

Chrysalis 331

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 331: Regroup

The first ambush had been a rousing success, even though fifteen of my family members had been lost in the fight. It was just a small taste of the carnage that was to come. I swallowed my sadness as best as I could. It didn't help anyone if I threw a tantrum and got upset that we'd lost fifteen soldiers in return for killing thousands of enemies. Hitting them from range, drawing them into a tunnel fight, where the ants had every advantage, then collapsing the tunnels on the enemy had been an elegant and clean strategy. I couldn't think of a way to improve it at all.

Every surviving ant had gained much in terms of experience and skill levels, strengthening the colony with every death we inflicted. The horde had been reduced as well, a win by all measures. Perhaps it was irrational of me, the other members of the colony were extremely pleased and I'm dead certain not a few of them actually envied the fallen, wishing that they themselves had had the unfortunate (fortunate?) luck to die in the battle.

I'd dealt out a few thwacks already to those I suspected of not valuing their lives as they should and I'd have to do it again before too long.

We had retreated with all haste through the escape tunnels and then back onto the surface. My pets and I had taken up a position in the rear guard, just in case of pursuit, but it didn't seem to matter. The enemy either didn't manage to find any of the exit tunnels in time or had not chased far enough over land to see us emerge. Whatever the case, we'd retreated at a solid pace to the second set of earthworks being prepared for the next ambush.

Luckily the enemy moved at such a casual pace, we'd have a few hours of rest and preparation time before they made it to us and the second fight began.

I'd checked in with a few scouts who told me that Victor and the other members of the twenty here on the front line were planning and I decided to leave them to it. I don't think I could contribute much that they wouldn't be able to come up with their own. Instead I decided to check in with my pets and count my own earnings. I hadn't listened to the pronouncements of the bearded one, may his facial hair ever flow like a mighty white river.

[How's the core looking Tiny? You burned a lot of juice up there.]

The giant bat faced ape sat on the ground next to me, absently picking through the longer hair on his arms, removing stones and twigs that had been caught as we fled. In response to my query he just grunted, seeming to indicate that yes, he had lost a lot of juice, but no, it shouldn't be a problem.

[How about you Crinis? I was super impressed with the shadow portal stabbing you got done. Very nice!]

The Crinis ball on my back wobbled a little at my strong praise and replied, her tone sounding rather pleased with herself, even if her words were negative.

[I wasn't happy with the number of tentacles I was able to deploy, nor with how quickly I formed them. I believe I can get much faster. A few more skill levels and mutations and I'll defeat twice as many of those trash in half the time.]

[Sure, sure] I agreed.

I was suitably impressed with Crinis' evolution but it was true that Tiny was able to reap greater destruction in the limited time we had available. Unloading both barrels of his lightning on enemies who had been drenched by a super soaker resulted in a heck of a lot of dead stuff.

[We did well. Let's all rest up for the next fight] I told my pets before settling myself on the ground and concentrating.

My sub-brains were hard at work with external mana manipulation, trying to drag ambient mana towards the three of us to keep our cores topped off. My skills had increased, but so has our consumption after Crinis' evolution. We had one more battle in us after our Mana Glands topped off from draining energy out of our cores, then we'd need to retreat back to the Dungeon to recharge.

With my main mind I began to flick through my skills to see what had levelled up during the conflict just past.

Hmm.

Mana Scrooge levelled up, I'll take it. On the surface I need to be as careful with my mana as possible. Improved Acid shot hit level 10? Nice! I'll upgrade that to ... Deadly acid shot? Sounds impressive.

Mana Transformation, Condensed Mana, external mana manipulation all levelled up. Firing off those Gravity Bombs is serious business, in terms of the xp that's earned, especially when I clean up a lot of monsters like I did.

Pet communication has levelled up? Finally hit level five! That gets upgraded to ... Distant Pet Communication? Range of communication has been improved? Seems good, I'll pay for that. What else have we got?

Looks like my extensive chomping has paid off, I managed to squeak a level out of Severing Bite and Splintering Chomp, which is good. I need those two bites to hit rank four in a hurry. Hopefully the bite skill I can create from the fusion of the three bite skills I have is some seriously potent stuff.

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I also managed to pick up a level in expert exo-skeleton defence. Thanks to being chomped a bit during the battle in the tunnels I suppose.

That seems to be the sum total of my level gains from the battle. I'm not complaining, I'll take what I can get at this stage. More than anything else, the raw levels are what are most important. Five more levels to go before I can evolve. I'm going to need to take part in a few more ambushes if I'm going to get there soon. Ideally I could snipe a highly evolved offspring of Garralosh and get a few cheeky levels out of that, but I doubt I'm going to get that lucky.

The next battle is going to take place in a few hours. It's a bit stressful, having to be pumped up for battle so soon after just finishing one, but I think I can get used to it. Perhaps this is how Tiny feels all of the time.

This is our reality for the next few days, I suppose. Until the threat is dealt with, we need to continue to do as much as we can to inflict damage to the enemy. Killing a few thousand enemies was pretty darn good in the last ambush, but even if we did that every six hours until the horde reached the nest, we'd still have half the horde to deal with at the end of it.

The pace will need to pick up the pace, which means there will be more casualties amongst my siblings. The thought that we'd been forced into this position, to risk ourselves and spend the lives of our family as currency for our ongoing existence.

Gradually, I felt the anxiety and fear inside me give way to anger. A tiny spark of rage ignited deep within me and began to smoulder.

Chrysalis

Chapter 332: Stepping forward

Deep in the nest, the Queen contemplated. She thought back to the difficult days just after she had spawned in the Dungeon, when she awoke by herself in the dark tunnels that bordered the shadow levels, surrounded by the roar of monsters and consumed with a burning desire. She had battled hard in that time, born with a powerful body, she had nonetheless come close to death many times as she had frantically tried to satisfy the instinct that had burned within her mind.

She had been hungry in those days, aggressive and dominant. She had fought brutally, crushed her prey between her mandibles and squeezed the life out of them as her carapace cracked, life's blood dripping from wounds that covered her body. She had to push, had to be faster, stronger, more vicious, more deadly, more voracious. There had barely been time to eat before she'd been forced to fight again in those days, an endless battle where she had pushed herself forward with an indomitable will.

When she'd had enough Biomass, she'd tunnelled into a wall, carved out a small chamber for herself and begun to rear her first larvae, laying the eggs, then hunting so she had food to provide for her young when they hatched. And when those grubs had finally emerged she had felt something that she had never felt before.

Satisfaction. Peace. Fulfilment. Creating the colony was her reason for existing, she had realised it in that moment. She had been expressly created for this purpose and in starting her family she had begun to scratch the itch that had burned inside her since the moment she had awoken beneath the ground.

Since then, her life had changed dramatically. No longer was she hunting, battling every moment to realise her purpose, she was now a defender and protector to her family. The constant flow of workers throughout the nest was like a warm pattering of rain that quenched her spirit.

There were many missing from the nest now and it wounded her to know that they were fighting and dying so far from where she could help. When she'd offered to advance to the front lines and fight with her children, they had protested vigorously until she had agreed to remain.

She was still miffed by that. She had been fighting for this family before they had even been born, why couldn't she fight with her colony? There were two Queens in waiting that could take her place, a thought that filled the Queen with gladness, and not even because the pressure of being the sole individual capable of creating young had been raised from her shoulders, but rather because the burden had been taken from the colony as a whole. No longer did the fate of the colony rest on a single individual, the threat of extinction had been pushed further away and the Queen felt only joy.

"Still not evolving, Mother?"

The Queen turned her large frame so that she could look directly down on the individual who had spoken. Bella, the core shaper, had crawled into her chamber and now clung to the roof, looking at the Queen.

"Are you also disappointed to see that I haven't rushed my decision, child?" the Queen said, thinking of the troublesome one who had so obviously pushed her to evolve as soon as possible.

The smaller core shaper shook her antennae in denial.

"Not at all, Mother, I think you have made the correct decision to weigh your options. I am simply surprised that the pressure of our current situation hasn't pushed you to move sooner."

The Queen thought for a moment. It was true that the colony faced a dire set of circumstances, peril such as this had not gripped them since the onset of the wave. She felt pressure, of course. Her family must survive, she would not permit otherwise, all threats would be removed with any force necessary.

"I am troubled over the decision somewhat" the Queen admitted, causing every ant in the chamber to freeze for a moment before continuing about their business as if nothing had happened.

Really now. What is that big of an issue for the Queen to admit to being troubled?

For her part, Bella simply nodded her head.

"I imagine there would be many options for you to choose from, Mother. After taking the rare core, and being such a powerful creature already, I can't imagine what sort of choices you are being presented with."

The Queen didn't think Bella was aware of it, but when she spoke of the rare core and evolution, her antennae twitched excitedly. Clearly the child was taking her role very seriously if she was already this enamoured with the power contained in monster cores.

"In truth, I've not yet looked at the menu" the Queen said mildly.

Bella nearly fell off the roof in shock.

"You haven't even looked at it?" she sputtered, "then what are you thinking about?"

What indeed, the Queen mused to herself. Perhaps the younger members of the colony did not grasp this, they were new to their roles and perhaps they thought they were unchangeable and permanent, that the demands of the colony now and the colony in the future would be the same. The Queen knew differently, she remembered when she had been alone, now she was surrounded by hundreds of her children, in a massive nest. They weren't even the same species as when she had started. The amount of

turbulence and change that battered this colony felt strange, unprecedented, to the Queen, as if her instincts were wary of such dramatic shifts. She had a feeling she knew who was the catalyst of all this change...

What the Queen was trying to consider was the colony of tomorrow. She was trying, with the limited life experience and intelligence she had, to grasp the flow of events and understand what it was that her family would need from her tomorrow.

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"What do you think the colony needs from me?" the Queen asked Bella suddenly, causing the young ant to twitch at the unexpected question.

"What do you mean, Mother?" the young Core Shaper asked.

"Exactly what I said, child. What do you think the colony needs from me?"

Bella was still puzzled. What exactly was the Queen asking her? What did the colony want? From the Queen?

"Continue to live and be yourself, Mother. We could ask nothing more" Bella said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

The Queen absorbed those words slowly as she pondered, then she nodded.

"Thank you for your words, child. I will take some time to consider my menu now."

"Of course!" Bella gushed, the words still hung in the air after she had departed, so quickly had she moved.

The Queen had decided on her path. The family who put so much trust in her would not be allowed to fall.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 333: Crafting the future

Bella retreated from the Queen's chamber, an inexplicable excitement building in her thorax. The evolution of the Queen was a subject of particular import to Bella and her partner Elligant. The two Core Shaper members of the council had struggled ever since they had evolved into their current forms and responsibilities to get a handle on their purpose, to forge ahead on their path, and they'd been making great strides.

Bella followed the winding tunnels of the nest this way and that, climbing over and around other ants going about their tasks until she made her way into the crafting research and development area. Here it was that those chambers put aside for the mage ants, the carvers and the core shapers to experiment and develop their skills were situated. Bella charged into the room designated for the shapers to use, almost knocking Ellie over in her haste.

"Bella! What the heck?" Ellie bellowed, disentangling herself from her exuberant partner.

Chastened, Bella pulled back slightly and straightened her antennae out as she collected her thoughts. The chamber was much as she had left it before, one side dominated by small indents they had carved into the dirt to hold the cores that were delivered to their chambers every day. Rows of the small, basic cores sorted into monster type and organised by evolutionary level, settled in neat lines that were each labelled via pheromones were the pride of the Carver department. It had taken a lot of agitation from the pair of them to get even this many cores from the soldiers who farmed them in the nest below.

Ellie and Bella had originally wanted every core collected by the colony to come through their claws, that they might practice their skills as much as possible in order to advance through the tiers, but it had been deemed both unreasonable and unnecessary. It was fair enough, seeing as the Core Shapers couldn't possibly work through that many cores in a single day and there couldn't be any delay in dispersing the cores to the hatchlings who needed them desperately in order to fuel their evolutions.

Even so, they had arranged to be delivered a number of cores each day that they could manage, along with their four assistants. With these cores they strained their minds as hard as possible to push their Core Shaping skills to the limit, pushing until their heads were near exploding and they collapsed in a heap, at which point the core would be put in a corner with the others which had been manipulated and collected at the end of the day for delivery.

It all came down to cores! There just wasn't enough of them!

Since the Elder insisted on fuelling the evolution of as many hatchlings as possible, the colony consumed a ferocious number of cores and farming efforts had expanded to try and meet the ravenous demand. Other than providing water to the farm chambers in order to give the monsters a source of mana infused water, there was yet to be a development in the methods used to increase the speed and likelihood for a monster to develop a core and this was shaping up as a key challenge facing the expansion of the colony.

It was just one of the project that the Core Shapers had bent their minds to, fuelled by their potent Will.

"Big news Ellie! The Queen is getting ready to evolve!" Bella told her partner.

Elligant wiggled her antennae in excitement, her mind instantly buzzing with the possible outcomes.

"We'll need to make sure we are there when she emerges from her evolution sleep" Elligant gushed, "when she tells us her species, we'll be able to add it to the logs!"

Bella nodded enthusiastically, taking in the logs which were carved into another wall in the chamber. This was the collective knowledge that the colony had amassed so far about monster types and evolution. The most key information was obviously that which referred to their own species. The Queen's evolution should be a rare and unique one, which would give them the opportunity to record an evolution pathway that wouldn't often be seen. The only evolution that would be more tantalising would be the Eldest, since that particular member of the colony walked down a path of evolution that no other ant had, and in all likelihood no other ant ever would.

Whilst the two members of the council nattered at each other about the possible paths the Queen's evolution might take, their four assistants continued their diligent work drawing from the collection of cores to be manipulated, carrying them back to their own individual work stations in their mandibles

and then touching them with antennae and forcing change to the information inside in order to train their skills.

One by one the poor ants slumped into the dirt as their minds hit their limits and they rested to try and gather strength for another attempt. This was their day, each and every day, and they loved it. To the Core Shapers of the colony, this was heaven, grinding skills and forging a path into the future as the experts of evolution, all things core and crafters of pets for the colony.

"How's our main project going?" Bella enquired of Ellie, getting back onto their actual tasks.

Ellie shook her head.

"Still inconclusive. The main drawback is still our lack of skill ranks and support skills."

The two ants moved toward their joint work area beyond the four assistants who remained crumbled in the dirt. In their station a single core sat on a raised mound of earth and the two shapers crowded around it.

The Core Shapers had been designed by the Eldest in order to fulfil one primary function, which was to design and shape cores that could be reconstituted by members of the colony to assist in work and much of their theory crafting and brainstorming had been toward working out exactly what sort of pets the colony needed.

The Eldest had certainly proven that they could be powerful when raised properly, but the Shapers had very quickly abandoned that avenue of thought. They would never have the kind of resources to spare that the Eldest had lavished on those pets, they didn't have enough for the ants, let alone any pets they might create!

No, that path of enquiry was pointless. Instead, they had focused on pets that would be immediately useful, able to fulfil some sort of need without having to be strengthened and reinforced. They should be useful after they were fully grown and should only expect to evolve once, perhaps twice over the course of their lives.

Bella drew her antennae forward and placed them on the core, their first effort at designing a creature to serve the colony in the capacity of a pet. Activating the Core Shaping skill, she took in the rush of information contained within and sorted it into a readable status.

After contemplating the results she drew back to consult with her fellow Shaper.

"I'm just not sure if it serves the purpose well enough for us to go with it" she sighed.

Ellie nodded. They'd attempted to design a pack animal to act as logistics support using the evolved Dragon Wolf Hound as the base. The idea behind the concept being that if a soldier or worker had this pet along they'd be able to move heavy loads much more quickly with fewer ants, speeding up the transport of Biomass, dirt, stone, logs and anything else that they needed to shift.

The problem was that it was extremely difficult to find something that be better than just throwing more ants at the problem. Need to fight stuff? More ants. Need to move stuff? Send more ants. Need to solve a difficult problem? Get some extra ants in there.

The two Shapers had been both chagrined, and extremely pleased to be confronted with the superiority of the design of their own species.

"Let's turn to our other concept then" Ellie suggested and Bella readily agreed.

Logistics was a bust for the time being, time to go back to combat oriented pets.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 334: The third ambush part 1

We lay in wait, ready to spring the third ambush. It's been six hours since the second battle, which had been another successful ambush, something that seemed to make Victor very irritated, a feeling I was also beginning to share.

The horde was massive. Tens of thousands of monsters made up the rolling carpet that made its way toward my home and even after two successful fights, we were only just making a dent in it, so the possibility existed that Garralosh and the wizard lizard just didn't care that we were killing their zombie monsters. Even if we kept up this pace, more than half of the monsters would still make it to the colony, more than enough to seriously endanger our existence.

But I just couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't going to go down that way. Why would they let us attack them, make ourselves stronger and them weaker, without any sort of retaliation? It didn't make sense for them to do that, especially when they could reach out and do damage to us so easily, or at least, I think they can.

With no concept of exactly what the Kaarmodo can do, we are left fumbling in the dark as to what its intentions might be. All in all, I'm starting to sympathise with Victor, having an enemy you have no information on refuse to do anything, thus denying you information, is so frustrating.

The second ambush went smoothly, that's a win, focus on that. We launched another Gravity Bomb, followed by an acid attack before retreating into the tunnels, so far so groovy. This time we'd prepared larger underground spaces in which to do battle.

I personally had been a little shocked that the monsters weren't restrained from following us into the tunnels, after all, the collapsing tunnels did half of the damage in the first ambush, but nope. When the enemy had charged down after me I'd been so shocked, a dragon-wolf cub had run up and bit me on the nose before I even realised it!

The fighting had been fierce down there, face to face, mandible chomping action and more soldiers had fallen than in the first fight. It pained my heart, but the survivors were able to gain valuable experience and levels in their skills which could make all the difference in the future. Not to mention that the colony produced more soldiers on that day than it lost by four times, but still. Those are my siblings. I can't and won't be that callous about it.

My anger and rage toward the invaders has built with every death they have inflicted on my family in a way that no amount of devastation in Liria could have achieved. Garralosh is going to pay for the losses we've suffered and it isn't going to be cheap.

I looked to my left and right. It was dark in this forest at night but I could still make out the long lines of ants on either side of me, waiting for the signal to launch the assault. They were so still that they might have been sleeping, if not for the pheromone chatter I was picking up through my antennae.

"Not long now."

"Remember the plan soldiers."

"Look sharp!"

A pause.

"... how?"

"... what?"

"... How do I look sharp? Do I have to angle my carapace to look pointy or something?"

"No, it's an expression I heard in the last ambush. It means to be focused."

"Ah."

"...."

"Look sharp soldiers!"

Gawd.

I really need to keep my pheromone gland shut. I keep throwing out statements or phrases that I learned in my previous life to the confusion of the ants around me. I frequently find myself having to explain things to a puzzled ant, only to have my words repeated back to me by several hundred other colony members later in the day.

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News travels fast through a colony of ants.

I'm feeling a little nervous, the battle is going to be slightly different in nature this time. No tunnels will be deployed. Victor has been increasingly cautious and doesn't want to our attack patterns to become predictable, which I agree with. We only know a fraction of what is possible with magic and I already know that they could flood us, use earth magic to crush us to death under the ground and a host of other things. Just because they haven't doesn't mean we should arrogantly assume that they can't.

I run over my status since the last fight one more time, double checking what I've gained. It's unusually important for me to be on top of my status right now, since the colony is kind of depending on me to evolve and somehow battle a dinosaur to death.

Name: Anthony

Level: 36 (Special core)

Might: 41

Toughness: 29

Cunning: 44

Will: 35

HP: 58/58

MP: 187/230

Skills: Expert Excavation (III) Level 5; Deadly Acid Shot (III) Level 3; Advanced Grip (II) Level 5; Shattering Bite (IV) Level 15; Advanced Stealth (II) Level 5; Splintering Chomp (III) Level 16; Tunnel Map (II) Level 6; Mana Transformation (III) Level 11; Condensed Mana (III) Level 3; Finer External Mana Manipulation (III) Level 2; Empowered Mana Sensing (II) Level 1; Core Surgery (III) Level 6; Expert Exo-Skeleton Defence (III) level 7; Distant Pet Communication (II) Level 2; Rapid Dash (II) Level 6; Expert Water Magic Affinity (III) Level 2; Advanced Stamina (II) Level 9; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 1; Mana Scrooge (II) Level 6; Expert Cerebral Endurance (III) Level 12; Profound Mediation (II) Level 5; Advanced Precise Shooting (II) Level 5; Severing Bite (III) Level 9; Enhanced Mind Magic Affinity (II) level 5;

Mutations: Perimeter Eyes +15, Future Sight Infrared Antennae +15, Mana Binding Acid +15, Rapid Absorption Legs +15, Empowered Mandibles +15, True Diamond Carapace +15, Regrowth Regeneration Gland +15, Persuasive Pheromone Language Gland +10, Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +15, Adaptable Coordination Cortex +15, Supportive Inner Carapace Plating +15;

Species: Dispersed Mind Ant (Formica Sapiens)

Skill points: 20

Biomass: 46

I'd gained quite a few levels during the fighting, especially across my bite skills. Greater External Mana Manipulation had reached rank three after my sub brains had used it constantly to feed more mana into my core. The upgrade had given me, much as the name suggests, greater control over the movement of mana outside of my body. I'm beginning to catch glimpses of exactly how the skill can be deployed in more useful ways than just dragging mana into my hungry core, such as defending from hostile magic. I think one more rank in the skill will unlock some juicy knowledge, so I intend to keep grinding it.

I managed to squeak in a few bites of Biomass after the last battle and pushed myself closer to the sixty five I needed to mutate my final body part, the Pheromone Language Gland. Perhaps once this battle is done I'll have the chance to do that and secure my first ever fully upgraded evolution. It's going to be very satisfying knowing that I'm not going to be kicking myself in the thorax and making it even harder to accumulate Biomass and mutate than it needs to be.

I'm also closing in on the bite skill fusion that I've been aiming for. According to Beyn, when all three of my bite skills reach the fourth rank, I'll have the option to fuse them into a more potent skill. Four more ranks in Splintering Chomp and eleven more for Severing Bite till I get there. That's another thing I'll have to focus on during the upcoming ambush.

As the ants around me continue to pep each other up, I take a deep slow breath and run over the plan in my head, one more time.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 335: The third ambush Part 2

Hunkered down amongst the trees, I waited along with my fellow ants, mostly scouts, for the enemy to arrive. We were roughly a hundred metres from the road and would have to charge across open ground in order to get close enough to launch our acid strikes. Only the soldiers with sufficient speed and range had been chosen to take part in the first phase of the ambush, for good reason too.

There was more risk to this plan, but potentially greater payoff. Moving away from the tunnel based strategy we'd employed in the previous two battles meant we would be more open, but ensuring we didn't become predictable and play into the enemy's hands would be well worth it.

"Steady people, they're coming" I heard from my left.

And they were. The horde crawled into view, a seemingly endless tide of monsters that walked with eerie quiet, their natural instincts suppressed to the point they almost seemed alien to me. Well, more alien than the crazy, vicious monster creatures who spawn out of thin air underground they normally are.

We continued to lie low and wait, concealed behind the tree line. The plan wasn't to hit the front of the horde, which we'd done in the past, just in case they were prepared for such a tactic. So we waited for five minutes after the first monsters had passed us by before we crept out of our hiding places and began to sneak our way closer.

The scouts had all taken stealth as a skill and at this point they probably had more levels in it than I did, since I didn't get much of an opportunity to train it anymore. But it felt nice to drop into my old habits, flexing my six legs to keep my body low and close the ground, sticking to the darker shadows and avoiding the light.

This was a night raid, which was one reason why we were comfortable advancing over the open ground. Somewhere overhead the moon shone down on us (I assume, I can only see a vague shininess overhead) which doesn't really help me sneak, since I'm so shiny myself.

If I get any more sparkly than this, they'll think I'm a vampire! The lame kind! But I do love my diamond carapace. After my evolution, the first thing I'm going to upgrade is my carapace to get MOAR diamonds! Gweheheh. The birth of the crystal ant is not far away!

Slow and purposeful, my team of scouts and I crept closer to the enemy. No magic assault at all in this attack in case we are detected. The horde grew closer in my eyes, the monsters looked lifeless and their behaviour was off-putting. Whatever it is that controls these monsters, I don't like it.

We've still not been sighted. Things are looking good so far. I'm actually not the ant in the front for this maneuverer, Wills has put herself out there since so many of her fellow scouts are the first in the firing line for this plan. I can see her now, a little larger than the other scouts due to her inflated stats, ahead of me and to the left.

Wait!

She paused!

Slowly, the lead scout began to raise her business district into the sky, huddling her lower body toward the ground until her acid barrage was primed to fly like the third quarter profits, in a high arc. At this signal, the rest of the scouts, and myself, formed up into a line with Wills and assumed the same aggressive posture. Time for a hostile takeover.

Despite being covered in darkness and utilising our stealth skills to their limits, we were still treated to the drill instructor like shouting of Wills as she organised her scouts.

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"Not yet you scum! Why are you so impatient? Are you scouts, or are you larvae? Form up the line! Wait for my signal!" she harangued her troops.

I assume she wasn't talking to me at least. If she was, I might have to have words...

POW!

Along with a pheromone shout of "NOW!", Wills unleashed the first shot of the barrage, one which was quickly followed by dozens more.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

I fired my own acid at a steady pace, aiming for power and distance as opposed to accuracy or concentration. The acid would arc high into the air and separate into a wider spray as it fell, reducing the concentration of damage but we didn't really care. The horde was so large and dense that every bit of acid we unleashed would land on something.

Even the sound of the acid being fired wasn't loud enough to reveal our positions, being only a dull muted thump as the acid burst out, like a new product being launched with a stealth marketing campaign. A torrent of acid was in the air before the first of it landed, alerting the enemy to our attack. The sizzle of flesh and the roar and groans of monsters is the first sign that battle has begun.

At first the enemy wasn't able to spot our position and the monsters milled about, confused and angry as I gleefully continued to empty my acid gland along with my siblings.

POW! POW!

Eat acid, suckers!

Then things changed.

A light erupted, blazing into existence above the horde with an intensity that blinded me for a moment before it faded a little, allowing me to see. As my vision focused again I saw that above the horde, three great balls of light now hung in the air, illuminating the surroundings and stripping us ants of our stealth.

We were exposed!

"Run for it!" I shouted to the scouts as the horde turned to face us and charged, hungry to feast on ant flesh.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 336: Third ambush part 3

Expose by the light, the scouts turned to retreat after I ordered them, taking advantage of their now rear facing commercial zones to fire a few parting shots at the horde as the monsters charged toward us. I positioned myself between the enemy and the retreating scouts, knowing that I could take more punishment than my siblings and hoping to absorb some enemy fire.

The monsters looked a touch angry, let off the hook from their zombie control and endless walking they have embraced the opportunity to massacre the ants in front of them with gusto. Unfortunately for them I don't plan on allowing that to happen.

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The worrying sign is the blazing lights in the sky, clear evidence that the lizard-wizard and attendants are taking a direct hand in the battle for the first time and there is a gnawing sense of anxiety in my gut as I have to consider what else they may do. Lights in the sky are annoying but not exactly terrifying, but who knows what else they may be capable of.

Not willing to get surrounded by the horde of onrushing monsters, I turn and start to run at a right angle to the horde, distracting a number of monsters and forcing them to chase after me. To keep them angry, I use a dash to charge toward the closest monster and sever it in twain with a savage bite before turning and dashing away, the claws and teeth of creatures scraping on my carapace as I charge away.

Gweheheh. Can't catch me you slugs!

Of course, at that moment the golden fence sprang into existence in front of me.

And not just me, it cut off half of the retreating scouts from the woods and safety. What the hell?! Where the heck did this thing come from?!

Illuminated by the burning lights, I can see two of the lizard's servants have appeared on either side of the fence. How the heck they got there I've no idea. Perhaps they'd been there all along, just waiting for us to move past them so they could spring this trap.

This doesn't look good!

My heart begins pounding in my thorax as I realise the danger that we are in. I can see the scouts are trying to bite the wall or climb over it but nothing seems to effect it, their mandibles and legs can't find any purchase and the ants are left with no option but to hurl themselves into in the hopes that it might break. Behind us, the horde roared with hunger, sensing the kill between their jaws.

"Dig under it! Now, now, now!" I bellowed and spun quickly, my claws scratching in the dirt as I executed the turn at high speed.

POW! POW! POW!

The last of my acid blasted out and splattered against the magic fence line in three separate locations. Please work you stupid acid, we need this right now!

I don't have time to wait and see how it goes, I need to try and save as many of the scouts as I can. My two sub-brains have been hard at work since the moment the wall sprang up, throwing themselves into action before I'd even thought to direct them. Gravity mana is pulled out of my gland and pumped into the complex construct that is the gravity domain.

This is gonna hurt dammit...

The roar of the horde is deafening in my ears at this moment, the heat rolling of the monsters as they charge, hungry for Biomass buffets into my antennae and the future glimpses of each monster I see are enough to make me dizzy. I shut it all out. None of that is important. I breathe out slowly, and then charge directly into the face of the enemy.

Leeroy would be proud.

I slammed into the first monsters, my mass and momentum enough to batter them out of the way, but then more come, and then more. Claws, teeth, spikes, mandibles, all of them grasp hold of my limbs and scrape against my precious, shiny carapace, chipping into my HP. I can see almost three hundred and sixty degrees and all of it is monsters right now!

I pump my mandibles furiously, the jaws of light arcing out and severing multiple monsters into pieces with each bite, but no matter how many I destroy there are thousands more behind them. Come on mini-brains, I need that spell!

I have to endure the battering of the horde for several more seconds before the spell finally manifests, the blessed purple light expanding out of my body in a delicious hemisphere that pushed down on every enemy inside it with a firm hand.

Yes!!

I shake myself like a dog shaking water out of its coat and the monsters climbing over me are knocked clear, unable to hold onto me and contest with the added weight. The second I'm free, I dash. I have to get some separation from the horde. No matter how powerful I am, if I try and take on tens of thousands of monsters at once, I'm going to get worn down and chomped into paste. If enough of them surround me, they'll grab onto my legs and pile on top of me until I can't move, then I could only wait to get eaten.

Speaking of begin eaten, I think I'm missing part of my leg...

Activate the regeneration gland! I'd only lost twelve HP, so it feels like a bit of a waste, but I don't want to be slowed down right now! Relief bubbles up in me as I finally burst out of the horde and into the clear. I was only in there for twelve seconds or so, but I wouldn't have wanted to stay and longer.

How is that damned fence going!?

In an instant I can take in the situation through my eyes and I'm not happy with what I see. My acid has eaten three gaps into the fence, the edges bubbling and hissing as the fluid continues to chew away at the magic, but the pace is slower than we need. Ants have begun throwing themselves through the gaps and I can see that they've begun digging from the other side, trying to connect with other scouts digging from this side and speed up the process.

It just isn't happening quickly enough.

I've managed to buy some time but I'm only one ant, and my domain isn't able to cover the width of the space we were attacking from, already I can see some scouts getting run down by the faster elements of the horde's charge.

"Dig dammit!" I screamed at the ants, "They're coming!"

"Eldest!" it was Wills, appearing on my left side like a ghost, "you need to get out of here!"

She tried to push me toward the fence line, but I threw her off with little effort.

"I'm going back in, get your scouts under that fence and continue with the plan!" I bellowed.

I didn't wait for a reply but turned toward the nearest monster, not even ten metres away, and dashed once again, closing the distance in an instant.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 337: Third Ambush Part 4

I should learn to hold off on the healing gland. Was I missing part of a leg? Maybe. But right now, as I charge into the literal teeth of a horde of angry monsters, I think that perhaps holding off on spending it might have been the better choice. Because this is going to hurt.

BAM.

I crash into the front line of monsters with a crash, their bodies smashed into mine and the monsters began to claw and bite at my carapace, wild and eager to rend me limb from limb. I can feel their fangs scraping on my carapace, sometimes harmlessly and other times digging grooves into it that threaten to tear through my defences. My shiny carapace! Don't damage it! The regenerative upgrade will help heal that damage over time, but I can't sustain this battering indefinitely.

Thankfully, I still have my gravity domain cranked up, meaning that most of the weaker, tier one monsters aren't able to move properly beneath its effects, let alone launch attacks. They feebly crawl through the dirt and run each other down in order to reach me but most of them get stomped into the ground by larger, more fearsome monsters.

Bring it punks!

My mandibles glow with energy as I pour mana into them as well as activating my stamina draining bite skills. I need to go all out here, I can't afford to hold the energy in my core back. Every second that I buy will allow more scouts to make it to the other side of the wall. Stupid mage slaves... If they hadn't been so far from me I'd have ripped them a new one. Sadly I didn't have the option.

CRUNCH!

With a satisfying slice, my mandibles tore through monsters, cutting away limbs and digging deep into flesh. Naturally I wouldn't forget, even in the midst of this crisis, to level my Severing Bite! Gwahahaha! The melee whirls and dances around me and a wild excitement builds in my thorax. I can feel my little ant heart pumping with energy as I cut down my opponents and they break themselves on my exoskeleton. Impossible odds, high chance of death, it would sound crazy to say that I missed this kind of fight, but there is a certain feeling that I can only get when my life is on the line. My concentration is honed to a razor's edge as my mind processes a thousand different things a second, the heat rolling off the bodies that crowd around me, the blurred images of their future movements, the sensations of my sub-brains straining to hold and direct the flow of mana through my domain spell. It's draining, exhilarating, terrifying and fulfilling all at once.

Perhaps I'm starting to understand Tiny more and more...

Wait, is that a bear?

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OOF!

An Earth Bear tyrant had reared up and battered my left side with one mighty claw, the blow sent sparks flying as it dug channels into my carapace but failed to break through. Still, the impact was enough to stagger me to one side, an opening that the enemies swarming around me were quick to exploit.

Dangit! I don't have the time or space to try and rip through one of those bears, they're too tough to kill that fast. Mind racing, I scrabble my feet underneath me and move away from the horrid creature, mana empowered mandibles chomping as I go. Thanks to the domain, the lumbering brute will struggle to keep up if I keep moving.

OUCH!

I think I just lost a chunk out of an antennae! How much longer?!

"Senior!" I heard a pheromone shout.

Who the heck?!

Next second, several new forms appear in my vision, crashing forward and grappling with monsters around me. Then a larger ant leapt into the fray, slashing about with her deadly mandibles. Larger than the regular soldiers, I can tell her body has been heavily mutated due to her higher than regular colony member Biomass intake. I couldn't forget the ant that I'd raised from a mere grub what felt like years ago!

"Vibrant! Aren't you supposed to be at the ambush point?"

"You can't keep all the fun to yourself, Senior!" she cheerfully replied whilst cutting down monsters with every chomp off her mandibles, "the way is clear, it's time to go!"

Finally!

"Thanks Vibrant, let's bug out!"

Mandibles flashing, I bite several times in rapid succession, draining my energy dramatically as I attempt to clear a space around. After crunching through several monsters, I turn my thorax around and get the heck out of there.

Dash! Dash for justice!

Leaving a trail of howling and angry beasts behind us, Vibrant, her squad and I disengage and hightail the heck out of there. In front of me, the magic wall still glitters with a bright magical energy. The acid has continued its delightful work and the gaps have grown larger, but more important than that are the many tunnels that have been dug and even now I can see the scouts who were successfully able to flee have begun to retreat into the forest, still firing acid over the wall and into the swarming horde as they ran.

I lined myself up with one of the gaps and hurled myself through it with a daring leap, legs scrabbling as I landed on the other side. Vibrant's speed aura paid massive dividends as we charged with all our strength to gain some separation between us and the monsters following behind. Once we were through the fence, it worked for us rather than against us, the sheer mass of monsters struggled to push through the gaps and narrow tunnels. It didn't take long for the slave mages to realise this and they allowed the wall to fade. Free of the obstacle the monsters roared anew and charged after us, ravenous for more ants.

The wall hadn't gained us much time but each second counted. The scouts had been able to regroup but my heart twisted when I realised a third of them was missing. We'd approached on a front more than a hundred metres wide, and powerful as I was compared to a regular soldier, I wasn't able to protect all of them. On the left and right flank, the scouts had been quickly overwhelmed, only those who'd been able to regroup in the centre behind me had a chance to make it out.

I knew things wouldn't keep going our way forever, and perhaps the loss of one third of the scouting force is a cheap price to pay for the first intervention of the mages in this battle, but it's still bitter to me. The anger I felt towards the mages, Garralosh and the stupid horde itself continued to build inside me, its heat fuelling me onwards.

"We made it!" Vibrant cheered next to me, "are we still going to go ahead with the plan?"

"We are" I grated out, struggling to control my rage, "we need to kill as many of these trash as we can."

Vibrant either didn't notice, or didn't care about my aggressive tone. "Sure-sure!" she chirped and turned towards her squad.

"Keep running to the next point, spread wide and lead on as many as you can. Get pumped for the battle!" she exhorted them and they responded with a variety of cheers and shouts.

It seems Vibrant's squad is turning out to be as high energy as she is herself. How ... exhausting.

The scouts ahead of us, we run at the front of the horde, staying close enough to tempt them onward, allowing them to draw a little closer whenever their charge faltered before speeding away before they could catch us. With Vibrant close by, it was childishly simple, her speed aura enhancing our already quick ant running speed to the point I didn't need to use my dash skill and was able to preserve some stamina. I allowed the gravity domain to lapse at this point, slowing the enemy down right now would work against the plan, not for it.

If we were to make the enemy pay a bloody price for the damage they'd inflicted on us today, we needed to drag as many as possible with us.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 338: Third Ambush Part 5

We continued to kite the monsters for five minutes, pulling them further and further away from the main body of the horde. Our plan for this strategy depended on a few things: that Garralosh and wizard-lizard wouldn't bother to chase us, the former due to a need to conserve mana in her core and the latter because the Kaarmodo seemed reluctant to leave it's captive Croca Momma alone.

The second thing we wanted to determine and rely upon was that whatever control the two leaders had over the horde of weaker monsters, there had to be a limit. At some point the monsters must begin to regain their savage nature and break free, or perhaps they would turn and retreat back toward the main body of the horde.

We needed to understand this behaviour and one of the objectives of this ambush was to determine this.

"Have we seen any sign that the mage slaves have followed us?" I called to Vibrant.

"Nope!" she replied in a thoroughly positive manner.

Gah. I hope Wills is on it.

We continued to run with the horde snapping at our heels and eventually I began to detect heat signatures in the trees. We made it to the ambush point! Now to see what the monsters decide to do.

With a burst of acceleration I rush forward to catch up with the scouts still running ahead of us. In the middle of the pack I find Wills and I feel a small burst of relief. I didn't want to lose any members of the twenty in such a stupid, small way. The colony had invested in them to the maximum extent possible and they should continue to repay that for the next hundred years at least!

"Wills! Do we have any idea what the state of the horde behind us is?!" I shouted at her as we ran.

"No, Eldest. We'll just have to trust that the others have the situation in claw."

Hope, eh? Fair enough. Things had gone to the dogs already, I wasn't about to risk making it worse doing something crazy without information. We ran for another three minutes before the monsters behind us began to slow down. We fired acid at them, let them get as close as we could without letting them touch us, practically wagging our commercial zones in their faces but we came to a point where the monsters stopped chasing, turned and began to make their way back to the horde.

Holy smokes!

"We've hit the edge of the control range! They're heading back!" I shouted.

"We don't know that for sure" Wills warned, coming to a stop next to me, "it's possible they've been ordered to return and the range is much farther than this. We haven't seen any sign of the monsters attacking each other, they still appear to be firmly in control."

Dang, good points.

"You're talking a lot of sense Wills. I knew raising you lot was a good idea."

If anything the compliment seemed to put the scout leader off kilter, causing her to go silent and still. Curious, I turned to inspect her more closely. Is this another Crinis situation? Is Wills weak to praise? I poked her with an antenna. "Hello in there?" I called.

The scout shook herself alert.

"I- I'm not used to you giving positive feedback, Eldest."

What?! I give compliments out all the time! Is she talking about the training I gave them? Now I'm worried all of the twenty are dealing with some kind of PTSD due to my diligent instruction after they were born.

I turned back to the retreating monsters, moving at what humans would consider a slow jog. They must be tuckered out after all of the running.

"So, we follow along as per the plan?" I asked.

Wills nodded.

"We've no information that would call for us to change our actions" she confirmed.

Vibrant, her squad, Wills, the remaining scouts and I grouped up and began to trail behind the departing beasts. As we walked I could sense heat signatures in the trees climbing down and falling in behind us or moving toward the flanks.

In order to avoid becoming predictable the soldiers had been concealed in the foliage and branches of the trees overhead, rather than in tunnels. The dark colours that made up our carapace meant there was little chance that they would be seen in the dark, and the meticulous cleanliness of the ants meant there was very little odour coming from them, so long they controlled their pheromone glands.

After another minute there were hundreds of soldiers positioned in a wide arc behind with healers and a few mages mixed in. Victor appeared out of the gloom to my right side, making me jump a little.

"Dammit, Victor! Why even sneak up on me?!"

"I'm trying to remain quiet."

"There are literally hundreds of us walking here, what is the point of sneaking?!"

"You can never be too careful."

I'd roll my eyes if I physically could.

"Is it time to attack yet?" I demanded.

"It's time" she confirmed.

Finally!

The order was spread wide and it didn't take long for the eager ants to position themselves for the first strike. The monsters were only twenty metres away and despite the trees blocking line of sight they could still be spotted everywhere you looked.

Then:

POW! POW! POW! POW!

Another acid barrage! This time from the hundreds of soldiers who had patiently waited as their scout brethren had risked themselves to pull these monsters this far from the main horde. Their sisters had died to give them this opportunity and they weren't going to waste it!

The acid streaked through the air and struck against the retreating monsters, sizzling into their flesh the moment it landed. With a roar the monsters turned once more and charged towards the vicious ants who had dared to strike at them!

The ants.... Retreated.

Gweheheh.

We fell back as a unit, maintaining our arc formation with a precision that only insects could muster, firing acid all of the way to enrage the monsters further. When we reached the point where the monsters had turned last time, they once again stopped and began to retreat back toward the road.

Excellent.

"This would appear to confirm it" Victor said, sounding pleased, "full engage!"

"FOR THE COLONY!"

From the pheromone glands of hundreds of angry ants the shout went up and we rushed forward to carve up the enemy with our face hands and bathe ourselves in their ichor!

My mandibles worked like pistons, slicing and dicing as I worked to train my bite skills to the fourth rank and inflict mandible justice upon the hated foe. Centipedes, hounds, rabbits, lizards, the odd spider, none could withstand our wrath. Several times I saw the larger monsters, the bears, the Lion ogres, brought down by dozens of ants blasting them with acid, pulling at their legs and scissoring off their limbs.

Then came the call.

"Retreat!" an ant bellowed and the order was quickly passed down the line. In perfect synch, the soldiers stepped back, turned and ran, charging away from the suddenly bewildered monsters left in their wake.

The surprise only lasted for a moment however, as the raging beasts charged, roaring with fury! Only to slow and stop, turn, and begin to walk away.

If I were capable of it, I would be grinning a wide grin right now.

We can kite and engage these monsters forever at this point! Whatever control over these monsters is being exercised, it clearly has severe limitations, and we are going to abuse the heck out of that fact.

Call me John Deere because I am about to get my farm on!

[Tiny, Crinis, you can come out now.]

I'd kept my two pets out of the firing line up to this point. They'd been positioned with the ambush troops in woods, hidden from sight and held in reserve.

[Thank you, Master]

[HRAAAAAAAAAA!]

I winced as Tiny hurtled past me to throw himself onto the monsters, viciously pounding them into paste with his fists. The rest of the soldiers seemed inspired by the sight and charged in once again, tearing

into the enemy with renewed vigour. I could see several wounded were being tended by the healers who utilised their healing magic glands to restore the soldiers to fighting condition. Once healed up, the soldiers jumped to their feet and charged back into the fight, eager to continue inflicting damage.

Suppose I'd better get back in there!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 339: Revel

We slaughtered a heck of a lot of monsters in the third ambush. By abusing the limitations of the control used on the monsters we continuously charged, battled, retreated and recovered until our entire force was battled out and exhausted from the slaughter, unable to keep up with the last retreating monsters. Even Tiny had collapsed to the ground, punched out.

Soldiers had been lost, of course. Fighting meant casualties and I would just have to get used to the idea. Even when including the scouts that we'd lost, a third of the number committed, the losses versus the damage inflicted looked fantastic for the colony. Not only had thousands more monsters been killed, but the experience and Biomass would be claimed by the colony in full. Enough Biomass for every soldier who participated in the battle to pump their evolutions up and empower them for the next fight.

I myself just slumped to the ground once the fighting was done, trusting that some ants would keep a lookout and slipped directly into torpor, only to awaken a few hours later with a developing issue.

My core! So empty! The gnawing feeling of my energy bleeding into the air was starting to cause that sharp pain I had become all too familiar with. I brought up my status and looked at how much mana remained inside my core. Down to under ten MP! I'd gone all out in the battle so it shouldn't be a surprise but yikes, that'd been close!

No time to lose!

[Tiny, Crinis, are you around?]

[Yes, Master.]

[Zzzzzzzzz.]

[... Tiny, food.]

[Arruah!?!]

Damned ape.

[We need to leave and recharge our cores as soon as possible, stuff your faces as best you can and let's go.]

With no further ado I joined the soldiers who were busy chowing down on the literal carpet of Biomass that lay over the forest floor and started shovelling food into my mouth. Once my first stomach was filled, I diligently switched to the social stomach and kept on going until I'd expanded in size like a swollen balloon.

Another 15 points of Biomass locked in. I really don't get the value out of these low tier monsters but it isn't as if I have an option. Eating this is still better than eating nothing.

61 Biomass! So close! Four more points and I'll achieve my first fully mutated evolution. Much excited!

Alright. With my own feasting done I waddled over to the nearby scouts and let them know I'd be heading to the Dungeon location the colony had prepared in order to charge up my core. The poor saps where in charge of disposing of the Colony's dead and it was saddening to see the fallen soldiers lying lifeless on the ground, somehow looking smug and satisfied. I'd been a bit worried at one stage that the ants would eat our dead, Biomass being Biomass after all, but they had unexpectedly followed a more traditional Earth ant path.

Colonies of ants on Earth were generally speaking, very clean. Since they live in damp, underground environments where mould and fungus can thrive, it's super important that they be as spotless as possible. To that end the ants would undergo many behaviours to ensure a squeaky clean nest: grooming themselves constantly to remove contamination, using their natural acid to disinfect themselves and each other, rotating the soil inside the nest with soil on the surface to aerate it and establishing a garbage site.

The garbage site was usually close to, but a respectable distance from the nest itself and it's in this place that the workers would carry the waste of the colony. The poop would go here, the bits of food that the ants couldn't eat, and the colony's dead.

In the case of Earth ants, that means a heck of a lot of dead bodies, since the lifespan of most workers is about one month, depending on the species. In the case of my colony here on Pangera, we haven't had many dead to worry about so it's not been much of an issue but I feel my heart twinge as I watch the scouts drag the bodies and pile them neatly away from the battlefield.

With Tiny alongside and Crinis riding on my back we set off at a solid but obese pace. The horde would be ahead of us at the moment, but since the path they followed would curve wide around the forest and we would be moving through it, we'd be able to get back ahead of them in no time.

We set off at a slow run, each of us weighed down by our food intake, me especially since I had to carry Crinis and her void stomach. How much she could fit in there I've no idea but since she weighs more than I do it must be a ton! My stick-like legs are shaking holding up the balloon of infinite hunger. I vowed to myself that after my evolution I'd beef my legs up to the point where carrying three Crinis's wouldn't faze me in the slightest!

After our bodies started digesting the food in our systems and doing... whatever it did with it, still no idea where the waste went (perhaps our digestive system is faultless and there isn't any waste?), and we were able to pick up the pace.

As we travelled, I took some time to check my status after the battle and I was delighted to see that I'd levelled once again. It's getting close! And my more physical battle skills had also seen a significant amount of growth. Hours of solid battling would do that, I suppose.

Name: Anthony

Level: 37 (Special core)

Might: 41

Toughness: 29

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Cunning: 44

Will: 35

HP: 58/58

MP: 230/230

Skills: Expert Excavation (III) Level 5; Deadly Acid Shot (III) Level 4; Advanced Grip (II) Level 5; Shattering Bite (IV) Level 15; Advanced Stealth (II) Level 5; Splintering Chomp (III) Level 19; Tunnel Map (II) Level 6; Mana Transformation (III) Level 11; Condensed Mana (III) Level 3; Finer External Mana Manipulation (III) Level 3; Empowered Mana Sensing (II) Level 2; Core Surgery (III) Level 6; Expert Exo-Skeleton Defence (III) level 11; Distant Pet Communication (II) Level 3; Rapid Dash (II) Level 8; Expert Water Magic Affinity (III) Level 2; Expert Stamina (III) Level 1; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 1; Mana Scrooge (II) Level 7; Expert Cerebral Endurance (III) Level 12; Profound Meditation (III) Level 5; Advanced Precise Shooting (II) Level 7; Severing Bite (III) Level 13; Enhanced Mind Magic Affinity (II) level 5;

Mutations: Perimeter Eyes +15, Future Sight Infrared Antennae +15, Mana Binding Acid +15, Rapid Absorption Legs +15, Empowered Mandibles +15, True Diamond Carapace +15, Regrowth Regeneration Gland +15, Persuasive Pheromone Language Gland +10, Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +15, Adaptable Coordination Cortex +15, Supportive Inner Carapace Plating +15;

Species: Dispersed Mind Ant (Formica Sapiens)

Skill points: 20

Biomass: 61

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 340: All revved up and

It feels good to be charged up and not on the verge of a horrible death! Whoo!

Thankfully we were able to make it to the discreet Dungeon entrance the colony had prepared close to the forward HQ without too much mana leaking out of our cores. Using my sub-minds I tried to turn the external mana manipulation up to 11 and drag the mana down into all three of our cores with some success. It certainly helped to level the skill, if nothing else. Shifting mana in three different directions was a heck of a lot harder than just pulling it in one, so the strain on my sub-brains was also increased. They were fairly cooked by the time we reached the Dungeon and I was happy to let them recover in peace.

Not now though, now we are back in the game!

Even better, I took my chance in the Dungeon whilst the wave was still ongoing and chomped through the monsters who spawned as I was waiting for my core to refill. I didn't get a heap of Biomass but I got

enough to tip me over to 65 in the bank! Good thing too since I didn't think I could possibly eat any more...

I digest fast but not quite that fast.

Upgrading my stomach is going to be one of the best things about this next evolution, I swear, even more than the stats.

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Ready to roll, the three of us made our way topside and then toward the forward HQ, the planning centre of this opening stage of the war effort. I left Tiny and Crinis on the surface and plunged down in the dark chambers packed with ants of all varieties rushing in every direction, zooming at my face and then climbing straight over me as I tried to get my bearings, wagging my antennae about to pick up the scent trails I needed.

It was interesting, almost frightening to watch how quickly the ants were learning and adapting to new situations. As a species, we Formica Sapiens had never faced a threat like this, heck, most members of the colony were only a few weeks old! But somehow, under the pressure of this existential crisis, the ants were pouring all of their energy, concentration and newfound mental power into absorbing everything they could. It was strange to sit in a room with ant monsters and listen to them propose ideas, debate, look for solutions, weigh risks. I suppose it's only now that I'm starting to realise that even I had underestimated what a difference making the colony more intelligent would cause.

Speaking of arguing ants, I found the planning chamber and the members of the council inside, along with Vibrant, already arguing with each other the next steps. It didn't take long to work out what the main issue was.

"We don't need them" Victor said flatly.

"I lost dozens of scouts in the last attack. I'm not going to sit on my abdomen and pretend this threat is less dangerous than it is. We must secure their assistance!" Wills spat back.

Victor twitched, visibly angered by the statement.

"I do not underestimate the threat, Wills! You should know better than anyone - " she began to defend herself.

"Whoa now" I broke in, "I think this might be the first time I've ever heard any of you siblings argue with each other."

I spoke in a quiet and calm way as I crawled slowly into the chamber but nonetheless each member of the council in the chamber froze, whether they had been arguing or not. Seems like I had been right after all. It wasn't only Wills that possessed a deep seated fear of their teacher.

Sheesh! I'd been so nice to them when I raised them! Maybe a few 'thwacks!' will straighten them out...

It was the healer, Mendant, who turned to speak to me first.

"Eldest, welcome back. I am pleased to see you have recovered fully from your efforts."

Her voice was calm and soothing as always, but I couldn't help but detect the slight wobble to her antennae that betrayed her nervousness.

I nodded towards her to acknowledge her greeting as I continued to step forward until I had placed myself between Victor and Wills, both of whom stepped back slightly as I approached.

"Now" I said mildly, "whilst it's nice to see some passion from the leaders of the colony, and dissenting opinions are an important part of effective decision making, let's see if we can take a little heat out of the discussion. What's got everyone so worked up?"

It was certainly interesting to see this kind of conflict between the members of the council. So far they'd been able to reach a consensus in a peaceful manner every time. It seemed that emotion was beginning to play a larger part in their thinking, which could change things dramatically. Not necessarily in a bad way either.

"It's humans!" Vibrant chirped, "they've offered to help us whittle down the horde."

Hmm.

This was interesting. Wills, upset at the loss of her scouts, wanted to bring the humans in to help in order to prevent further losses, whilst Victor didn't agree with bringing them in. Perhaps she didn't want to increase the number of unknown variables at play as we moved into a critical stage of the battles.

It was odd to see one of the twenty be so emotional about the loss of ant life. It was a little cold to say it, but they were very callous about that sort of thing usually. Somewhat different, to see ants taking on such human characteristics. Perhaps when each member of the colony is a barely thinking drone, it's no real loss when one dies, but when they have developed minds and personalities, voices and ambitions, it became harder to think that they didn't matter.

I could also understand what Victor is concerned about. The Kaarmodo has begun to respond to our incursions. This meant that things would become much riskier from now on. I've no doubt that the trick we used in the last battle would no longer be effective, some sort of workaround having been implemented to prevent such fruitless waste. This meant we needed to continue to adapt and try new tactics without knowing what could be coming back our way.

Adding in extra risk factors was just a recipe for disaster...

"It's going to be risky no matter what we do" I mused out loud.

Wills stirred.

"Exactly" she declared, "more options can't be a bad thing."

I turned on her.

"That doesn't mean that risks shouldn't be managed. If things aren't properly thought through it will be a heck of a lot more than a few dozen sisters we end up losing."

I stared her down and she stepped back from me once more.

"That was my point" Victor chimed in, "there is just too much risk in bringing a force we don't control to battle."

I turned around to face him.

"Risks can be controlled and mitigated. There just has to be a will to get it done."

I stared her down in turn, forcing the general to back off.

I sighed.

"Things are getting heated and I understand that we are all under the pump here, but you need to be able to keep emotion off the table and deal with problems as they pop up. The colony depends on you for guidance. You are ant leaders. Make sure you act like it."

Very nice. Dignified, controlled and powerful.

"Wow-wow Senior! I've never heard you talk like that before!" Vibrant gasped.

Dammit, Vibrant! Give me my moment!

The two ants who had only moments ago been arguing, began to vigorously groom themselves in an effort to calm their minds. When she was finished Victor spoke:

"So you are suggesting that we accept help from the humans?"

I nodded.

"Yes, but in a way that will allow us to control the risk to our efforts."

"How are you going to do that?" Wills broke in.

I shrugged my antennae.

"Simple. I'll go work with them and we'll form a separate team that works independently. What could go wrong?"