

Chrysalis 321

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Chapter 321: War Council Part 1

"Welcome back Eldest" Victoriant, the budding queen to be, greeted me.

At the sound of her voice, the others turned their antennae toward me, signalling that their attention was with me as I crawled down the wall and onto the floor in the centre of the chamber. There were a few soldiers present, I noted, to keep the spawning monsters out of our carapace long enough for the council to take place.

"It's good to be home" I told them as I settled in place, observing the first generation of my grand experiment. The twenty hadn't changed much in my absence, perhaps a few mutations here and there, but none of them had taken the next step and reached evolution. I suppose they hadn't wanted to hog resources that were needed to grow the population of the colony.

That was something I could respect. The twenty did not use their seniority to benefit themselves, they thought only of the best for the colony as a whole. It was the kind of unselfishness that I had come to see as normal within the colony. The workers, the Queen, every member, thought only about contributing to the collective and not about empowering themselves.

I suppose, as the only true 'non-ant' in the colony I was the sole exception to that rule. It would be unlikely, or improbable, for any one worker to come into the kind of resources that I had lavished on myself. The sheer wealth of Biomass I had consumed, the cores I had absorbed and the experience I had earned, most workers would have donated much of that to the colony. I suppose in some ways it made me a selfish, member of the colony, but at the same time it had allowed me to contribute my new family in ways that would have been impossible had I not reached as high as I had, as quickly as I had.

Which was something I would have to consider in the future. We didn't have the resources, and likely never would, to raise every ant in the colony the same way I had raised my pets, and invested in myself. Maximised cores and Biomass, special cores absorbed to go beyond capacity and push the evolutionary potential to the limit. It simply wasn't feasible when we were talking about two hundred individual monsters being born per day. My minimum standard would have to be enforced, every worker would generate a core rather evolve in a weakened, dead end state, and each worker would be given the opportunity to reinforce their core before evolving. But I had to consider whether it would be beneficial to pick out individuals for exceptional reinforcement.

It fundamentally didn't seem fair to me, but I couldn't discount the possibility either. After all, I'm just one individual with more resources poured into them than average and I'd been able to change the destiny of the colony completely by changing our species. Who's to say another, similarly resourced ant couldn't do the same via incredible prowess in battle, or magical research, or through crafting?

For now, I didn't intend to make any changes to my hatchling rearing policy, but I would have to continue to think on it if we survived this crises.

"Well" I opened up, "scouting to the north was ... interesting."

I tried to keep my tone light, but the twenty clearly detected something as each member's antennae drooped low at my words.

"Would you like to elaborate on 'interesting', Eldest?" Wills the scout asked, almost visibly bracing for an impact.

"Look, I want to say up front that it wasn't my fault!" I said defensively, "if anything, I did a good job as a scout by identifying a major threat!"

At my declaration of a major threat, the antennae drooped even lower, almost touching the floor, as I confirmed their worst fears.

"How big is the threat?" Sloan the general enquired tiredly, trying to focus on the problem.

"Dinosaur sized?" I hazarded. What sort of size scale are they working with for threat measurement?

I could see some confusion ripple through the gathered ants and I realised they had no concept of what a dinosaur was, or how large it would be.

"Okay. I was able to identify the nature of the destruction occurring to the north, as well as locate the source of the strange monster behaviour and the raids that have been sent our way through the Dungeon."

The twenty all perked up at these words. This was good stuff so far.

"The unfortunate part is that the creature responsible is a gigantic monster crocodile and she's coming our way to stomp us out, along with the human village."

And now they were deflated once more.

"They are also bringing a horde of thousands of monsters and a powerful mage lizard with its own sorcerous attendants."

If the scout Burke sunk any lower he'd melt into the floor.

"What are our chances of avoiding the danger?" Frances the healer ant spoke up. "Is there a chance we can deflect this threat onto the human village or retreat into the Dungeon?"

I shook my antennae. "I don't think so. The lizard is capable of scrying magic and probably knew we were here before I even left to scout. Now that they are coming this way, I think they'll work to hunt us down. Since they can control Dungeon monsters somehow, moving into the Dungeon would be too dangerous. Our best bet is to make a stand with the humans and try to fight them off."

"That's going to be difficult" Brendant the soldier muttered, "we are only just now beginning to ramp up our growth. Active hunting outside of Vibrant and her group only started two days ago. The Queen has been laying at full capacity since then but those workers will only be fully grown and ready for deployment in a week."

"We have slightly less than a week to prepare" I informed them, "they're moving fairly slow and taking the long way around. I can't be exactly sure why but I clapped eyes on them myself before returning."

"Well that's something at least" Burke muttered and turned her eyes toward Wills, who nodded and rushed out of the chamber.

I twitched an antennae, curious at the exchange and Burke filled me in. "Wills has gone to organise our scouting regiment, we'll need trails laid further to the north and eyes on the horde if we can get them."

"Be careful" I warned, "that magic lizard is no joke."

"We'll be careful" she assured me.

Hmm. I suppose having as constant a flow of information as possible will be a great first step.

"We are going to have to fight this" I declared to the council, "and we can't afford to wait until they get to us before we begin to inflict damage. We need to start chipping away at them as they advance. Does anyone have thoughts on how we can do this?"

The generals and soldiers flapped their antennae for a moment as they considered their options before Leeroy spoke up.

"I suggest I lead an advanced unit to - "

"Rejected" I said.

"You didn't let me finish!" the offended soldier replied.

"Alright then, go ahead" I sighed.

"As I was saying. I lead an advance unit to engage the enemy and die in glorious battle, sacrificing ourselves to buy more time for the colony to prepare. My very guts will rise up to entangle the foe!"

THWACK!

I slapped down on the ants head in retribution for the nonsense she'd spewed.

Damned Leeroy... Get some sense in your head!

"Any serious suggestions?"

Tungstant used one leg to rub her mandibles as she thought out loud. "We should limit ourselves to the 'hit and run' tactics that the eldest taught us during training. It should be feasible to attack using tunnels, pitfalls and prebuilt defence networks that we can abandon and flee. Cobalt and I have cooked up a few ideas in that direction already."

"Do we have any ants that can do damage from long range?" I asked. All of the workers were born with acid glands, just as I was, but the range wasn't exactly stellar.

Burke filled me in. "The scouts have a dedicated group with range and damage mutations on their acid glands. We are experimenting with ways that scouts can contribute to pitched battle and using them as an artillery battery in open areas is one of the concepts we are developing. We are soldiers, after all."

It was true, and easy to forget. The scouts were one of three offshoots of the baseline soldier variant and therefore were beefier than all of the other casts. It would be a mistake to think of them as anything other than a battle asset as well as a scouting force.

"Fantastic. What else can we get done?"

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Chapter 322: War Council part 2

"With your permission Eldest, I will leave the council and begin to organise a workforce to prepare our initial fortifications" Tungstant said.

I waved an antennae in approval and the small, dextrous ant climbed up the wall and out the roof of the chamber in a moment.

"Alright then. Pitfall traps, tunnels to attack, I like all of these ideas. What else have we got? How is our magic firepower coming along?" I asked.

The two mages in the room, Propellant and Coolant, shifted on their feet as they became the centre of attention for the council. The mage caste hadn't had a lot of time to build up their raw magic handling skills, and were without the benefit of my own extensive spending on brain power when it came to evolutions. Having said that, they were no slouches in the brain game and were able to choose their own elemental gland on evolution. So there had to be some juice there.

"The number of mage ants we have to work with is still limited" Coolant hedged.

There were over a thousand ants in the colony at this time, there were like a hundred new ants being born every day. How few mages could there be?

"How many are we talking about?" I asked.

"Five" Coolant said flatly.

"Five?!" I sputtered.

"Oh, seven including Coolant and I" Propellant offered helpfully.

Holy moly.

"Why do we have so few mages? When fighting against a huge horde, like the one coming to kill us right now, more mage ants would be indispensable!"

I could see it in my mind's eye already. Tunnel entrances falling in to reveal teams of mage ants who blasted the front ranks of the horde with deadly fire, torching dozens of monsters with flamethrower like magic before retreating through the tunnels which collapsed behind them, leaving decimated and crispy ranks of enemies behind them.

A few members of the council shifted uncomfortably. "We've had most of the hatchlings move into the soldier caste recently" Antionette informed me, "Large numbers of scouts and soldiers have been born. Our more specialised castes have had slower recruitment rates for the moment."

Slower I could understand, but five?!

"Coolant and I have been doing our best to map out the skill paths from scratch and explore methods to raise up the future generations of mage ants" Propellant told me ruefully. "We didn't anticipate a need for a number of mages at this stage and wanted to take more time with our preparation."

Makes sense, but still, I would have loved to have more mages right now. To clear away large amounts of weak enemies they would have been indispensable. There may be a use for the mages we have, of course, but there is a lot that can be said for quantity.

As they say: Quantity, is a quality all of its own. That's practically the ants motto.

"Ok then. We have two main objectives, we need to whittle down the horde that's coming our way, I need to help with that so I can reach my second objective, which is to level up so that I can evolve."

"You're close to your next evolution, Eldest?" Victoriant asked, sounding oddly excited.

"I am" I affirmed with a dip of my antennae, "I only need six more levels. If we're going to battle against creatures as strong as those coming our way, we're going to need every little advantage we can get."

"I agree" Sloan the General piped up, "we may have the ability to chip away at the number of weaker monsters but tackling anything stronger is going to be beyond us for a time. If the Eldest can evolve then that task will be in capable hands."

You just wanted to dump all of the hard work onto me, didn't you? She's technically correct, but that doesn't serve to soothe my irritation.

"I think we can agree that we don't need to prioritise food gathering or egg laying to a high extent in the lead up to this crisis?" I asked the gathered council, "If we don't survive the upcoming battle then the colony will cease to exist."

"We shouldn't shut down food gathering entirely, surely?" protested Florence, the to this point silent Brood Tender, "without food the larvae will starve."

"I don't think anyone is suggesting that we cease food gathering operations completely" Sloan assured her, "but rather that we divert a significant portion of the soldiers currently acting to gather food to prepare for the defence."

Somewhat mollified, Florence settled back, though she and her fellow Brood Tender were clearly not happy. I understand it, less food coming in means less brood. What else is a Brood Tender going to do?

"We also need to keep enough senior workers here to ensure that the hatchling training program continues to run unabated. Each new hatchling deserves the best possible start we can give them, don't forget that!"

I eyeballed each of them at the same time, something you can only do with extensively upgraded compound eyes, one of the benefits of being an insect monster.

They each nodded in agreement, more to appease me than anything else. My insistence on equal treatment for the hatchlings still makes little sense to them I suspect, thankfully by virtue of being old they have to listen to me. Hooray for strict respect for the elders!

"You won't be ready to move out for a few hours will you, Senior?" Sloan asked me.

I nodded. "That's right. Crinis needs to evolve and we all need some rest. We've been pretty flat out for the last few days and I suspect it's going to be hectic for a week or so after this."

"Right" Sloan agreed. "I propose we sent out a large scale hunting party immediately. We could stockpile enough Biomass that egg production doesn't noticeably suffer over the next few days. The worker and artisan castes can devote their attention to the brood and constructing the initial defences whilst the soldier caste hunts. Once the Eldest has rested sufficiently they can join the digging teams on the frontlines and begin to harass the enemy."

The rest of the council nodded in agreement. This did seem like a reasonable proposal.

"I'll need a favour though..." I spoke reluctantly, "can someone get a hold of Vibrant and tell her I need some Biomass hunted for my own personal consumption. I want to finish my mutations before I evolve and I need close a hundred Biomass to do it."

Taking resources from the colony at a time like this felt bad, but deep down I know it's necessary. In my mind the hulking figure of Garralosh, her incredible mass and the overwhelming aura she emitted are weighing down on me. Even after evolving there's little chance I'll have any hope of matching up against her but I need to make sure that I do everything possible to increase my strength before she arrives here."

Advant tipped her antennae. "I'll be able to take care of that. Vibrant has been hunting in the Dungeon incredibly actively with her squad. It's thanks to her efforts the egg production rate has increased as quickly as it has. I'm sure she'll be able to provide the Biomass you need in no time."

"That's great" I said, relieved of a burden. I really didn't want to have to go hunting for that Biomass, I simply didn't have the time.

Ok then.

"I think we have the first stage of our plan in place. I'll leave the details to you to work out. Can some soldiers stay down here so we can rest without being attacked? We can't waste time sleeping in shifts."

The soldiers nodded and the council gave me a friendly wave as they quickly dispersed to their undoubted mountain of tasks that needed to be organised. They are better at taking care of that kind of stuff than me. I have my own responsibilities to look to.

[Ready to evolve Crinis?]

[Yes, Master!]

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Chapter 323: Crinis evolves

With the main bulk of the planning done, it was time to get my group rested and ready to head back out into the fray. Not long after the council broke up, Tiny stumbled into our chamber only to flop onto the floor and returned to sleep, absorbing the mana of the Dungeon to restore his exhausted core.

Speaking of cores, it was time to help Crinis evolve! Only her second evolution since she'd been reforged as my loyal pet and unlike the last evolution, this one would be less of my design. I hadn't had the skill to affect her evolutions to such a deep extent at the time, so there is an opportunity for Crinis to take a more direct hand in her own evolution here, without my own guiding influence.

Naturally this meant that the Dungeon would weave the general shape of her choices and there was a chance that some of them would be hot garbage. Fortunately, if that were to happen then Crinis could ask me to dive into her core and sort out some options for her.

[Are you ready for this Crinis?]

The little ball wiggled indecisively on the floor in front of me, small tentacles extending this way and that until eventually her form solidified.

[I - I think so, Master] she told me.

[You're doing great. Remember, if the evolution options are terrible, let me know and we can work on developing something a little more concrete that suits what you want.]

The little blob-like ball nodded somehow and firmed up further as Crinis gained confidence.

[I know. I feel it'll go well] she declared.

I looked down at my loyal and ever diligent sphere of endless murder and torment. She'd come a long way in being able to try and take responsibility for making her own choices. It wasn't that long that she'd been paralysed by fear just thinking of spending her skill points, and now here she was, preparing to make her own decisions in her own evolution.

I was happy she'd shown such growth over the last few weeks. She'd been working hard to improve herself.

[Wait a second. You aren't trying so hard because you think that's what I want, is it?]

[....]

[Oi! Don't pretend you're already in the evolution menu!]

[Can't hear you master, evolving] Crinis' voice echoed faintly in my mind.

Such a dirty trick!

Well at least she's working on being independent, even if it's for the wrong reasons. Personal growth! The journey we are all on as we slaughter monsters together! As I leave Crinis to sort through her menu my eyes fell onto Tiny.

A little personal growth would be nice for the big guy. He was a battle hungry nut case when I reconstituted his core and he is still that same battle hungry nut case. At least he knows what it is that wants from life, I suppose.

For now though. Time for some rest. After everything that's gone on since my last snooze, I think I've earned it.

As I fall into the comfortable, dark fuzz that is torpor, the ever nearing threat that is Garralosh, her lizard handler and the horde that accompanies them weighs on my awareness. I have to believe that the family I've found in this new world be able to weather the storm. I know that I'll do everything in my power to get us all through it.

HAGGAH!

I'm up!

Ahh! Feels so nice to have had a good rest, back in my own little chamber. It may not have been home for long, but it's more home than anywhere else on this world.

Tiny is still asleep and Crinis appears to be deep in her meditation sleep. I can already see her little spherical body beginning to change in subtle ways. I'll be interested to see what the final result is!

But I have business to take care of first. Sitting in one corner of the chamber is a pile of Biomass and when I approach it I find a pheromone message from the most hyper-active ant of them all.

"Hi-Hi Senior! Long-time no see! :o. Hope things have been well with you. It's been busy here! x) This is the second load of food I brought in since Tiny woke up and ate the first lot. Enjoy! ^_^ "

Figures that Tiny chow down on my food, thank goodness that Vibrant was able to rustle up a second serve. This may not be enough food to give me all of the Biomass that I need, in fact I'm sure it won't. The quality of this food isn't enough for me to be able to get the numbers I need before I fill up my two stomachs.

Without waiting any longer I lay into the food and begin stuffing my face.

Om Nom Nom!

Just before I finish stuffing my face, another twenty points of Biomass accredited to my name, I notice Crinis beginning to shift in the corner. I immediately abandon my meal and leap over to her resting position, bringing my antennae forward to poke and prod at her in concern.

[Crinis! You awake? Everything ok?!]

The changes to her outer physical form are fairly minimal, but more pronounced than last time. She's grown slightly larger, for starters, from a softball size to a... slightly larger softball size. She'd grown ten small permanent tentacles that curved downward from her body to the floor, lifting it up and allowing her to walk around without having to will any limbs into existence by manipulating her shadow flesh.

I gradually felt her awareness come to me as she finished waking up.

[Master?" she queried sleepily, "I've done it. Check and see.]

What a cute little pet she is, so dedicated.

Eagerly I bring me antennae forward and activate my core surgery skill. The information from her core floods into my mind and after parsing it I put together her status and examine it:

Name: Crinis

Level: 1 (core)

Might: 95

Toughness: 80

Cunning: 44

Will: 42

HP: 160/160

MP: 210/210

Skills: Expert Shadow Flesh Manipulation Level 4 (III); Expert Grappling Level 6(III); Expert Shredding Level 8 (III); Enhanced Tremor Sensing Level 8 (II); Brutal Dismembering Level 5 (II); Greater Fear Inspiration Level 4 (II); Mana Transformation Level 2(III); Smooth Tentacle Walking Level 7 (II); Tentacle Fu Level 3 (I); External Mana Manipulation level 3 (I); Shadow Magic Affinity Level 1 (I); Stealth Level 3(III);

Mutations: Dense Durable Shadow flesh +10; Rapid Disintegrating Void Maw +10; Vast Bottomless Dimensional Stomach +10; Empowered Dividing Tentacles +10; Sharpened Ripping barbs + 10; Pointed Macabre Teeth + 10; Wide Fine Mana Sensory Gland +10, Rapid Deep Shadow Magic Gland +10, Extra Swift Shadow Flesh Generator +10; Shadow Eye; Tentacle Conductor;

Species: Shadow Murder Orb

Skill points: 17

Biomass: 75

Oho! There's some good stuff here! In the skills department she's clearly been making great strides, already reached Mana Transformation. She must have been practicing diligently whilst riding on my back to achieve the tier three skill so quickly. And she got shadow magic affinity right off the bat! I'm so jealous! Not to mention she's almost reached the same level of Cunning as me! And the rest of her stats are so high as well! Dammit! I feel so inadequate... This is mainly due to her having far higher base stats before her first evolution. Poor ants, we have it so rough in the stats department.

I can only hope my next evolution will be able to push me over the edge and I can start reaping some high stat gain.

Looking at her stats, it seems as if Crinis has gone for a balanced approach, improving in every stat. Her mental stats being concentrated in one mind means that her brain must be incredibly powerful, far stronger than my own since my stats are distributed across three brains. With her shadow magic affinity, the full potential of her shadow magic gland has been unlocked as she can now use that mana to its full potential and her high mental stats mean she has the grunt to get the job done.

Her might stat is still decent without being overwhelming. She'll continue to be able to battle multiple smaller foes with impunity but will be stronger against the heavier hitters. I think that's why I see an emphasis on stealth. Crinis seems to have been thinking about her own method of contribution to fighting tougher monsters and I think she has reached her answer with her new organs.

The Shadow eye... I'm curious about this one.

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Chapter 324: New Crinis, Spending up

Curious about Crinis' new Shadow eye I dive deeper into the information hidden within her core, laid bare before my core surgery skill. Ah, interesting. It's dense bloc of information, clearly a powerful organ, far more than the average, if anything I would think that the majority of her evolutionary energy was spent on this.

From what I can gather, the shadow eye is a special type of sensory organ, it doesn't help her to 'see' per se, not like human eyes, it allows her extend her vision or more accurately, her 'awareness' through shadows. I'm not sure exactly how powerful that will prove to be, although I'm sure Crinis will have a use for it, otherwise she wouldn't have picked it. Combined with her shadow magic gland and affinity Skill, there must be some trick she can use that I'm not aware of.

The other new organ she gained is also interesting. This is Crinis' solution to the problem of divided attention. I resolved this issue by adding a number of brains to allow me to think about multiple things at once, but she's taken a slightly different path. Much like how an octopus has neural connections for each tentacle, Crinis' new organ, the tentacle conductor, effectively acts as nerve endings for up to eight tentacles, so they'll be able to move and act independently of her main mind. Eight may not seem like enough considering the kind of numbers she can manifest, but with mutation advances I'm certain she'll be able to push the boundary higher.

Interesting! All in all I think she's done an excellent job!

[Well Crinis, it looks as if your evolution has been very successful!] I praised her, freezing my antennae at the last moment so I didn't pet her. If I overpraise her, she might freeze up and I can't afford the time. As it is, she's already quivering a little bit, like a blob of jelly I'd poked.

Crinis collected herself, lifting her body up on her new permanent tentacles and skittering left and right a little as she got used to them.

[Thank you Master] she replied warmly, [I spent a great deal of time thinking about how I was going to evolve.]

[I took a good look at your Shadow Eye, but I'm not quite sure how it's going to work. I assume it has something to do with your shadow magic affinity?]

The slightly larger blob nodded.

[That's right. I'll show you.]

The squishy orb of death grew still for a moment and I notice that the shadow beneath her body grew noticeably darker over time until it was pitch black. Then, Crinis deliberately extended a tentacle into the shadow.

I boggled at the sight of her tentacle extending into solid stone. What is this? Some sort of shadow gate?

I felt something tickle the bottom of my carapace and I leapt high into the air.

[Wazzat?!] I cried.

Crinis giggled, a to this point nearly unheard of sound and I looked down to see the tip of the tentacle emerging from the ground where my shadow had been, wiggling back and forth.

[Oh that is sweet!] I yelled as Crinis withdrew her tentacle back through the connected shadows and into her body.

[I can't move my main body through] she checked my enthusiasm, [but the Shadow Eye allows me to extend by senses through the shadows after I've connected them.]

Oh snap! So she could spy on people, or extend her tentacles to attack things through a shadow that is in a separate room than she is! The possibilities are almost endless.

[How far can a shadow be before you can't connect it?] I asked, musing to myself.

[My range is around twenty metres right now, if I can detect the target shadow through my mana sense, ten if I can't.]

I nodded, stroking my chin with an antenna. [Train hard Crinis, this new ability will be extremely powerful when levelled up.]

[I will Master] Crinis acknowledged, already sounding pumped for the challenge.

So diligent.

Crinis, with her shiny new evolution toys to play with, waddles onto my back with her short tentacles and settles into position, no doubt already practicing her skills. I'm somewhat jealous of her at the moment, having successfully completed her evolution. with my own dance with body changing looming on the horizon the anticipation and anxiety is continuing to build apace.

It's a strange thing, changing your body in such a dramatic way. It's invigorating, the sense of growth and strength that you feel is incredible. At the same time, there is a tinge of fear, of stepping into the unknown.

Gah! Thinking about that sort of stuff is just going to hurt my head. Time to move onto what I need to be doing in the here and now: Mutations. I still have three upgrades that I need to do, but only enough Biomass for two. So close! I've never been this close to a completely upgraded body before and the sense of accomplishment is building the closer I get.

Just one to go! I'm not sure how I'm going to get the Biomass or time to eat it, but I'll have to manage somehow. Perhaps I'll need to lean on Vibrant again to hunt and deliver some food for me.

Whatever, time to focus on mutations.

[Do you wish to improve Precognitive Infrared Antennae to +15? This will cost 65 Biomass]

Yessiree.

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

This is an interesting one. Infrared is quite useful, another way to detect enemies, another sense to help cover up shortages in other areas. Having said that, my senses have been steadily improving, particularly my sight, there isn't really a need to emphasise the infrared. The Future Sight has been very interesting, not to mention saving my life (if not my backside).

My reflexes and reactions are almost not quite fast enough to make full use of the tiny glimpse to the future that my antennae give me. Emphasising this mutation will perhaps give me that extra nano-second that will make all the difference.

Ok. I'm going to Emphasise the precognitive.

[Would you like to upgrade your Mana Eating Restrictive Acid to +15? This will cost 65 Biomass]

Yessss!

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

Ahh the acid gland, a key feature of the formica variant of the ant species. My 'ol trusty business district and its jets of burning acid have served me well, particularly in the early days. The restrictive property of the acid was such a key thing for me back then and to be honest I still think it's a valuable property to the acid. I haven't had much chance to use the magic eating mutation lately but I have high hopes that it will be extremely relevant in the days to come.

This seems like a slam dunk, Combine them!

[Do you wish to upgrade your Precognitive Infrared Antennae to Future Sight Infrared Antennae?]

[Do you wish to upgrade your Magic Eating Restrictive Acid to Mana Binding Acid?]

I do!

GACK!

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Chapter 325: Belonging

It took some time for the itching to pass, as it always did. When I finally regained full control of my body again, I picked myself up from the floor, dusted myself off, cleaned my antennae and attempted to move as if nothing had happened.

The soldiers keeping an eye on the room pointedly didn't look at me as I climbed the wall and moved up into the Queen's chamber. Things continued to operate in here as they always did, a cloud of buzzing workers rushed here and there whilst the ever-patient Queen stood still and unmoving amidst the chaos.

She had not evolved.

"I will evolve in good time, child" the Queen remonstrated before I'd even begun to speak, predicting my question with ease.

"What's the hold up?" I asked piteously, "most ants are happy to have the chance to evolve and dive straight in."

Perhaps I was being a touch selfish, I'd really wanted to see what shape her evolution would take.

The Queen looked down at me, her eyes like pools without a single ripple and said: "this decision is more important than most, and due to your ... gift" she gestured to the rare core in front of her, "I will

have many options to ponder. I am seeking the correct frame of mind and trying to determine the right path forward, for myself and for the colony."

Slow and steady wins the race eh? Not an attitude I was super familiar with, but I could recognise the wisdom in it. She was right in the sense that for most ants, their evolution did not weigh on the fate of the colony in quite the same way that the Queen's did. She was the central figure in this family that the rest of the colony turned around, like some sort of caring, soothing hub.

Not to mention she was individually the most powerful individual in the colony, with the possible exception of myself. If she was ready to evolve, with a rare core to boot, just what would she be capable of when she'd finished? What sort of juicy options would she unlock? What kind of potent glands were available to someone with that sort of evolutionary energy at their claw tips?

I sighed.

I'd have to wait to find out. The Queen was taking this situation very seriously, as well she should.

"Did any of the twenty tell you about what is happening top side?" I asked, somewhat apprehensively.

I hadn't wanted to go into too much detail when I first came in, I'd been getting thwacked just on the basis of the rare core I'd brought in, who knows if I'd still have a shiny, unbroken exo-skeleton on my head. I'd figured that one of the twenty would tell her and I'd come in a bit later after the heat had gone out of it.

"That was not a mess of your making, child" she told me, "you have assisted the family by bringing news of this threat back to us."

I could tell by the twinkle in the Queen's eye that she had seen through my scheme to try and avoid recriminations but she was kind enough to make it clear that in this case, she felt I didn't deserve them.

"Thanks Mother" I chuckled.

THWACK!

Oooo, the 'unexpected, tender moment thwack!'

She'd got me that time...

"Try not to keep such critical details to yourself after asking me to do something as important as evolving, child" my Mother admonished me, "I need to know in order to make the best decision for the colony."

I rubbed my sore head and nodded. That was fair, I deserved that. In pushing her to evolve and then keeping the details of the crises that was approaching the colony I'd put my own fear of getting thwacked ahead of the interests of the colony. A selfish thing to do.

I'd have to get rid of that habit if I was to avoid disappointing my family.

I moved to slink out of the Queen's chamber with what remained of my dignity intact and as I left the Queen's voice sounded out behind me.

"Good luck child, we are counting on your success."

At her words, an unforeseen emotion welled up inside me and I doubled my pace, unable to respond to the upwelling of feeling, I fled from it.

I didn't know what to say, how to express it. I wasn't used to being counted on like this. I wasn't used to being trusted like this. To have individuals I care about and trust, care about and trust me back in return.

My family in my past life, if they even deserved the word 'family', never gave me this, they'd never accepted me as I'd been accepted here, had certainly never involved and trusted me.

I didn't like to dwell on my past life, I felt back then, as I feel now, that plenty of people had it worse than I did. But it feels a little crazy to me that I had to reborn as monstrous ant to finally be able to feel this feeling of... belonging.

GAH!

I can't handle these emotions! I need to channel them into something constructive, like slaying my enemies and feasting on their Biomass! New Crinis had tagged along for the ride, her little tentacles clinging onto my back as I moved up the walls.

[Hurry up, Tiny!] I called down to the big ape, shaking him out of his slumber.

He'd been slowly rousing when I'd left the chamber but I'd run out of patience with him now. Eating, sleeping and fighting were all he was bothered about.

[We're going to fight stuff, by the way] I shouted.

[Ooo!] I heard back a startled exclamation and in moments the giant ape was seen scrambling up the tunnels, his thick fingers clinging to holds in the walls as he climbed.

It's time to go pay a visit to the village and then head to the frontlines. We needed to chip away at the horde and we needed to start as soon as possible!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 326: Consultation

Filled with energy and a surging sense of purpose I launched myself out of the colony and into the open air of Pangera, my new world. Crinis, Tiny and I moved with deliberate haste and made our way toward the village. Before we move to the front line and engage ourselves with the activities of the colony there, I wanted to take a moment to check in on the village.

I wonder how the people over there are holding together with the threat of horrific death and doom weighing on their minds. The colony has been fine, the ants are a calm bunch when you get down to it. They really only respond with powerful emotion when defending or serving the colony. The threat of death doesn't weigh particularly on their minds at all.

Scratch that. The threat of death is something of an attraction to most of them. Thinking of Leeroy I can't help but wince inside. That moron is only a particularly zealous example of the flagrant disregard the ants have for their own safety, but he represents an attitude that is still prevalent within the workers, despite my attempts to stamp it out.

There isn't a single one of them who wouldn't happily throw themselves into the jaws of an enemy if they thought it would benefit the colony in some way, the only thing holding them back is my directions to the contrary.

The people of the village don't have that kind of dedication, at least, I be very surprised if they did. It would be rather... disturbing, if they did.

Hopefully they aren't panicking too much. Enid runs a tight ship over there and I'm sure Morrelia, upon her return, would be able to inject a steel into the backs of the people there. I can't imagine her tolerating even the slightest sign of hesitation.

When we arrive in the village I'm somewhat surprised to see that my expectations of panic and fear have failed to manifest. In fact, the villagers appear to be calm, determined and focused. There is a heck of a lot of activity in the village, to be sure, but there is a quiet determination in the air that lends the people with a feeling of control.

Children are running here and there, carrying equipment, building materials, passing messages, whilst the adults are engaged in all sorts of labour. The smithy has been finished and men and women ply their trade inside, their faces lit from beneath by the warm glow of the heated metal they are pounding into shape, making nails, swords and I think I can spy an axe.

In another newly erected building I can see what appear to be bowyer's at work, their hands carving away at staves with long smooth motions, whittling the wood down into the curved wooden bows I've seen in the hands of Morrelia's team. I can only suppose that those are the predominant bow type in use in the area. Then there are the people drilling and practicing, which seems to be about the entire adult population of the village not currently engaged in gathering food or making weapons of war.

In pockets all over the village, almost a small town now, with the number of houses and other buildings that have been erected in the time I've been gone, villagers who I assume are the more learned and Skilled amongst them are leading groups through drills and basic sparring practice using crude training weapons. The villagers, far from shying away from the martial skills they are learning, express only fierce determination and focus in their faces.

Moving from group to group, I can see a new face, a somewhat rough looking man I'd place somewhere in his twenties. Every time he comes to a new team, he pauses to look and correct people form and bark out some advice before moving onto

These people are giving me seriously intense vibes. They have no chill!

With Crinis on my back and Tiny standing at my side, I make a conspicuous sight and it isn't long before villagers spot me. A ripple passes through the crowded town centre as people nudge their neighbours, I can see many a finger raised, pointing in my direction and it isn't long before the entire village has come to a standstill as every man, woman and child has paused to look at me.

Sigh.

May as well get this over with. I'd kind of hoped that the obsession the people here have with me would blow over with time, but thanks to the unending efforts of Beyn and the members of his village, it seems to be getting worse.

As I move toward the village I can see it all happening, the whispering, the pointing, the gazes filled with reverence. The men and women of the village look at me as if they are looking at a sturdy mountain that shelters them from the howling wind, or a great tree that protects from the lashing rain.

Hang on a sec.

Are they so confident facing this crises because they think I'm going to save them?! Surely they aren't that crazy! What kind of human depends on a freakin' ant monster to swoop in and save the day? That can't be healthy! Not to mention, I don't need this pressure in my life! Save yourselves dammit! Go bug Morrelia and get her to save you... she's plenty strong!

Disgruntled and somewhat awkward, I make my way into the centre of the village and wait for Enid to show herself. Usually, as soon as I turn up they send someone running to fetch her, or in a less optimal scenario, they fetch Beyn.

I tolerate the muttering and ardent stares as I wait, my antennae twitching this way and that until I decide to start cleaning them, just to give myself something to do. The moment I lift my front leg, the crowd who had been quietly gathering around me in a loose circle gasped as one and leapt back, freezing my heart in my thorax for a moment.

Don't' freak me out like that people! I'm just trying to keep clean!

Fortunately it wasn't long before I spied Enid, rushing through the crowd which reluctantly parted to allow her through.

[Hi there Enid] I greeted her once I'd established the mind bridge, [how've things been over here in the village?]

Enid scowled at my light tone.

[An unending horde of monsters are about to descend on our heads, led by a vicious Kaarmodo sorcerer, and anchored around a centuries old monster, legendary for its viciousness. I hardly think this is the time for levity, Anthony] Enid said peevishly.

[When you put it like that] I muttered, [it does take the light out of the situation.]

Enid sighed, as if the weight of the world was pressing down on her shoulders.

[Sorry, I feel as if I haven't slept in weeks] she apologised, [to think I'd be having to work this hard in my old age. My bones are aching I tell you, and there's still so much to do.]

[Not a problem] I excused her, [things have been a bit hectic over the last while, there's no doubt about that.]

I cast my eyes about.

[I don't see any sign of Morrelia. Has she taken people into the Dungeon?]

Enid nodded.

[She's been running people to and from the Dungeon ever since she got back. I don't think she intends to stop until the horde arrives. I can understand it, every level counts at this point but I worry that she's pushing herself too hard.]

[Tell her I think she should take a break at some point] I advised.

Enid cast me an amused and curious look.

[You think she'll listen to you?] she asked incredulously.

[She might] I shrugged my antennae, [another hand on the scales might push her hard enough that she gets some rest.]

Enid nodded slowly before diverting the conversation.

[There's been a great deal of activity seen at the colony over the last day. So many ants have left the nest.]

There seemed to be some sort of undertone to what she said, but I couldn't read it for the life of me.

[We've been sending out an advance party. We intend to try and whittle down the numbers of the horde as much as possible before they arrive. I'll be heading out there myself shortly.]

Relief swept over Enid's face only to be swiftly followed by concern.

[Will you be safe out there? Don't underestimate the Kaarmodo, they are ancient and cunning beyond measure.]

That peaked my curiosity.

[You've had dealing with them before?]

She nodded.

[When my merchant enterprise what as it peaks I dealt with one of their mage conclaves as an import-export agent for them in Liria.]

[Any advice for me?] I asked hopefully.

The old woman looked down at me, concern creasing her forehead.

[Don't underestimate them] she warned me. [They are smart as whips and bite twice as deep.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 327: The forward HQ

It took a good bit of travel before we were able to reach the first staging area on the path between the nest and the anticipated direction the horde would be travelling. A steady stream of workers ran back and forth in long lines, bringing information back to the nest or returning for designated rest periods.

I found it curious that even with their enhanced senses and intelligence, which removed the necessity for the ants to move directly on top of a trail like regular ants on Earth would, they still chose to do so.

The result being that I was treated to the sight of hundreds of ants the size of large dogs hustling about in long trails, one after the other.

The main difference between this and looking at an ant trail back on Earth, other than the size of course, is that I could hear the chatter between the workers as they ran.

"Keep it up! Run hard!"

"We've got this! Push, push, push!"

"So much work to do, no time to slow down now!"

"Lift those claws! Don't forget you have six legs, not two like a human. That means three times the work!"

"Work hard for the colony!"

"FOR THE COLONY!"

Endlessly.

One advantage of not having to breathe in order to talk I suppose, no matter how fast they run or how tired they are, they can talk continuously. It was interesting to hear them pump each other up and encourage one another as they ran, to the point I wasn't sure if I was listening to monstrous ants or a spin class at a gym.

I've no doubt that if Vibrant were here, she'd be enthusiastically shouting and cheering the workers onto glorious deeds and greater efforts. I'm looking forward to catching up with Vibrant when she makes her way to the front lines. From what I understand, she decided to remain behind with her dedicated followers in order to make a push toward meeting the colony's food requirements before she left the nest to join us up here.

I have a suspicion that the food quota is going to get hit a lot faster than anyone anticipated. With Vibrant fired up for the job it's going to get done at light speed, which can only be a good thing. The faster it's done, the sooner those soldiers can get to the front and help with our campaign here to chip away at the horde, and the more food will be built up by those remaining behind to hunt, adding to the stockpile that will have been amassed. If things go like I think they will, the production of eggs may not slow down much at all during this crisis, which will put us in a better spot if we actually manage to pull through.

My pets and I eventually reach the staging area where the leadership of the raiding force has been gathering as more concrete plans are being drawn up, scouts are being sent out and preliminary ambush preparations are being made. It isn't much to look at though. When I arrived, I would have missed it had I not been following a scent trail.

The workers had dug a mini nest into the ground, but in the interest of concealing it as much possible, they'd done a good job of spreading the loose dirt around and carrying it away from the site itself. A large hole in the ground was the only sign of the nest, one meter across, too small for Tiny and a little squeezey for me to be honest.

I left Tiny and Crinis topside for the moment and plunged vertically down into the tunnel. The relative calm of the surface gave to a flurry of activity beneath the ground as workers climbed all over each other as they rushed about their tasks, expanding the size of the nest, excavating side tunnels and secret entrances so that they might enter and leave without being spotted.

The crush was a little claustrophobic for me, I didn't have a proper ant mentality about things like personal space, so having ant and dirt shoved in my face constantly made moving around a little disorienting, even as I tried to follow the scent trails to the "Planning room".

By the time I made it through I was quite rattled and extremely grateful to enter a chamber that contained a little free air and only a couple of ants.

"Welcome eldest," Victor the General greeted me, "It's good to see you made it to the front in time for the first ambush."

That got my attention. "We're ready for an ambush already? Do we even have eyes on the horde?"

Victor shook her head.

"Our fastest scouts have been sent to locate the horde but they are yet to return. We expect them to make contact with the horde tomorrow and then make their way back. Of course, that is conditional on the horde travelling on the stone trail you described to us."

"Road, Victor. It's called a road."

She waved her antennae dismissively.

"A strange human convention, it matters not. We have dispatched workers to scout and prepare the ground ahead, come and look."

Victor pulled me over to a corner of the room where I could dimly see a flat raised area had been prepared, the surface of which had been carved into a semblance of terrain. I could see roads, surprisingly detailed little building to represent what I think are towns. Midum was there, as well as the human village and I believe a rounded hill to represent the main nest of the colony. I believe that would make this hole pushed into the soil over here the forward base we currently occupied.

"This is weirdly well done Victor, did you get some sort of skill for this?" I asked, puzzled.

The General nodded.

"Sloan and I both thought it would be important for us to have a way to visualise positional information and terrain. After clacking our mandibles together for a while we came up with this!" she gestured towards her elaborate map proudly. "We had to buy a few skills to make it work, mental visualisation and earth shaping."

Huh. Interesting. So essentially a carving type skill to be able to shape the dirt into the forms they wanted, which helps to explain the high level of detail in the dirt shapes. Mental visualisation I suppose assists them in forming a picture in their minds of what they know, assisting them in being able to craft these little war maps. Clever stuff.

"Very handy! These kinds of maps are going to be super useful in planning our strategy. Good work Victor."

She wiggled her antennae, pleased her efforts had been valued. I'm guessing that some of the other ants had possibly doubted the value of this avenue of development, but as a former human, I knew it was going to pay off.

I'm glad I made the Generals a direct evolution from the soldier caste. We weren't going to need a whole lot of them, certainly not in the planning area, but Sloan and Victor had proven that having some soldiers with a decent head on their shoulders to lead the way was a wise decision. I did worry at times that the soldiers, having the lowest Cunning stat of any caste, would struggle to perform their duties properly, but with the Generals sprinkled into the mix, helping to keep them on the right track, they'd been performing well.

Which is just as well since they were going to get a serious test soon.

"I've got a few things that we can add to your map, Victor. Then I'd better get myself towards the front lines. I'll be a heap more useful up there helping to dig rather than sitting here twiddling my claws."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 328: The first ambush

I huddled beneath the earth with my brethren. The narrow tunnel was claustrophobic to say the least, the ceiling hung low over my head and knowing just how thin it was didn't help my space issues. My digging skill conveyed to me the awareness that the tunnel was structurally sound, but for some reason it didn't help.

Perhaps I was just nervous about the upcoming ambush and my nervousness was looking for an outlet. The scouts on either side of me didn't appear nervous in the slightest. Calm and composed, not moving at all, really. They were rock still as they awaited the signal to begin.

It had taken two days of solid effort to prepare this, the first ambush ground. We'd had to run hard to get out here, only to find that the workers who'd been sent ahead had already been hard at work for hours and their progress was staggering.

We assumed that the horde would continue to follow the road south and with that thought, the generals had planned for the first ambush to take place as far from the home nest as possible, whilst still allowing the workforce time to prepare the ground. The ants had been especially motivated however, my siblings had torn into the digging work with such zeal that by the time my pets and I had arrived, the ground was already littered with pitfalls.

The workers and soldiers got to work on the forest nearby, taking branches and cutting down trees away from the sight of the road and cutting them into stakes using their razor sharp mandibles, which they then took to the pitfalls and buried them in the bottom.

Others had been busy tunnelling out our ambush avenues. The area had looked feverish with activity and ants ran everywhere over the place and dirt flew into the air in dozens of places at once. It had been such a mess that I had genuinely thought there was no chance that we'd manage to get everything prepared and then cleaned up before the horde had arrived.

I was a fool to doubt my siblings. Before I'd taken my place here inside the tunnel, I'd been able to cast my eye over a spotless stretch of cobbled road and idyllic forest. No sign of the dozens of spiked traps or murderous ants hiding above and below the ground.

"Begin charge" came a whispered message from behind me and I immediately began focusing my three minds on my Gravitational Mana Gland.

I was hoping that Garralosh and the Kaarmodo lizard wouldn't be able to sense the build-up of mana if I was concealed beneath the soil. It was for that reason that I was positioned several metres back from the covered entrance of our tunnel, in an attempt to place a good chunk of dirt between the enemy and me as the Gravity Bomb took shape.

Claws crossed, it worked.

I pulled my mana out at a steady pace. I wasn't worried about depleting my core since the colony had extended a tunnel from the closest dungeon entrance towards the forward HQ. It wasn't much but it was enough that Tiny, Crinis and I were able to top up after our trek to the north.

The Gravity Bomb grew dense as time passed and I continued to feed mana into it at a steady pace.

"No change, continue charge" came the message from behind me.

No change in behaviour from the horde, no sign my spell had been detected. All good so far. I hope the ants keeping watch on the horde from above ground were keeping themselves hidden. Without knowing exactly how scrying worked, we'd tried to make sure all of our colony members were as hidden as possible. Each of them was tucked into a burrow or foxhole of some sort, hidden from above such that a view looking down from the sky would be unable to find them.

The greater the density of the gravity bomb, the more of my attention it demanded and the less extraneous thoughts I could allow. I didn't want to give away the ambush by blowing myself up, that would be less than ideal.

"Release when ready" the messenger behind me relayed.

The words and their meaning whispered around the outside of my awareness, my attention was drawn into the potent spell I was weaving as if it were the black hole it resembled. Due to the meditation skill my focus was strong enough that the meaning of the words registered and I could act.

That message meant the enemy was in position and I could unleash my gravity bomb when ready. The timing window was quite tight here so I had to move with haste.

One leg at a time I pushed myself forward, drawing nearer to the disguised entrance with each movement. On either side of me, scout ants pushed up, ensuring they remained slightly behind me at all times, lest they be caught in the release of the spell.

The rotating black mass of the gravity bomb consumed me now. The roiling energies threatened to spin out of my control at any time and only my iron will and powerful minds working in tandem were able to contain it.

With a sudden lunge, I propelled myself out of the opening, the grass and branches used to disguise the entrance burst outward, and no sooner did I lay eyes on the enemy than I unleashed their doom.

HOOOOOOOOWL.

The Gravity Bomb flickered into existence and announced its presence with the now familiar shriek of wind. The very air around us seemed to thin as the spell streaked toward the masses of monsters that made up the horde.

With the spell released and no longer requiring my constant focus I turn my attention more fully to the array of monsters approaching my position, monsters who are about to have a very bad day.

Like a blanket of zombies, the soundless ranks of Garralosh's horde are advancing at a slow pace along the road. From my vantage point, poking out of the low roofed tunnel we had dug into a low hill, the horde is spread before me across the plains. I can't make out the beast herself at this distance, I assume she's toward the back of the horde, and to be honest I'm grateful. If the regular soldiers had to deal with her crushing aura I'm not sure how they'd fare.

The Gravity Bomb crashed into the massed ranks of the horde and expanded to its full size, the furious pull of the magic dragging monsters to their soundless deaths and they were crushed in an instant. The sound of Gandalf uttering the system notifications rang in my mind over and over again.

[You have slain ...]

[You have slain ...]

[You have gained experience]

[You have gained experience]

[You have slain ...]

Twisting in place, the Gravity Bomb continued to drag more unwilling monsters into its depths, all sound dominated by the endless howl of the wind. Before the spell dissipated, the ambush was sprung. Called out of their hiding places by the piercing sound of the air being devoured by my spell, soldier ants pour out of their hiding places, tunnels dug into the surrounding low hills, and, as one, turn to present their business districts to the enemy.

This is a business convention!

As the spell continues to wreak havoc amongst the foe, jets of acid are unleashed from hundreds of ants and pour down, burning every monster they touch.

The scouts around me are super impressive, their acid blasts have tremendous range, arcing far beyond those of the other soldiers, raining their fearsome acid payload deep into the horde.

Oh right! I'm meant to be doing that too!

Gandalf continues to natter in my ear with notifications as I present the fearsome battery I keep in my back pocket and unleash liquid death at the horde.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

My own acid rained down as the Gravity Bomb flickered and vanished. As the spell disappeared, the enemy seemed to shake themselves awake, as if it were a beast that had just been punched in the face. The horde seemed to blink at our assault, then recover with a roar and charged forward.

Then Tiny and Crinis appeared.

Chrysalis

Chapter 329: The first ambush part 2

As the waves of monsters began to rush forward to attack the pesky ants who were tormenting them from the low hills surrounding them, Tiny burst out of his hiding place, crackling with electricity. He'd been hidden much closer to the horde than I was, and it had taken some extremely direct and detailed instructions before I was prepared to allow him to get that close to the enemy.

The plan depended on him not hurling himself in the midst of a horde of tens of thousands of monsters, as I'm sure he would be delighted to do. Speaking of the plan, I need to do my bit!

My sub brains put the time I was firing acid to good use and I put the finishing touches on the basic water affinity transformation construct and turned back around, already pumping out water mana which I wove into a non-compressed water cannon.

From just in front of my mandibles a fire hose like jet of water fountained out and filled the air with fine spray. At the range I was at, still a good thirty metres away from the first monsters in the horde, the non-compressed water cannon wasn't going to do any damage. At best I might knock a few monsters off their feet. But that wasn't the point.

As the water began to fall on the charging enemies, Tiny bellowed his challenge and thrust his meaty hands forward, unleashed his lightning. The enemy, now covered in a coating of fine mist that I continued to pump out, prove to be delightfully conductive. And when Tiny released twin bolts of pure lightning into them, they were instantaneously fried.

And we aren't done. From my raised vantage point I can spy a few patches of darkening shadow between the heaving masses of low level monsters. It's time for Crinis to begin her dark work. As Tiny continues to roar and discharge ridiculous amounts of electricity, electrocuting huge numbers of monsters, dark tentacles begin to emerge from the ground, slowly at first, then with growing speed.

The first the monsters know about it is when several of them are suddenly wrapped by dark limbs as thick as a human arm. Then the tentacles flexed, shifted, and allowed their barbs to go about their grisly business. Only moments after she had grasped her first victims, a rain of gore and Biomass had begun as she dismembered the monsters and her tentacles began grasping for new targets even as more of the dreaded limbs began to rise from the dark ground.

Crinis is currently positioned in a very small and narrow tunnel that has lead her directly beneath the enemy, five metres below ground. With the aid of her shadow magic and Shadow Eye, she can extend her mana sense through the shadows and 'see' her targets, clear as day. The end result is the disturbing carnage I'm seeing before me.

With my two pets working on separate areas toward the front of the horde, the charge that had been building in momentum has been stalled, but not for long. The scouts and surrounding soldiers have

continued to pour out acid as fast as they can and most have run out of juice. The battle has only been going for a minute at this point but it's nearly time to stage the retreat.

Just as I was thinking that, Tiny ran out of juice, the electricity pouring out of him flickered and died off, causing him to roar with frustration and rage. He wanted to fight, I get it, but he was under the strictest instructions for this engagement.

Once he ran out of juice he had to turn and retreat through the tunnel he'd emerged from. Clearly unhappy, Tiny did just that and I released a knot of tension in my gut. I'd done everything I could to ensure that he'd not stuff things up by throwing his life away, but Tiny had a way of making things difficult. I wasn't certain I'd done enough until I saw him vanish out of sight beneath the ground.

Crinis continued her butchery unabated as twenty tentacles grasped and tore through monsters who appeared to be thoroughly intimidated. I guess her fear inspiration skills were paying dividends since it didn't appear that anybody wanted to try and take a swing at her.

With Tiny retreating, the rest of the ants did the same, turning and vanishing into their tunnels, leaving no trace of the hundreds strong raiding force that had battered the horde from range only moments ago.

With the ants gone, Crinis' limbs retracted beneath the earth, slapping a few monsters around on the way out and the horde was left staring at their bloodied front ranks in silence.

It didn't last, of course. With a roar the horde surged forward, desperate to rend the ants, who had taunted them only moments before, into tiny pieces and stomp on what was left. Outward they surged, into dozens of now opened tunnels. I could feel the heat of them, roiling through the air as they plunged into my own tunnel, nipping at my heels.

Just as we'd planned.

The tunnels were cramped, with low roofs and limited space. Other than the tunnel dug for Tiny, the larger monsters couldn't fit through and indeed it was mostly centipedes and rabbits who had chased after me and my scout artillery force.

We fled down the tunnel for fifty metres before suddenly turning. This section of the tunnel opened up into a small chamber and a force of soldiers was already in position, arrayed in a 'U' shape, ready to receive our pursuers.

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When the flood of monsters ran into the chamber, they found themselves surrounded on all sides by the snapping mandibles of angry ants. And when I say all sides, I really mean all sides. The enemy poured straight into the mouth of the U, putting soldiers on their left and right, but it wasn't just that, soldiers clung to the ceiling and to the walls as well, forming a literal wall of snapping jaws that tore the first wave of monsters apart.

I took the brunt of the charge, anchoring myself in the centre of the formation and allowing the ineffective strikes of the weaker monsters to bounce off my glorious diamond carapace. Stymied by the narrow tunnels, the horde was unable to bring their superior numbers to bear against us, their own

losses clogging up the space as they tried to force themselves forward only to throw themselves into a field of bite attacks.

Similar battles would be taking place in a number of tunnels right now, a chance for us ants to inflict further casualties on the enemy without risking much ourselves. The only trick we'd had to work out was how to disengage.

SNAP! SNAP! I pumped my mandibles dispassionately as my siblings around me did the same. The waves of enemies didn't seem to ever end and for every monster we chopped down another pushed its way through until the chamber was packed with the Biomass of the fallen. Shame we wouldn't get a chance to eat it.

After five minutes of this brutal combat, a shudder ran through the ants as we received the unspoken signal. As one, we stepped back as with a roar the tunnel in front of us collapsed, drowning the enemy in tons of dirt in seconds.

The deep thump of the dirt falling was followed by a chilling silence as the raging battle was brought to a close with sudden finality. The first ambush was over. Hopefully the other tunnels had fared as well as we had, in which case the attack would have been a rousing success. Thousands of monsters killed, hopefully very few soldiers lost. It was a good start.

Chrysalis

Chapter 330: Musings

I was blessed many times over for such events occur, not only in my lifetime, but in my vicinity, allowing me to take a direct hand in the magnificent triumphs that transpired. But that isn't what I value most, the thing I gained the greatest joy from. The understanding that was granted to me far outweighed any other considerations in terms of the impact it had on my life and the direction I took.

What is the System? Divine intervention, most would say, certainly in the human kingdoms where the Church of the Path is most entrenched. A power that was granted to the wise that they may defend the light of civilisation from evil and temper themselves in battle, that they might prove themselves worthy.

What is the Dungeon? Providence, they would say. A place of trial, where the gifts of the System are to be developed to fulfilment, so that the worthy might be discerned and given their proper due. That, was the Path.

But I was shown that it wasn't so. Even now I am surprised that it didn't shake me more, I had been diligent and faithful all of my life, trained with the priesthood with such zeal that I had graduated two years ahead of my peers. The masters at the Temple of Ways in Croninheim had anticipated great things from me, but even they could not have anticipated the insights I would gain.

I was shown a new way, a different path. The depredations and depravities of the church had blinded it to the truth of the world in which we lived. What is the System? A tool, nothing more. A tool to be grasped by strong hands and wielded by each individual to forge a path of their own. The Dungeon? It is not of the divine, but of the earth. It is a tool, nothing more.

I lost an arm in order to glimpse the true divinity, that creature who forged a path of compassion, of sharing, protection and purity with the tools that others made objects of their worship. For that blessed realisation I was cast low by mortal hands, only to be raised high by the winds of the divine.

Excerpt from 'The Path Reforged' by Beyn Naligic the Apostate.

Tungstant, Victor and Mendant stood huddled in a small chamber awaiting the next round of scouting reports from the front.

"Seems as though the ambush went to plan" Mendant offered to her sibling.

Victor waved the compliment away with one lazy antennae and continued to click her mandibles irritably.

"What is so wrong with the battle going the way we wanted it to?" sighed Tungstant, puzzled by the attitude displayed by one of the two generals of the council, "Isn't that supposed to be a good thing?"

Victor clacked her mandibles a few more times before focusing her attention onto her two siblings. "The ambush went well" she conceded, "but I had hoped most of all to bait some response from Garralosh or the Lizard creature. Those two are the greatest threats to us and not having a clue of what they might be capable of is... worrying."

"Perhaps they couldn't do anything? Maybe we just hit them too fast for them to muster a response" Mendant suggested.

The small healer had spent the last few hours tending to the wounded who had made it back to the fallback position. The ambush had been carried out with surprisingly few casualties but there had been many injuries suffered by the soldiers who had battled in the tunnels. Despite the scales being tipped so far in their favour, it was inevitable that a few legs would be lost, an antennae shorn off here and there. The few soldiers who had actually perished had simply been unlucky.

Victor clacked his mandibles derisively. "We hit them fast but I doubt it was that fast. From the intelligence we have, we've been told that the Kaarmodo is to be considered a spell caster greater than the Eldest by several degrees. I refuse to believe that such a creature would be incapable of hitting us back in any way."

"So what are you suggesting?" Tungstant inquired, exasperated. She liked to work with stone and dirt, concrete materials that behaved the way they ought to. The Generals and soldiers took so many variables into their claws it seemed ridiculous. How were you supposed to guess the mind of giant lizard?

"I'm not sure" Victor said and Tungstant slumped to the floor.

Mendant was more patient. "Let's see what the scouts have to say before we discuss further" she suggested.

The three ants stood in companionable silence whilst they waited. The twenty members of the first generation were not often in the same room together anymore, but they quite enjoyed the companionship of those who had been born alongside them. The only ants to receive the direct

'teachings' of the Eldest other than Vibrant, they had gone through much together and those bonds still held.

It was Wills herself who came to report, rushing into the chamber without appearing to be hurried in any way, which was her special talent.

"Waiting around for little old me?" Wills chuckled, "surely you have better things to do?"

Victor was in no mood for levity.

"Give the report, scout" she ground out, "how many of my soldiers died today?"

"Not many" Wills shrugged, "you'll seldom have a better fight than this one."

The scout settled herself unhurriedly before beginning to speak again.

"Our last report has the elements of the horde that had been in pursuit pulling back to the main body and resuming their march along the projected path. So far no deviation has been observed. Current count of casualties sits at fifteen. Most of the injured are back up and crawling, thanks to your healers, Mendant."

Wills nodded towards the healer in question and she responded with a calm tip of her antennae. The colony hadn't produced many healers yet, barely twenty, but each and every one of them had been sent out as part of the ambush force. Where the fighting was thickest, they were there, healing and regenerating their fellow ants.

"Estimated casualties inflicted on the enemy are over five thousand, with more to follow I believe."

Victor flicked an antennae in confusion.

"What do you mean? We aren't fighting them right now, why would they be dying?"

"Scout reports suggest that those monsters who survived the acid strike in a wounded condition are being consumed by their ... allies. I don't believe those running the show want to be slowed down."

Possibly as many as six thousand casualties inflicted for the loss of only fifteen soldiers. A tremendous victory by any metric, yet each of the four ants in the chamber was silent.

"The Eldest won't be happy" Tungstant sighed, breaking the silence.

"The Eldest will understand the need. We were never going to get out of this without losing family members" Victor snapped, a touch defensively.

Tungstant just shook her head.

"Eldest will understand perfectly well. But that won't prevent them from being unhappy."

Silence returned once again as the four members of the twenty considered their strange and often bewildering elder sibling.

It still felt unnatural to them, to care so much about each individual member of the colony. The Eldest had changed much in designing them, but had failed to remove the instinct of sacrifice. Those fifteen soldiers had died with hearts full of gladness, there was no doubt of that. Leeroy would possibly strangle

herself with her own guts out of sheer jealousy, to be frank. Only the Eldest seemed immune to this instinct, also Vibrant to some extent, and demanded that every member of the colony fight against it. So they did.

It also helped that preserving the strength of the colony made good logical sense. The enhanced minds of the Formica Sapiens helped them grasp this point, at least.

"Have we had word of the Eldest?" Mendant asked Wills, "what was his status?"

Wills nodded to her respectfully, showing far more deference to the healer than to the General Victor, who ground her mandibles to one side.

"The Eldest retreated in good order along with both pets. From the last report I received, the Eldest levelled up once during the battle."

The other three ants each sighed with relief. One level down, five to go.

None of them wanted to put pressure on the Eldest, but that possible evolution was looming as their ace in the hole. The ants had only just begun their study of the System but already they were unlocking some of its secrets. It was clear to see from their limited experiments that evolutionary bonuses snowballed at an exponential rate, each evolution giving more power than the last. With the rare core consumed as well as the possible unlocks the Eldest had achieved, who knows what might come out in the Evolution menu?

"Let's move onto planning the second ambush. How are preparations proceeding?" Victor pushed the conversation forward.

Tungstant was eager to detail the digging works and spoke excitedly, finally, something that made sense!

"The interconnected tunnel networks will allow us an opportunity to draw away a more significant number of enemies and engage them on friendly ground, but we must be prepared. The collapsible tunnels worked well on this occasion but I would like us to consider more contingencies, such as ..."

The four ants discussed their plans for two more hours as the horde marched inexorably onward.