was no older than she was.

"Yes. Yes! This is something new, something different. The System has brought forth a miracle in order to save ..."

Morrelia raised a hand to stall his gathering momentum.

"Whoa there, buddy. I don't need the whole sermon. I still don't trust it, but I'm willing to give it a chance. I don't have anything to do except stay here and help the refugees anyway, so my team and I will stick around."

Beyn nodded.

"In that case, you might want to find Enid, she's sure to have a use for you."

Morrelia found the white haired old woman in the thick of the action, as always. Her thin hair was tied up in a tight bun and a small knot of people followed her wherever she went, taking directions and asking questions as Enid continuously spoke in her soft, no nonsense tone.

It turned out Enid most wanted Morrelia and her group to help with training the villagers. Apparently the farmers, with their ridiculous pools of stamina (the only thing the class was good for) could handle the work, but the people needed to be able to defend themselves.

Which is how she found herself not half an hour later with a small group of able bodied students aged from ten to forty, going over basic spear and sword forms.

Training people to fight who worshipped a monster. What on earth would her father think?

Morrelia chuckled to herself. The commander would throw a pink fit, but Titus wasn't here right now and these people needed help. So she would help them.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 247: Changer of ways

Right then. For the time being, my skills had been dealt with. Now for the juicy bit.

The Biomass.

But first.

[Crisis...]

When she received my mental communication the little ball shrinks in on herself, withdrawing her stalk until she's almost touching the ground.

[Um... Y... yes? Master?] she stammers.

...

[Is there something you want to tell me? Has some sort of milestone been achieved?] I enquire.

[N, no? I can't think of anything like that, Master]

So evasive!

[You wouldn't be worried about having to make choices for yourself again, would you Crisis? Panicked that you might make a selection that I didn't approve of? If that were the case, I'd be quite disappointed] my voice drops to a sinister low by the end.

[Hiiiiii!] she squeaks.

I can only sigh. Why are pets so weird? This should be a joyous occasion, the individual should be jumping for joy and as the master I would bathe in that reflected happiness, smiling deeply, feeling smug and satisfied that all things were travelling on the path that I ordained.

No.

Instead, I have to bully my own pet into evolving, or watch my pet evolve into an imbecilic lump of muscle meat. Crinis is just paranoid about having to make her own choices, not wishing to do something 'wrong'.

[Look, Crinis, I'm very happy that you are ready to evolve. It's a great thing! So as soon as we are finished speaking we will finalize your core and you will evolve. Okay?]

[.....]

[OKAY?!]

[yes... Master....]

Don't sulk!

[I want to remind you of something. When I recreated you from your core, I made sure to make adjustments so that you'd be perfect, the best little murder ball of boundless horror and death in all of Pangera. I also created a special evolutionary path for you. You understand?]

The little ball seems struck dumb, growing incredibly still.

[You did that Master? For me?]

[Of course I did. We are connected by bonds of friendship, not just those of Master and servant. Whatever I can do to help you, I will. Do you understand that me creating your evolution means I'm meeting you halfway on this right? I've already made a good chunk of the decisions for you. The rest you need to look inside yourself to find the answers that best fit the kind of monster that you want to be."

[... But!]

[No buts!]

THWACK.

Swinging an antenna around in a vicious arc I whack the little tennis ball right in the middle, sending her flying to the corner in which I keep my core stockpile.

[Let's do this!]

Ignoring her attempted excuses and protests, I fuse together a special core and whack her on the head with it until she finally absorbs it.

[Now go evolve, dammit!]

[huuuuuu]

Sniffing quietly to herself, Crinis retreats to one side of the chamber and begins the process of her evolution. This is only her second evolution but it's going to be exciting to see exactly how she changes. I know the broad strokes of it of course, but exactly what she will decide to change for herself will be interesting to see.

I know I'm being harsh on her, after all, the only thing she wants is to be as helpful as possible, but she has to develop some independence, become her own Crinis!

With that dealt with I poke Tiny until he wakes and put him on guard duty. We are still in the Dungeon after all and if anything spawns in here I need it smashed ASAP. I'm going to be busy mutating and don't want to be disturbed.

Finally!

It's just me and three hundred and sixty six Biomass.

It won't go as far as I want it to go, I get that. I need to get all of my mutations to +15 before I evolve and I still haven't completed the +10 set yet. I'm determined this time though, no evolution until it's done!

To go from +10 to +15 is going to cost me... Sixty five Biomass.

....

SIXTY FIVE?!

Ugh. I hate being reminded of this. From five to ten is only forty by comparison. I remember when that amount seemed outrageous.

Well, nothing I can do about it but eat, I suppose.

For now I want to test something that Beyn mentioned during our discussions. Apparently a big part of the System is focused on consolidation and reinforcement. Fusing is one part of this, where classes and skills can become combined to create a new and more powerful skill. The other side of the coin is when the System doubles down on one thing, making it a stronger and better version of itself.

According to Beyn, this typically occurs in either threes or twos. Three skills combine to make a new skill, or two classes combine to create a new class. It isn't a hard and fast rule by any means, he said he knew of one class which required ten levels in five(!) separate classes before fusion occurred, but it is usually the case.

How this applies to monsters he wasn't sure, but I have a feeling that the +15 upgrade won't be just choosing another mutation. I'm determined to find now before progressing any further on my other mutations.

[Would you like to upgrade Mandibles to +15? This will cost sixty five Biomass.]

You betcha.

[At this level you may choose to combine your mutations, or emphasise one. Which will you select?]

AHA!

We were right!

At this stage the System will either allow you combine your current mutations to create a new variant, or emphasise one of your mutations, enhancing it over the other. Interesting! The more I learn about the system the more depth it seems to have.

Well, with my mandibles I have the infused mutation, which allows me to channel raw mana from my core into them in order to improve their cutting power, and the savage mutation, which increased their size, density and strength, making them the beastly tools of biting they are today.

Is there one that I prefer over the other? Infused is probably the more powerful boost, but it costs mana, placing another drain on my mental resources, whereas savage is just a straight up passive boost, affecting the structure of the mandibles themselves.

To be honest, they are a great combo together. Savage improves my baseline biting power and Infused gives me a higher peak. There isn't any reason to take one over the other.

I'll fuse them!

Whoa, but first...

[Do you wish to improve Hardened Diamond Carapace to +15, this will cost sixty five Biomass]

May as well take care of this one at the same time.

[At this level your mutations will be reinforced. Do you wish to proceed?]

Hmm! So, since I chose to enhance the original mutation the second time around, I don't have a fusion option now, only a reinforcement one. It's not a problem though, I've grown super fond of my Diamond Carapace.

Confirm both of those mutations!

Wait a sec. I feel something building.

As if from a great distance.

Is it the ocean? The rising tide?

... nope. It's the itch.

PALLALAFZZZZ!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 248: I mutate therefore I itch

Ho God! What the heck is this overwhelming itchiness!? From what depths of skin irritant hell did Gandalf find this sensation? My body is fire! My mind is breaking! Why am I the only one who seems to be bothered by this? When Tiny spends Biomass he barely twitches and Crinis doesn't have a face so I can't tell what her reaction is but they don't seem to suffer like this!

Why Meeeee!?

Eventually the torture ends and I slowly pick myself up from the ground.

I hate it. I hate it so much.

Now what's next?

First I try to inspect my own carapace to see what has changed and unsurprisingly the shimmering diamond patches of my carapace have extended even further. Hang on a sec...

I peer closer to try and get a better view and what I see shocks me.

It isn't that the patches of Diamond have expanded, but rather they've been pushed outward by a core of pure diamond. In the centre of each diamond covering the carapace itself, my own exoskeleton, has been transformed into actual Diamond.

I'm getting more and more expensive...

So is this what will happen if I keep choosing to upgrade this path? I won't just get a diamond layer atop my carapace but my carapace will actually change into diamond?

I'm not sure how to feel about that.

Will my inner carapace plating still be able to heal my carapace if it's made of diamond? I suppose it will, it all seems to mesh together even when you don't think it should, Gandalf seems to have those things worked out well enough.

Next I flex my mandibles, trying to sense if there is a difference. They certainly feel stronger and more solid. Curiously, I channel my mana into them and am pleased to note how smooth the flow of mana feels. The mandibles themselves immediately glow with the energy of mana. Ooooo this feels strong.

Eagerly, I check my status to see what has changed.

My Savage Infused Mandibles +10 has now become Empowered Mandibles +15 and my Hardened Diamond Carapace +10 has become True Diamond Carapace +15.

And it only cost me 130 Biomass. *Sob*.

Ok. Hold it together Anthony. Still have more to spend.

236 Biomass left. Yikes.

At forty Biomass a pop I have enough left to upgrade five body parts to +10, and I only needed enough to cover four, so I should be able to get one more part to +15! Fantastic!

All right. Here we go!

[Would you like to upgrade Pheromone Language Gland to +10?]

Yep!

[At this level you may choose a mutation enhancement.]

Once more the menu blossoms within my mind, filled with the possible selections of pheromone upgrades and there are tons.

Acid pheromones that cause damage to any who inhale them? What the heck? I mean... I guess the ants don't inhale the pheromones so it wouldn't hurt the colony... Not sure on that one.

Mind Strike pheromones that weaken the will of any who come into contact with them? Could be handy for setting someone up for a mental attack... pity I can't do those yet.

Flammable pheromones, fill up an enclosed space with this stuff and then throw in a fire spell. Kaboom! So like, petrol fumes pheromones? WHY?!

I spy one option that piques my interest.

Persuasive Language Pheromones. Makes your pheromones more persuasive when being used to communicate with others, causing others to consider your signals before listening to others.

This sounds interesting. I might be able to get the Queen to reconsider the rare core situation with this! I'll take it!

[Would you like to upgrade your Deep Gravity Magic Gland to +10?]

Awww yeah.

[At this level you may select a mutation enhancement]

Aaand the menu again.

There are still the same options I had before, as well as some new ones. The condensed Gravity magic gland sounds interesting. This is the one Tiny ended up choosing, which condenses the mana held within the gland slightly. If this upgrade were chosen multiple times and reinforced, perhaps you'd have fully condensed mana sitting in the gland, ready to go, without having to do any extra lifting with my brains.

But I already have the brains to do that work so that seems like a waste.

Quicker to refill the gland, mana becomes more malleable for spell shaping, mana moves more smoothly. There are a lot of new effects that make spell casting with the mana easier but I feel like that's a waste of potential. I can increase casting speed by buffing up my brains during evolution, I don't need to utilise my mutations for that.

What I really need to do is think forward to the +15 upgrade. Is there a possible fusion that I think would be powerful or should I double down on increasing the capacity of the gland, then reinforcing it to take the capacity even further?

Personally, I like the idea of having more gravitational mana to play with. After talking with Beyn I now understand that the true power of gravity magic won't reveal itself until I'm able to unlock the gravity mana affinity skill and start levelling it up. At that point I'll be given the knowledge of the spell shapes that are unique to Gravity mana and make the most devastating use of its potential.

So I'm going to take the Expanded Deep Gravity Mana Gland.

And next!

[Would you like to improve your Divergent Coordination Cortex to +10]

Let's keep this rolling!

[At this level you may select a mutation enhancement]

Another menu!

All this text is sending me cross eyes.

The Coordination Cortex functions as a gatekeeper or secretary to sub minds, increasing their efficiency by sorting inputs and outputs before passing them onto the sub minds, allowing the little brains to better focus and make use of their resources.

My first upgrade allowed the cortex to better assist the sub minds when they were focused on their own individual tasks, rather than combining their strengths.

There are a heap of options available for this mutation, just as there is for all of them. I can have the cortex be more efficient at assisting minds casting certain kinds of spells, or increase the efficiency of working on certain types of mana. There is a further upgrade on the divergent mutation which assists the brains when they are each concentrating on multiple tasks. Yikes.

Thinking further ahead though, to the +15 stage, I want to aim for a fusion. My sub brains are for spell casting and I want them to be able to be all singing and dancing. Good at casting spells individually but also working together in a group.

Combined Coordination Cortex. Increases the efficiency of attached sub brains when working together to accomplish a sophisticated task.

Sounds simple in theory. I'll take the mutations that make them better at both single tasks and cooperation and then fuse them, see what I get. Hopefully it doesn't suck.

NEXT.

My inner carapace plating!

[Do you wish to improve Regenerative Inner Carapace Plating to +10]

Lez goooo.

[At this level you may select a mutation enhancement]

So many great options for the bone plating. Strengthen the plating overall, making it like a second skeletal structure, improve the regenerative ability, improve the speed of the regenerative ability, extend the bone plating inwards so that it protects some organs from damage.

So many!

Eventually one catches my eye. My diamond carapace is tough as nails and extremely sparkly. I get that, but my main concern with it is a strong blow cracking it, from a hammer or axe type weapon, of a monster like Tiny punching me. To protect myself against that, I need:

Dispersive Bone Plating. Forms an absorbent layer against the outer skeleton that assist in absorbing and dispersing kinetic energy from hard strikes.

I like it. My exo-skeleton is my pride and it shall never be pierced! I won't rest until I'm as solid as a tank!

Although I really need to work on my magic defence.

Chrysalis

Chapter 249: Hey big spender

This is a big moment for me. I've nearly upgraded every body part to +10. It isn't the full milestone that +15 would be, but it's partway there! My mutations have been lagging behind for way too long, it's nice to finally be able to boost up this side of the power equation. I've been neglecting the various aspects that can contribute to my strength, apparently to my detriment.

Ensuring that my core is fully upgraded and evolving has certainly helped, but my skills and mutations have suffered from a lack of patience and dedication. That stops now! From here on in, it's going to be skills and Biomass number one! Evolution is for chumps and Anthony's who've fully mutated themselves.

Let's get back to sorting out this mutation bonanza!

The only part left to mutate to +10 is my legs, the famous tippity tappers! My dancing feet! Which reminds me, I need to check the skills menu for 'fancy feet'. I want to know what the heck that skill does. I can't help but wonder if Tiny is tap dancing when I'm in torpor.

[Would you like to improve your Absorption legs to +10? This will cost 40 Biomass]

Yassss!

[At this stage, you may select a mutation advancement]

Hit me with that menu!

So many great options for legs. Leaping legs is one that grabs my attention immediately. I'd be like the famous Jack Jumper ants, able to leap and deliver my menacing bite from a distance! As cool as I think it would be, I'm not sure how good I'd be jumping into the middle of a pack of enemies, I can't make quite the same landing as Tiny can.

What else have we got?

I can double down on Absorption, there are a few options for that, increasing the rate of absorption at a constant rate, or allowing me to dramatically increase it for a short amount of time. There are options to add slicey looking blades to the end of my claws, allowing me to attack with my feet or options to increase running speed, reduce stamina cost from dashing, improve my climbing ability.

Argh! So much cool stuff!

Think Anthony!

Look, I don't think I need more mana. I have the absorption already, and mana miser is helping to reduce my spending, not to mention I have a huge pool of mana to start with, especially for the number

FLABBADABBAFLAAZZZZZZZ!!!!

Worse than ever before, the mutation creeps over my entire body, my legs, my glands, the bony plates along the inside of carapace, everywhere! An itch I can't scratch, so intense I can't stand it! This is agony!!!

Immediately I roll onto my back, unable to support my body and twitch there like an electrocuted spider.

FLAZZA!

KRAZZA!

FTAGN!

BROFLOFLAFOFF!

And on. And on. And oonnnnnnnnn.

Make it STAHP!

...

Eventually it fades away. My body has finished performing whatever magic it does when the pure essence of Biomass floods my system, rebuilding my body and reshaping my cells at a stupidly rapid pace.

When you think about it, it does make a certain kind of sense that it would be an intense feeling, the body itself is being restructured in a pretty serious way after all. I just don't get why it doesn't seem to bother anyone other than me!

I've spent a massive amount of Biomass, three hundred and thirty points, and endured the worst itching of my ant life, but I've done it. A major step has been taken in the pursuit of the fully upgraded ant pre evolution.

With that out of the way there is so much to do it still makes me dizzy. Hunting needs to happen obviously, grinding skills along the patterns that Beyn and I discussed, helping the humans out a bit, preparations for the new generation. Too busy!

First I decide to check in with the twenty larvae playing about in the chambers towards the top of the nest. When I get there the little grubs are still rolling about, stuffing themselves full of food provided by the battle above. Some of the little things are so stuffed they look like pale basketballs and I can't rolling them around and giving them a tickle with my antennae until they wiggle about trying to escape my clutches. Awww!

Enough with the larvae teasing. Time to check in on the Queen.

Let's see if I can utilise my new persuasive pheromone gland to change her mind about the rare core. Surely she can see the value in improving her own strength?

THWACK!

NOPE!

Rubbing my head with my own antennae, I retreat from a clearly irritated Mother into my own chamber. The new inner carapace plating upgrade is showing its worth here, that blow hurt less than usual thanks to the force being dispersed through the inner layer. Nice to see the plan coming together!

Gweheheheh.

I don't know what I'm going to have to do with that rare core... I may have to try and absorb it chunks? Is that even possible? Guess we'll find out...

I move over to my favourite death ball of endless darkness to see she's fallen into the evolution trance. She must have finished going through the menus as I was still playing with mine and now she's undergoing the evolution proper.

I feel a pang in my chest as I think of her tackling those menus. I know she hates it, but I feel unhappy with my pets relying on me to that extent. I want them to be able to take care of themselves and be independent.

Perhaps the reason I feel so uncomfortable with Crinis' dependence on me is because I'm just not used to having someone rely on me, or value my input at all really. The only creatures I can think of that actually needed me in my human life were my pet ants. That's probably why I was willing to sacrifice so much for them...

Anyway!

Something to think about another time. She's managed the tough bit for now and I'm excited to see just how she'll come out. A new and improved Murder Ball! Maybe though, just maybe, I'll help her with the menus next time.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 250: The ancient itch

Somewhere in the forest expanse a predator lay. Old and implacable it had hunted these tunnels for hundreds of years. How many creatures had perished between these jaws? How many had been torn by these claws? It was a number too vast to have meaning. Uncountable.

In the early times, where the memories are dim and blurred, it had hunted with such intensity, such ferocity, nothing was safe from its grasp, nothing could escape its immolating breath. Many had tried, powerful beasts, the old kings, beasts grown fat and idle, content to rule their own tiny ponds and venture out only to sustain themselves.

They had all been hunted down, dragged from their lairs and consumed, fuel to the ever burning fire. The predator had grown strong, powerful. It had revelled in that strength at first, seeking more powerful prey, greater challenge, descending ever downwards.

But the one known as Garralosh had grown too strong, too fast. When the call had come, Garralosh hadn't realised what it was at first. It was vindication, triumph! Her long years of struggle, the lonely hunt, had finally borne the ultimate fruit! Recognised for the prowess, the bottomless strength cultivated with the broken bodies of fallen enemies.

It had come too soon. No sooner had the announcement come, then a pull began to exert itself on her. Descend, descend, descend, descend! Every day, every hour, every second, the call tugged, an endless itch that demanded to be scratched.

At first it was fine. Garralosh wanted to descend, wanted to seek its rightful place alongside its peers in the centre of this world. But when it tried to get there ... blocked, prevented, barred. No matter where it went, which paths it travelled, they were always there, pushing Garralosh back, fending it off. Barricades that it could not break through, defences that did not yield to her assault, warriors who did not fear her fangs.

They fought, so many times, Garralosh killed them, feasted on them, but was never able to break through, always forced to retreat.

And the pull. It grew every passing moment, insistently tugging at the soul. Descend, descend, descend, DESCEND, DESCEND, DESCEND!

Desperation had followed, then rage, world burning, soul immolating rage. Still there was no breakthrough, Garralosh could not breach past the hated soldiers in black. They tracked, harried, harassed and repelled the great predator every time it drew near the borders. They had erected a cage around it and no matter how desperate it become, the beast could not escape it.

Then the madness came.

Garralosh shifted her massive bulk, cracking a few trees against her scales. It irritated her, to think back to that time, when the madness had finally taken her. She had charged at the blockage, storming the defences. Battered and bruised, she had killed many but payed a hefty price. Finally the black shirts had brought out their champion and they had done battle.

BOOM!

She thrashed her tails angrily, sweeping away a swathe of the forest in one moment.

The human had been incredibly strong. They had duelled for hours until finally one of her arms had been smote from her body, the grievous wound forcing her to flee. Even worse, that hungering axe had cursed her flesh, inflicting unending agony and preventing the limb from growing back.

Even now, many years later the effect of the curse still lingered, a dull ache that refused to fade. The arm was still not completely healed, despite enormous efforts being spent.

Her children watched her from a distance. She could feel them, hesitating to draw closer as they knew the danger of being caught within range of her jaws when the rage struck her. Unable to fight, tormented by the constant tugging at her core, she had started to raise these children in earnest. An army, to help her break the blockade and make her way deeper into the Dungeon at last.

She had carefully nurtured the first generations, then allowed her children to roam free, letting the strong feast on the weaker monsters in the upper layers before returning to join the ranks of her army.

She had been prepare to wait. Wait until the tide of her crocodilic children was overwhelming before storming the black shirts and tearing them to pieces.

But the wave happened. The mana had surged higher and higher, easing the painful drain on her core and allowing her to rise higher and higher in the Dungeon until finally, she was close enough to the surface to direct her children out of the Dungeon to annihilate the cities of the humans that had barred her way for so long.

The thought of those people, crushed and consumed by her children, filled her with glee. She wondered if the black shirts down below knew what she had done? Did they cry? Gnash their teeth and weep with rage?

She hoped so.

Vaguely, a part of her wondered if she should feel any sorrow for the thousands she had killed. Perhaps once, she might have.

When Garralosh tried, when she reached far back, into the depths of her mind, she can remember a different time, when she wasn't a creature of the Dungeon, she'd been something else, soft and pink, vulnerable and weak.

She could no longer remember if those memories were dream or reality. She could vaguely remember her first years in the Dungeon, the fear, the terror, the sheer exhilaration.

But even those fractured memories, of a softer world and a different her, they didn't feel peaceful. She could remember blood, she could remember her hand, without claws, but with a knife. She could remember the fear, the terror and the exhilaration.

Garralosh shifted her weight slightly, then levered herself onto her feet.

Whatever she had been before, whatever she was now, she was extremely confident of one thing.

She had always been a monster.

GRRRRRRRRRRRRROOOOWLLLLL.

The rumbling of air through her throat caused the trees to shake and the rock to crack. She turned to where her strongest children had been widening the tunnel for her. She could barely fit now, but it would be enough.

With a surge of mana and her powerful strength she rushed forward, every step carving huge gashes into the stone beneath her feet. The ground itself trembled at her passing and she rushed passed her gathered children, into the tunnel and then up.

The mana had grown high enough now, impossibly high. She would go the surface and see the ruined cities for herself. She would crush everything that she found and devour the humans whole until their bodies quenched her hunger for vengeance. She would rampage and kill, harry and hunt until the cursed black soldiers abandoned their posts and rushed to stop her. Then she would destroy them, feast on their remains and finally, finally, she would answer the call and descend to join the Ancients.

Her lips drew back from her obsidian teeth in a Crocodilic grin.

She would claim her rightful place at last.