

## Chrysalis 361

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#### Chapter 361: Level 40

I'm not sure how the slave mage felt as they flew through the sky and into my waiting mandibles, but it can't have been pleasant. I tried not to dwell on it in the moment. I've already had to defeat human opponents in the defence of my family, taking down the Setsulah shouldn't weigh on my conscience any more than that did.

CRUNCH!

I brought my mandibles down hard on the shield that protected my bag of experience. The spell was not so weak as to break as of yet, but my mandibles sank into it with a satisfying crackle. With the mage safely trapped within my jaws, there was only one thing to do. Flee!

Thunder crackled overhead as I pushed my tired legs once more and dashed to freedom, carrying my prize!

[Get out of there, guys! Tiny, pick up Crinis and run for it!]

Even if I thought, I was going to draw the majority of the fire, it was necessary for the two of them to get out of there as fast as possible. Tiny might be able to take a few shots of lightning but I don't want to put his tolerance to the test.

Nor mine for that matter! Lightning continued to crash down in my wake as I fled the scene of the heist. The Kaarmodo must be furious! Having to watch as I escape with one of its precious servants!

Gweheheheh.

Starting to regret coming for my colony yet, you stupid Lizard?

I ran as far and as fast as I could, eventually leaving the range at which the Kaarmodo could threaten me. It seemed as if the Lizard wasn't willing to risk more of its servants trying to retrieve this one, which left it in an unfortunate situation indeed.

I won't go into the details of what came next, it's a little unfortunate. I was able to crack the shell eventually and ... end the mage.

[Severing Bite has reached level 19]

[You have slain Level 48 Setsulah Bonded Mage Attendant]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 40]

[You have reached the maximum level for your tier. Evolution Menu is available.]

At last.... AT LAST!

I've done it!

Not caring if the Kaarmodo was scrying from above, I threw myself onto the ground and wiggled with sheer joy, my legs kicking ecstatically in the air. Finally ready to evolve to the fourth tier after all this time! My levelling speed had been severely knocked back by having to fight against lower tier monsters this entire time, but I've finally done it. And just in time!

Suddenly recalling that I don't have the time to sit around wiggling, I righted myself and reached out to my pets.

[Are you guys close?]

[Nearly there, Master.]

[I'll come and meet you, we need to make our way back to the colony as quickly as possible!]

[S-So you've finally reached it?]

[I have indeed, Crinis! It's time for this mighty one to reach and even greater height!]

[That's fantastic, Master!]

Crinis is overflowing with happiness and congratulations, but all I can feel from Tiny is a grudging jealousy.

[Aww, not to worry Tiny. You'll get your chance to evolve soon,] I teased.

[Grrrr!] he rumbled back.

It didn't take long to meet up with my pets and we began our trek around the horde towards the colony. We made sure back off a good distance though, I'm sure the Kaarmodo is mad as heck about losing another servant and I'm not especially keen about dodging lightning bolts from on high the entire way back.

After a short while we ran into Isaac and his team who had managed a successful retreat.

[Ho there Isaac. Made it out alright I see.]

[Nothin' to it,] the former guard grinned. [You look like you got what you wanted out of it.]

[Sure did,] I happily admitted. [It's time to get back to the colony and prepare for the final battle. What are you going to do?]

Isaac stroked the scraggly beard developing on his chin after several long days doing it tough.

[I think it might be time to regroup. We've got, what, less than a day? My group needs a chance to rest and I want to ogle - I mean talk to Morrelia once before the battle.]

[Right you are then. Pass on my thanks to your group, they've been more helpful than I expected.]

[That seems unnecessarily harsh,] Isaac muttered, but turned to speak to his squad.

Oddly, upon hearing his words, they faced me and bowed low as one, their faces beaming with happiness and pride.

Odd.

Never mind, I've got bigger fish to fry. Evolution! And I mustn't forget that my bite skill is on the verge of reaching the fourth tier also! Finally! I feel like I've been slicing limbs off of monsters for weeks now and only now am I close to getting the skill fusion that I've been waiting for!

I said our goodbyes to the squad who, for their own safety I recommended moved separately from us. No need to put themselves at greater risk than they had to. For our part, we crept our way around the horde, only approaching for me to YOINK the occasional monster into my waiting mandibles to train my Severing Bite skill. I didn't mind throwing away my gravitational mana in this way now, since I knew I'd be heading underground to evolve anyway.

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For an evolution like this, tier four and with a rare core, I thought it would be for the best to be safely ensconced in the Dungeon so that my core would be charged once I awoke.

It took six hours of crawling and chomping on monsters for us to make it the front of the horde where we were forced to hang about for another few hours whilst I pulled more enemies to a grisly end before the voice of Gandalf rang in my ears.

[Severing Bite has reached level 20, upgrade available.]

It's all coming up Anthony! Muahahahaha!

Now I can head to the nest without regret and submit myself to the painful experience of absorbing the rest of that rare core. Claws crossed, I won't die!

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### **Chapter 362: Return and Nes**

"Are you returning to the colony, Eldest?" one of the scouts came up to ask.

"Yep! It's time for me to evolve."

"With your permission Eldest I shall inform the council of this event."

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"Go for it,"

Once I reached the front I started to run into more and more scouts and soldiers, as well as other castes mixed into the small raiding teams. It appeared as if the colony was scaling down their raiding operations, withdrawing the forward squads to the nest in order to spend the final hours before the battle preparing and resting. Which made a lot of sense really. Ensuring the ground was prepared and the warriors of the colony were fresh would make a huge difference compared to the starved and tired horde monsters who'd been forced to march for a week solid on almost no food.

Even though the ants started with very poor stats, it shouldn't be forgotten that every ant was a tier three monster after having gone through the training program, the same tier as me. They didn't have the benefit of maxed evolutions like I had, but they were certainly a cut above the average monster in

the horde. Bizarrely enough this fight would be a battle of quantity against quality, and the colony of ants would be on the quality side of the equation.

At least that was true for the general horde. Garralosh and her children were a whole different kettle of fish. That's where the Queen and I came into the equation. Hopefully it would be enough to tip the balance.

"Off to evolve are you, Eldest? Keep up the hard work!"

"When am I not working hard?!"

"That's the spirit!"

Gah! The closer we came to the nest the more ants we bumped into. Running back and forth between the nest and the front, passing messages and keeping eyes on the situation, or just returning to regroup or sleep. Each and every one of them was happy to chip in with a comment, which is nice on the one hand but gets exhausting after a few hundred repetitions.

Even still, it was nice to be wanted.

My pets and I made sure to motor as quick as we could, but even so it took several hours to make it back to the nest. Colony activity continued to rise, we found workers digging here and there, soldiers patrolling and scouts rushing here and there. It felt good to be back amongst the family again. The heart of the family.

I couldn't help but let my mind wander over what had occurred in the time I'd been gone. Had the Queen evolved yet? Had the defences been completed? How many new ants had been born and trained whilst I'd been away? I was also looking forward to the progress that had been made by the different artisan castes over the previous week. The ants were collaborating and pushing themselves so hard that their speed of development was getting out of control.

When I tried to picture what the colony would be like in a year's time, I just couldn't. I knew that the ants would have incredible potential if I was able to increase their intelligence, but how could I have anticipated that it would be this successful? If we were able to survive the coming battle, the sky would be the limit for my colony.

Or the centre, more to the point.

When we finally began the final approach to the nest, the first thing I saw was the nest itself. They'd made it even taller! At some point it had gone beyond 'hill-like' to just a full-on hill! At this rate I'd need to start thinking about how high a hill needed to be before you'd have to classify it as a mountain! At this range I could barely make out the small forms of the ants bustling about on that enormous dirt pile.

As we drew closer to the nest I could see the huge amount of work that had gone into the defences being prepared. Traps were everywhere, dug into the soil and marked with pheromones. I had to lead Tiny around a zig zagging path to avoid him falling into what I'm sure would be a spiky and painful hole.

Beyond the traps were layers of walls and led toward the nest. Each wall wasn't large, only two to three metres, but after the enemy crested the first wall, a second lay a hundred metres beyond it, and a third a hundred metres beyond that. A lip of dirt a metre thick at the top of each wall would provide some

defence from enemy projectiles and spells whilst the ants unleashed their own barrage upon the horde with the height advantage and in relative safety.

There were eight walls in total that formed a wide ring around the main nest and we climbed over them one by one as we made our way forward. Holy mackerel! There's even traps in between the walls as well! The colony had really gone all out on this one. I wonder how many trees they had to cut down in order to form this many stakes... Hopefully haven't caused a deforestation issue in the local area.

I can see that someone has been directing the construction to maximise the colony's chances against the horde of weaker monsters that were coming our way. There are probably hundreds of tunnels dug through the area as well, concealed. I can detect some of them nearby from their pheromone markers. It'll be interesting to see what the twenty have planned for those.

When we made it to the main hill we began the climb and received the friendly greetings of every ant we walked past. I had many opportunities to engage in some friendly antennae slapping and exchange pleasantries with the members of the colony.

"How are you, Eldest?"

"Looking forward to the battle, Eldest?"

"Who's going to defeat more enemies Eldest, you or the Queen?"

"The Queen obviously" I scoffed at the ant who asked me that.

She's tier six! With a rare core evolution! Don't even try and compare us. That's just madness.

It was a relief when I finally reached the top of the hill and took a look around. From this high up, it was easy to see the village in the distance, many of the trees between the two locations had been cut down, ensuring a clear line of sight between the two locations. My eyesight wasn't good enough to see what the humans were up to, but I'm sure they were just as busy preparing for the oncoming disaster.

My anger at the horde and those behind it hadn't diminished over time, in fact it had only grown larger. Garralosh and the Kaarmodo would pay for what they brought upon my family. I could only hope that the rage was enough to sustain for what was to come.

[Let's go down and find the rest of my rare core. It's time to do this.]

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### **Chapter 363: Wrestling with the core**

Down into the nest we plunged. Is it just me, or is the opening a lot wider than it used to be? Even Tiny fits into the main shaft quite comfortably now. I wonder what that's all about. As usual, my antennae are assaulted by a plethora of pheromones. Trails that paint the way to each of the different sections of the nest are mixed with an overwhelming number of more short term messages from ants coordinating the many tasks that they've been given.

"We need more wood! Follow this trail for the worker teams heading to the forest!"

"Food! Get on it! You think the colony feeds itself?! Hunting parties are leaving from the Dungeon staging area now!"

"Got nothing to do? What the hell is wrong with you?! There's always earthworks going on, report to the Carver headquarters to join a work team!"

"Hey! Stay positive and work hard! :D"

... Not sure what the point of that last one was... just trying to keep spirits up around the place I guess. I hardly think it's necessary, the ants I can see look as if they could hardly work any harder. In fact, the only ant I can see standing still for any amount of time is ... me. Dangit, better get moving before I start to look conspicuous and lazy.

We clung to the wall and made our way straight down, innumerable ants rushing in and out of smaller side tunnels constantly. I feel as if the population has definitely lifted whilst I've been gone. If we managed to hatch and graduate two hundred a day then the colony would have gained 1400 new members in the time I've been gone. Some of that would have been offset by losses at the front, but even considering that, there would have been roughly one thousand more ants in the colony than there had been before.

If only we'd had another week! Then I'd be far less concerned.

When I reached the Queen's chamber I was quite confused to find that, apart from a few guards, it was empty! No Queen, no retinue of attendant soldiers and tenders, nothing! Where has she gone? Curious, I led Tiny and walked down the walls and followed the main shaft beneath the Queen's chamber into my own room.

Even this space has been widened, at least double the space it was before, but other than a couple of soldiers who sit around the outside of the room, keeping watch for spawning monsters so that they might leap on them the moment they emerge, the chamber is empty.

[Home sweet home] I told my pets.

[It's nice to be back] Crinis assured me.

[Hrrr] Tiny let his actions do the talking as he threw himself down onto the ground to rest.

That was fair enough. Our run back to the nest had been exhausting. Matter of fact, our entire last week had been exhausting. The entire colony must be tottering on its feet unless the mandatory rest has kicked in. The amount of work that had been done was staggering. I know it's almost impossible for the ants to admit they are tired, but I hope that the council will start forcing the family to rest before the final battle. Even just a couple of hours of torpor could make all the difference. Especially now when the horde was only four hours away!

OK. No more stalling. Time to get that rare core out.

I've been dreading this experience for months. I've already pushed my core beyond the System Imposed limit and even though gaining some levels and Biomass combined with a bit of time has helped ease the pain, it hasn't ever gone away. Even now my core aches with a dull throb, an inexplicable tightness that I can feel twinge every time I breathe.

Now where is that stupid thing? I know I left it here somewhere...

Ah!

Flipping on my mana sense, my mind is momentarily blinded by the ever present glow of the mana flooding out of the Dungeon walls. After a second or two I was able to blink the background glare out of my mind and focus on detecting the glowing core I had buried in the wall.

There it is!

I scuttled over to the wall and extracted the gem with my mandibles before I retreated back into the centre of the chamber, the bright, spherical gem held in my mandibles.

[I might need your help with this Crinis. I'm a bit worried about how it's going to go,] I admitted.

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[Anything, master. I'll be ready for your orders,] the sphere of cosmic horror and tentacle death assured me.

[Thanks, Crinis.]

This tender moment of bonding between a monster and his devoted pet was only disrupted by the thunderous nasal snoring of Tiny a few metres away.

Alright then, here goes...

[Compatible rare core detected!]

[Would you like to absorb, or reconstitute this core? Warning! Your core has pushed beyond the allowed limit for your evolution. Further absorption will prove fatal. Do you wish to proceed?]

You know... Not really? But if I don't push myself beyond the limit, how can I possibly hope to match up to powerful creatures like Garralosh and the Kaarmodo?

Fear blossomed within me, along with the constant anxiety that had been bubbling away inside me, the nervous worry that I'd shoved into the back of my mind gushed to the fore.

I don't want to die... again. I'm enjoying my life on Pangera! I finally have a family. I finally feel accepted. I don't want to lose it all now that things are getting better and better every day.

At the same time, that fear of losing my family is what is driving me forward. If I don't go this hard and risk it all, I might not be able to defend the colony that has come to mean so much to me. How would it feel, to lose the colony knowing that I didn't do all that I could to protect it?

[Bring it! Absorb that core!]

PAIN.

Holy smokes! Ahhh! That.. That stings! Right in the core!

The moment I give the mental command to my good friend Gandalf the system, the energy began to leak out of the core and swirl through the air as a bright energy vapour toward me and then into my own core, which immediately began to expand.

Which was a problem.

Unable to contain the pain, I slumped to one side and collapsed into the dirt floor of the chamber, my legs twitching uncontrollably as my focus is turned inward toward the agonizing changes that are taking place within my body.

HAAARGHHH!

Come on Anthony! You can do this! Hold on man!

The pressure continues to build as the energy flows into me, the outward pressure of the expanding core is pushing outward against my inner organs, which in turn is pressed into my carapace, causing me to feel like a balloon on the verge of popping.

I can hear a vague noise echoing in my ears and with a start I realise it's my own mandibles grinding against each other. Even my face hands are starting to hurt! This is absurd! The pressure builds and builds until I can feel my core on the verge of cracking.

The outwards force is just too much! I need something pressing down on the other way, otherwise I'm gonna burst!

[Crisis! Wrap me up and squish me!] I screamed desperately.

[What?!]

[Just do it!]

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### **Chapter 364: Crushed**

Unable to refuse my order, Crisis was forced to extend multiple tentacles which she unwillingly began to wrap around my carapace and squeeze, the lacklustre force evidence to her confusion and reluctance.

[Crisis!] I cried out in agony, [If you don't compress me I'm gonna pop! Please!]

The outward pressure continued to build as the energy in my core swirled dangerously, drawing more and more from the rare core into itself and growing larger with each moment that passed.

Crack!

Deep within my body a horrific sound reverberated outward and waves of pain washed through my entire body, sending me writhing and twisting on the floor.

[Crisis!]

[I'll do it!]

Suddenly afraid, Crisis reached out with more tentacles and wrapped them around my body covering almost every inch of my carapace and began to squeeze.

I became still, not because it hurt any less, in fact, it began to hurt more, but with Crisis wrapping me up so tight there wasn't anywhere I could go! In fact, in her rush to obey my desperate plea, she inadvertently caught one of my legs up in her tentacles and the limb was immediately crushed.

She's strong!



But, holy moly, this hurts! The outward pressure of the growing core has now been met with the inward pressure of Crinis. I have no sound medical basis for this procedure, but I'm rolling with my gut instinct here! If all goes well, maybe I'll survive...

Please finish soon, please finish soon. COME ON!

In the centre of my thorax, my innards are being shredded, pressed down onto the core, they are being used in an attempt to hold the stressed gem together whilst also having to endure the core pressing back against them. Ravaging pain, the likes of which I've only experienced once before, wracked my form.

Back then, the only thing I had to live for was my colony.

Strangely enough, that's still true today!

I REFUSE TO DIE!

[Give it everything Crinis! Don't worry about hurting me!]

[Ahhhh- OK!]

Pressure.

More and more, Crinis' limbs crushed and grinded down on my carapace with such force that even my diamond shell began to crack and splinter beneath her ministrations. The inward force and the outward pressure continued to grind my insides to paste and it was all I could do not to pass out.

Activate the regeneration gland!

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I have a horrible feeling that this is gonna hurt. But if I can keep my organs functioning for a bit longer, maybe I'll be able to survive.

AAAAARGGGHHH!

I'd writhe in pain, but I can't! How much longer to go?!

I rolled my eyes around until I spotted the core lying on the ground in front of me, a steady stream of energy vapour pouring off it and into me. I think I'm about halfway through absorbing what's left of it. Half way through and I'm barely hanging on!

Come on Anthony! Would the Queen whinge and moan like this? No! Hold yourself together! Show the other ants how it's done!

I continued to endure through the agony which seemed to defy the odds and grow worse each second. Just stop it, pain! Nobody asked you to get any worse! EERGHHH. I'm losing my sense of things, as well as my senses. At least I think I am, is everything fading?

I startled Crinis by starting to bang what little was exposed of my head into the floor of the chamber.

Wake up Anthony! No time for sleeping! There's a lot of stuff still to do and it won't get done if you pass out and die here! Grit those face hands and endure you son of a Queen!

Inch by agonizing inch the core was absorbed into me, it's energy overflowing into my own core and fuelling it's growth. I better get one hell of an evolution out of this! Despite my best efforts, my mind is starting to fade. The pain is too much. Is this what it would feel like if Tiny tried to do math? Reality is slipping from my grasp.

It would be so easy. So easy, just to let all go. But I won't. I'm a stubborn creature at heart.

Did I let it go when I was abandoned by my family? Nope. Or when I was kicked out of school and shunned by everyone I'd known? Negative! I'm not likely to give up now that there are people (ants) who actually need me!

Despite the intense pain, a sense of purpose and determination welled up inside me and I grabbed hold of it with all six legs plus my mandibles. I can take it!

And I did. I held on until the final wisp of energy leaked out of the rare core and it disappeared inside me, the ordeal finally complete.

Except it isn't!

It still hurts like all get out! If I don't evolve immediately, I might not be able to hold onto consciousness, pass out and die!

I feel like my guts have been blended, mashed, pureed, minced and then blended again for the hell of it! How much health have I got left?! 6 HP!?!?! And it's still going down?!

Oh.

[Crisis, you can let me go now!]

[Oh! O-Of course!]

Not being crushed to death my own pet helps the pain a little, but not much. It's time, I need to engage the evolution menu!

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#### **Chapter 365: Evolution Begins!**

I can't handle this suffering anymore! Gimme the menu!

Forget about doing anything else, I'm worried about dealing with the evolution system properly in this state! Isn't there a pain resistance skill or something!?

Apparently, not.

[Would you like to use the evolution menu?]

ABSOLUTELY! PLEASE!

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

[ You have maximised your mutations! As a reward, an additional ten percent evolutionary energy will be granted.]

WHAT!? Bonus energy!?

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

[Your evolution options are as follows (Each evolution is of the species Formica Sapiens):

- Veteran Mature Worker
- Senior Mage Ant
- Mana Soldier (special)
- Ascended Mind Ant (special)
- Nascent Hive Mind (rare)
- Collective Mage Ant (rare)
- Colony Paragon (rare)]

Ohhhhhhh boy! Putting aside the bonus energy thing, these options look... ARGH... tasty.

I just wish I was in slightly less agony so that I could properly enjoy this moment....

If it weren't for my... ARRRGHH ... current circumstances... I would have loved to have gone through all of the options, some of them sound so juicy... OUCH! But I can't, obviously. I'll have to jump straight to the good stuff.

Tell me about the Nascent Hive Mind!

[Rare Evolution: Nascent Hive Mind. +100 bonus to Cunning, +100 bonus to Willpower, -30 penalty to Might - 20 penalty to Toughness. This evolution will weaken the host physically, transforming them into an almost immobile entity. A rare Mental Dominator Cortex (Formica Sapiens) will be granted with this evolution that will allow the host to usurp and control the body of other members of its species, acting as the 'brain' for all.]

What the heck is with these bonuses?!

100 to Cunning and Willpower?! What's up with that? And the negatives?! I didn't know something like that was even... Ugh... possible.

So what is this then? I'd turn into some sort of giant brain that can control each member of the colony? I guess such a thing would be ... HUCK!.... Powerful. Imagine millions of swarming insects, all controlled by a single mind. That level of coordination would be unstoppable.

But I didn't make the colony smart just so I could take away their free will and do all the thinking for them! Rejected!

Ugh! This hurts.... What's next?

[Rare Evolution: Collective Mage Ant +40 bonus to Cunning, +40 bonus to Willpower. This evolution grants significant mental prowess and includes a free rare Social Processing Cortex (Formica Sapiens), which allow the host to temporarily draw on the mental stats of the specified species within a radius. This organ effectively allows the user to utilise the minds of nearby members of the specified species to assist the host with mental cognitive activity.]

Holy Gandalf!

Forty to Cunning AND Willpower? Without transforming me into a stomping brain?! It's almost enough to shock me out of the pain! Almost... And what's this? The Social Processing Cortex? From the description it seems as if it would allow me to utilise the minds of nearby colony members as sort of coprocessors, borrowing their minds to help me cast spells.

The kind of spell flinging I could do with that... I could probably even use my sub-minds to manage the job of coordinating the extra minds. The power I'd be able to wield would be boggling! Not to mention, more ants would mean more processing power!

This is some serious mind power, possibly enough to match the Kaarmodo in raw spell flinging ability.

HACK! Dammit! I wish my guts didn't feel like they're about to burst, thinking would be much easier.

Despite the raw power, I'm not sure if this is the evolution I want. Borrowing my strength from the colony isn't really what I wanted, and I'd also hoped to evolve into something a little more rounded this time, rather than continue down my mage ant path to the end. If I'm going to survive in battle against Garralosh and the horde then I'm going to need to be able to take a few hits. Not to mention have the raw physical might to use my new bite skill to its fullest potential. I'll need to take care of that fusion after evolving.

Let's shelve this evolution as a 'maybe' and check the next one.

[Rare Evolution: Juvenile Colony Paragon. +15 bonus to Cunning, +15 bonus to Willpower, +40 bonus to Might, +40 bonus to Toughness. This evolution will transform the host into the paragon of their species, the ideal form. This evolution includes the rare Collective Will Vestibule (Formica Sapiens). This organ collects mental energy generated by the faith and goodwill of the specified species and transforms it into regeneration.]

ARGH! Is it the pain, or this blinding stat boost that caused me to cry out? I can't even say myself! Rounded bonus to all stats is nice, it'll allow me to spend my evolutionary energy on other things, not to mention the overall gain is massive!

Since Will and Cunning take more energy to generate than Might and Toughness, the overall stat boost lines up, but this is more in line with my wishes of rounding out my stats. And the unique gland seems powerful. I'm not sure what faith and goodwill energy is, or how it would help with regeneration? But at least I wouldn't be taking over my family members' minds or borrowing their brains for my own purposes... This gland seems more in line with what I feel comfortable doing.

GAWD this hurts. Distract, distract!

This evolution also mentions it's a juvenile, which means the mature version must be even more impressive.

Alright, I think I'm settled on this one!

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Choose Juvenile Colony Paragon!

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### **Chapter 366: Rounding out the evolution**

After selecting the species I would evolve into, the expanded manual evolution menu appeared. I was thankful just to have the distraction, my core was full to bursting with energy and I couldn't wait to drain the stupid thing dry, improve my body and cease this horrific suffering!

Alright, now that the menu is in front of me, what did I have to do again? I feel like I had to eat something... Oh right! My stomach!

Eagerly, I fiddle about with the menu and begin to check my options for changing my stomach from a non-mutable organ and into a mutable one. Since it turns out that not every organ within a monster's body is able to be upgraded at the time they are born, getting the new members of the colony to enable their stomachs for mutation during their first evolution was critical. Once they could upgrade it, selecting the option to make food consumption more efficient by negating the evolution penalty.

Now I would get the opportunity to do the same thing!

Gweheheheh!

After I messed about navigating the menu, ignoring the twinges of flaming agony that flared inside my body, I was able to find the option to enable my stomach for mutations. Thankfully it was quite cheap, roughly half the cost of a basic organ to do so.

I wasn't done here either, I also wanted to take a leaf out of Tiny's book and enable my muscles to be mutable as well. He'd been able to upgrade his musculature to be incredibly powerful, and if I wanted my bite to pierce the heavens one day, I'd need to do the same thing.

Two for the price of one!

How much energy do I have left?

Holy smoking mackerels! I have freakin' tons! Is this the benefit of pushing my core beyond its limits? And then pushing the extra 10% bonus for a completed mutation set on top? I'll be able to go much further than I already have with my stats! Not to mention glands! What should I buy? More organs? An aura?! Ah, the snowball effect of my repeated special evolutions has finally come into play! I feel like a kid in a store! Except that I have money to spend!

It's intoxicating! I feel like I might pass out!

No wait, I really might pass out. Hold on, me! Nearly there!

The first thing I do is go for the Cunning. I'll play with my stats until I'm happy and then I'll worry about organs and other such things afterwards. Alright then. With the +15 I got from my evolution, I decide to

spend most of it shaping a third sub-brain which I place between the other two and connect to the coordination cortex. I have the cortex after all, it'd be a massive waste to not take advantage of it, which means more sub-brains!

My new third brain I make larger and more potent than the other two, I want it to act as a kind of 'boss' brain that will lead the way in combined spell casting, acting as the guide and brunt force. While I'm at it, I beef up the other two sub-brains slightly, giving them a little extra punch. Having done that, I have a shade of my free +15 Cunning and Will left over, so I spend it upgrading my main mind, and I give a little extra boost from my spare energy as well.

When that job is done, I sit back and admire my new brain power. Fearsome! With this evolution I've taken my mental game to a whole new level! Now onto the physical stats. I want to spend my Might on roughly sixty percent size and forty percent density. It'll make a bit larger a bit faster, but I really need the quick stats. In my next evolution I may be able to correct the imbalance and give more energy back to density, but for now I need to emphasise raw stats.

A straight up forty might does a long way in making me a larger boi. I try to ensure that the density of muscle is concentrated in my head, since those are the muscles responsible for powering my bite. I'll need all the juice I can get in that department if I'm going to match it with a giant crocodile. I supplement the free stats with some extra from my evolutionary energy pool, making my overall might gain fifty points. If I'm going to address my terrible physical stats in this evolution then I need to commit.

Toughness is mainly spent thickening and powering up my carapace but I spare some thought to buffing up the walls of my internal organs. It's unlikely to help much but some types of energy, such as electricity, are able to go straight through my outer defences, so toughening up the insides should help reduce that damage, at least a little. As with my Might, I spend some energy to bring my overall toughness gain up to fifty, rounding out the bonus stats nicely.

Since I'm already in the menu I decide to poke around at my new Collective Will Gland. Each of the three rare evolutions gave massive stat gain as well, as powerful as what was described as a 'rare' organ. In the case of this evolution, it was the Collective Will Vestibule. Rather than an organ it almost appeared to be formed from crystallised flesh. Which is creepy enough, but more staggering than that was the sheer cost of the thing.

This was one expensive organ! It cost more than most of the high end aura glands! Significantly more! And I get it for free?! Viva la rare core! Viva la rare evolution!

I'm not even perfectly aware of what this thing does, but I'm positive it's going to be amazing! How could it not?

OK. Cool it off. We have a fair whack of energy still to spend. More stats? Hmm. Not sure. Wings? Again... not sure. Will I really need the wings underground? Flying sounds nice and all, but I like getting my face hands and claws into the dirt. Perhaps I'll revisit the wings idea another time.

I could put a stinger onto my back zone? Lots of different ants have stingers, and I can definitely see how they'd be useful, injecting painful venom into my enemies. But no. I'm firmly in camp acid. The products released from my business district have widespread renown and fame after my aggressive marketing. I

wouldn't want to turn around and start to advertise a whole new line of wares. Perhaps there's something I can use to give my acid a boost?

I flick through the exhaustive menu, my mind happy for something to focus on other than my screaming innards until I find a few items I like the look of.

[Acid Nozzle. An attachment organ that allows for more flexible and precise aiming from acid glands.]

This gland is quite cheap and essentially acts as a small, flexible 'barrel' on the end of my acid gland that can help me aim without having to change my body position as much. For example, I'll be able to lift my abdomen up high and then use the nozzle to fire directly forward without having to turn around. Nice!

Whilst I'm at it.

[Acid concentration gland. Attached to acid producing organ, this gland will secrete a concentration that will cause the acid produced to condense and purify, improving its qualities.]

Nice one! Essentially improving the power of the mutations that I already have, meaning my acid will do more damage, be more sticky and eat through mana faster. Not bad for one cheap gland! Heck, I'm on a roll, why not keep it going!

[Acid stimulation gland. Improves the speed of acid production in the attached gland.]

Since my acid is going to be much more flexible and potent, I may as well ensure that I have more of it! Phew. It's a good thing my back zone is so much larger than it was before, I never would have fit this gear in here otherwise.

What else can I do? I've bought three little cheap glands, I think it's time to spend the rest of the energy on something big! Something expensive and powerful that'll help tie my mental and physical attributes together.

Maybe I can do something with my nervous system?

After all, that's the part of the body that connects the mind to the muscle!

I poked through the menu for a few minutes and managed to find a heap of options regarding nerves and the nervous system in general, and much as I suspected, they were quite pricey to buy. Some of the tastiest options I couldn't afford, even before I'd bought any glands, but there still quite a few that caught my eye.

After some consideration, I spend the remainder of my energy making my nervous system mutable and then buying this one to go with it:

[Sub-neural network. An extension to the main nervous system that reduces response times by allowing automatic reaction processing in the extremities.]

Gweheheh. With my nervous system ready to be upgraded, and with this item alongside, my reaction speeds will be extraordinarily fast! When I consider what I might be capable of with my future sense antennae .... Hopefully it comes together.

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 367: Sinking**

I can't wait to see my status when this evolution is done. It's going to be craaaaaazy. I'm already getting a headache just thinking about having to upgrade all of these new glands. So many!

But it'll be worth it, I may have gone on a bit of a shopping spree, but the utility I've gained is immense, not to mention by all around beefier stats. My size is possibly going to double, perhaps even more than that after this. I'm gonna start pushing Tiny around once I'm done. Gweheheheh.

Alright then. Time to confirm everything and drain this dangerously overloaded core. Just being free of this pain is enough for me to eagerly finish up with the menu and welcome the deep embrace of torpor. As it has in the past, the lassitude begins to fall over me immediately, my vision fading to black and sensation falling blessedly away. Ah, no more pain, no more sensation of a physical body at all!

Wait a second. I remember this sensation.

My mind continued to sink, falling deeper in on itself as if I were circling a cosmic drain to the centre of the world.

Here we go again. Off to chat with Gandalf.

Being my second ride on the ... whatever this was ... I let myself go and tried to enjoy it without the sense of vertigo kicking in. I have to say, it isn't easy to enjoy a disembodied experience since there isn't really any actual sensation but rather a vague dizzying sense of movement. Without any ability to perceive my environment and without any real sense of distance, I found myself feeling vaguely bored as I waited for the ride to be over.

[Well I do apologise if you find the trip dull. There isn't really any other way to bring you to me.]

Ah, the gruff voice of the Grey One himself. It's seriously uncanny how much they sound alike. Is this some form of cosmic accident?

Yes, well. It is what it is I suppose. How've you been, Gandalf?

A deep chuckle resounded around my free floating mind.

[This name you have for me is amusing. You continue to insist on using it?]

It's not as if I know your real name now, is it?

[And if I told you my real name would you change your way of speaking?]

No.

[...]

...

[You've certainly kept up your fast pace,] the voice changed the subject, [I didn't expect to see you here so soon after the last time. I suppose your circumstances can be somewhat to blame.]

You can tell what's going on up there? I'm a bit shocked.



[It shouldn't be that surprising, surely. Everything touched by the system is within my grasp. It's only natural I could track the progress of so many monsters as they rushed toward you.]

Yeah well, any chance We could get some help out of you? It doesn't seem entirely fair. How are they controlling all those monsters anyway? Isn't that infringing on your role?

[Not really. Certain monsters have that authority. It's all part of the design.]

Right....

[You should have died, you know,] Gandalf said suddenly, [You weren't made to push your core that hard at your current level of evolution. Your core should have cracked and you should have been killed. That's how the system was designed, after all.]

Well... what can I say? Sorry to disappoint you?

[Oh, I'm not disappointed. Quite the opposite. You're a promising specimen, after all. It would have been a shame to lose you so soon.]

I guess I'm annoyingly good at surviving when I shouldn't. You said the system was designed, was it you who designed it?

[Oh, think you're going to ask the questions do you?]

I tried to roll my eyes but then realised I don't have a body, or eyes that can be rolled.

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You brought me down here just to talk at me? A little dialogue isn't such a bad thing is it?

[You know, it's been a long time since I was able to talk to someone like you. As I mentioned before, those that I've brought into the Dungeon tend to be on the broken side, and being let loose in that environment tends to warp them even further.]

There was a pause before the voice continued mildly.

[... Like that Garralosh for example.]

Well that stopped me cold.

Garralosh was an outsider like me?

[Of course. She's from your world even. I can't say if the timeline was close to yours. Temporal vectors tend to get very fuzzy with this sort of summoning. But yes, she was like you. Unleashed on the Dungeon, alone and had to rely on her wits and savagery to survive. She's been here for hundreds of years now. She did very well at first,] Gandalf mused, [perhaps too well. She threw away every piece of herself that inhibited her survival until there was almost nothing left.]

Yeah, who would have thought that someone would make desperate choices when thrown into a murder pit and forced to fight for their life.

[Are you being sarcastic?]

Not at all.

[I had high hopes for her you know,] the voice mused, [she was much like you, rose up quickly. But in terms of long term impact you've already surpassed her in a lot of ways.]

Like how? By creating a new species?

[By creating such a successful species. She made her own species also. Inadequate, inefficient things.]

Gandalf sounded very dismissive of the Croca-Beasts, almost as if they were insulting in some way.

I'm not a big fan of the Crocs, for obvious reasons, but they seem pretty killy to me?

[Bah. Without the support of their parent the species would have been wiped out by normal Dungeon spawns within ten years. They provide no value.]

How are monsters supposed to provide 'value' anyway? As long as they're killing things, they're serving their purpose aren't they?

[In some ways, yes. But in others, no.]

Alright then, stay cryptic.

[I'm curious, does knowing that your enemy shares so much in common with your change anything for you? Are you still willing to fight against a fellow human?]

Who's a human? She's a giant crocodile and I'm a massive ant. Of course it doesn't change anything.

[Oh? I expected a little more sentiment from you.]

I'm a big believer in the loving the skin/carapace you're in. Had a human life and it was fine ...

[You starved yourself to death remember ...]

I feel like you're never going to get over that. It was fine, but that's over now. New life, new family and I'm not about to let someone destroy it just because they happened to be a human before they were brought here.

[I find your commitment towards your second life to be admirable. Not many in your position have been able to say the same. I hope you wake up in time to defend your home.]

Wait.. What do you mean? I should have heaps of time, right?

[Well, this evolution is a bit special. You did have a lot of energy in your core to expend. It's going to take a bit longer than usual.]

I was suddenly frantic at this news. I had to wake up in time. What would be the point of my struggles otherwise? I could feel my mind fading into nothing as my consciousness was returned to my body.

Dammit Gandalf...

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 368**

It was a busy time for the soldiers. Grant had been run off her six legs over the last week. In some ways it was a relief to have the enemy finally arrive on the doorstep! Now she'd have the chance to rip into them directly with her mandibles and not have to stress about extraneous matters!

"Make sure you watch over the eldest carefully" she commanded the guards who remained in the chamber where the Eldest was undergoing their evolution.

The soldiers would hardly have done any different, but they saluted the council member with an antennae anyway before continuing their careful observation of the chamber walls. The Eldest lay close to the centre of the chamber undergoing the process of evolution. The two guardians sat nearby, watching over their master and Grant was careful to give them their space. The two creatures were quite revered in the colony and their unending loyalty to the Eldest was firmly to their credit.

Grant stepped out of the chamber and made her way further down into the newest section of the nest. The Carvers had been excited to have an excuse to have to expand the nest in a new way and the Queen's evolution had been the perfect opportunity. She'd needed more space and to be deeper in the Dungeon which had required an extensive expansion to the lower reaches of the nest.

"Nice work soldiers. Keep up the hard work," Grant nodded to the many soldiers she passed.

She came across a general patrolling with five soldiers trailing behind her moving in the opposite direction.

"How goes things general?"

"The extra patrols are putting a strain on resources, Senior," the smaller soldier variant replied, "the Dungeon wall spawns have been faster than usual over the last day. It feels as though something has changed."

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Grant swiped her antennae in a concerned gesture.

"Have any other patrol groups reported this issue?" She asked.

"All of them," confirmed the patrol leader.

Grant pondered for a moment. There were a few implications of increased Dungeon spawn rate, and she didn't like any of them.

"I'll speak to the council," she assured the patrol, "if we can spare any more soldiers they'll be sent down as soon as we can manage."

"I appreciate it, Senior," the general snapped out a quick salute before she moved on with the rest of her patrol.

Grant shook her head. This wasn't what the colony needed. At a time when not just every soldier, but every member of the colony, was required top side to deal with upcoming battle, committing yet more soldiers to the Dungeon sections of the colony was far from ideal.

But it would have to be done. The Queen was down here along with the Eldest. Any risk at all to either of them was unacceptable. She supposed they could remove all members of the colony to the above ground section of the nest for the duration of the battle and leave the freshly spawned monsters to battle each other here in the lower tunnels. Abandoning any amount of territory to those filthy creatures angered Grant deep down, though she couldn't say exactly why.

As she mulled over her emotions she made her way down into the Dungeon until she came to the chamber the council had made for their use, directly above the Queen's chamber.

"The Eldest had begun to evolve," she announced as she entered.

There was a relieved rustle as the few members of the council present shifted their bodies and their antennae twitched. The twenty members of the council were extremely busy. There wasn't so much of a formal meeting as a rolling series of consultations with whoever was present at the time. For the time being, Mendant, Victorient, Florence and Coolant were in the chamber, the others were out on business. For many in the council, this chamber had become something of a break room, shameful as it was to admit it.

"How was it?" Mendant asked, concerned, "absorbing the core?"

Grant paused as she considered how to describe the scene she had observed from the tunnel above the Eldest's chamber. Like a fool, she'd feared for the Eldest's life as his own guardian hand engulfed him in tentacles that writhed and squeezed with tremendous strength. Even covered, she could sense the agony that rolled through the air in waves.

"Difficult. But the Eldest, succeeded, as always."

"Of course," Coolant pitched in, "We can only marvel at how powerful a mage the Eldest will become once the evolution is complete."

Grant stabbed her antennae forward in irritation.

"I believe the Eldest will seek physical strength in order to lead the soldiers from the front," she said with certainty.

She could see it in her mind, the colossal strength of the Eldest, scattering the foe and harvesting their lives as wheat before the scythe, the soldier caste charging through the wake.

"D-Do you think the Eldest will invest in a healing magic gland?" Mendant asked hopefully.

"No," the others replied, which caused the healer to drop her head in sadness.

"The patrols need to be increased in the lower tunnels." Grant said.

Victorient focused on the Soldier, surprise clear in her voice.

"Again? I hope this trend doesn't continue," she worried.

"We'll have to wait and see," Coolant replied, "there's no use engaging in idle speculation."

Grant nodded in agreement. Guessing would get them nowhere in a hurry.

"Has most of the colony been pulled in for the mandatory rest period?" Coolant asked.

"I think so," Grant confirmed, "I haven't spoken to Burke or Wills for a few hours, but I think they've managed to bring in everyone. The upper nest has been turned over to the Brood Tenders to monitor, since they are non-combatants, whilst the soldiers are patrolling down here."

"Did Vibrant come in?"

"I heard she had to be dragged in by a team of scouts," Grant chuckled.

"I was there," Coolant confirmed, "it took twenty of them to hold her down whilst her team was blocked by thirty soldiers. She wanted to get one last food run in before the battle started."

Grant sighed. Vibrant's work ethic was second to none and she had the respect of every ant in the colony for it, but it was by far the better choice for the colony that she and her team were rested and fresh for the battle than a little more food was stored away.

"She ended up coming peacefully in the end," Coolant continued. "Once we pointed out the Eldest was returning to the nest to evolve, she was happy enough to come back."

Once again the Eldest did work for the colony without even being present. Truly something special.

"I'm heading down to consult with the Queen" Grant announced, "I think Sloan is down there as well. I want to make sure my soldiers are in position."

The others nodded.

"Keep working hard," Coolant said.

"Of course," Grant replied.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 369: War Queen**

Grant exited the small council chamber and returned to the widened main shaft. Gripping onto the walls that glowed with intense, blue light, she made her descent toward the lowest chamber in the nest where the Queen now rested.

As the shaft opened up, Grant took in the contents of the room at once. It was crawling with ants. Over a hundred had been committed to the defence of this room. The spawns were happening rapidly now, shadow beasts and plant monsters erupted from their cocoons in the walls at regular intervals and no harm would be allowed to come to the main occupant of this chamber.

She loomed large in Grant's eyes now. She sat in the centre of the chamber as her protectors revolved around her, as if she emitted a powerful force that kept them close but unwilling to approach. Grant saw a shadow beast erupt out of the floor, right under the giant form. Before she could even shout out, the Queen had shifted her weight and stabbed down with one leg, impaling the shadow beast clean through. The Queen brought the leg to her mouth and swallowed the Biomass in one go.

"Have you come to greet me, child?" a warm voice rang out.

Grant started and came back to herself.

"Ah, yes Mother. I've been checking on the soldiers and I wanted to speak to Sloan, if she was here."

"She is." The Queen flicked an antennae toward one corner where Grant could see a small cluster of scouts, generals and soldiers had gathered.

Grant completed her climb down the wall and steadied herself on the floor, looking up at the new form of her only parent. The Queen had already been the largest ant in the colony by a wide margin, but her evolution had pushed the boundary even further. Grant was one of the largest ants also, being a Mature Soldier who had the benefit of maxed core evolutions. The Queen towered over Grant. Her mandibles were almost equal in size to Grant's own head.

The power contained in the rare core was no joke.

"Tell me," the Queen continued, "did the troublesome one return?"

"Yes, Mother," Grant told her, "the Eldest has begun their evolution in the chambers above."

The Queen tilted her head to more directly face the roof of her chamber, as if she could penetrate the layers of rock and soil that lay between and stare at her wayward offspring.

"That is good then," she huffed.

"Were you worried that the Eldest may not make it back?" Grant enquired.

The Queen lowered her head to look Grant compound eye to compound eye.

"I am always worried about that one. Do you think I don't have cause?"

Grant shifted, uncomfortable with the scrutiny. She was unwilling to admit wrongdoing or poor judgement in the Eldest. How could she? The Eldest had done more for the colony than any other, the Queen included. The Eldest had created their species!

"The Eldest has been known to push a little too hard at times," she was able to admit.

The Queen chuckled. The scent of her mirth spread throughout the chamber and tickled the antennae of every ant present, causing them to pause for a moment as the warmth of her emotion washed over them.

"I have to agree," the Queen hummed.

It was a delicate thing, what the colony was undergoing at the moment. For the Queen to not be the Eldest member of their colony was possibly unprecedented in the history of ant monsters. The council had been wary that there may be a power struggle between the two most revered members of the colony. On the one hand, the Queen, mother to them all, who had raised the colony from nothing. On the other hand, the ant who had caused the colony to be reborn into something new, something better, and in so doing had claimed the position of the Eldest Formica Sapiens in the Dungeon.

To their relief, no such conflict had become evident, or even appeared to be brewing. The Queen remained devoted to all her children. Uninhibitedly so. But she appeared to hold extra concern for her most troublesome child. The Eldest, for their part, appeared devoted to the Queen and the colony

without reservation. Both of them appeared happy to leave the day to day running of the colony to the council. Which seemed to work fine.

It wasn't normal. It wasn't antlike, to worry about these things. Grant could sense that now. The colony had been pulled into unexplored Dungeon by the Eldest and they would need to puzzle their own way out.

"What are they talking about over there?" Grant muttered as she watched the huddle around Sloan.

"They are discussing how to adapt the plans for the upcoming battle," the Queen chimed in unexpectedly.

"Adapt the plans?" Grant cried, "why are they changing the plans?! We've pinned down every angle we can possibly cover!"

The Queen shifted.

"That's my fault," she sighed, "They are trying to account for what I've said I will do during the battle."

That brought Grant up short.

"What have you said you'll do?" she asked, nervous.

"Lead from the front, child, as I should," the Queen replied calmly.

"What?!" Grant panicked.

Nonononononono! Unacceptable! The Queen couldn't be on the front lines! She should be in the nest! Deep in the nest! And covered in Soldiers!

As if reading her mind, the Queen chuckled again.

"I did not take this evolution to be sheltered in the nest during the battle, child. I will fight, as I did when the colony was young."

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Grant took a few deep breaths and looked up at the Queen, taking in her new form.

Thick plates of hardened carapace covered the folds in her exoskeleton and around her head. Her legs were thicker, and tipped in sharp spikes that gleamed wickedly in the cold light of the cavern. The sheer size of the Queen, possibly double what she had been before, was a testament to the muscle mass she possessed.

The Queen's body had transformed. No longer was she just strong, she had become a physical powerhouse. That was just the outside. Who knew what powerful organs or glands she had chosen as part of her evolution.

"What was the name of your evolution, Mother? If you don't mind me asking."

"War Queen."

The Queen raised herself to her full height, lifting her body from the ground she dominated the room with her majestic aura.

"There will soon be other Queens for this colony, Queens who will be able to raise young and provide the future generations of the colony. What is needed now is not a Queen who will hide behind her children and allow them to sacrifice themselves for her safety. I will step forward and shield my children with my own body and, should I fall, I will fall with the knowledge that by my efforts I have given all I could in the defence of my family."

The Queen looked down at Grant.

"Perhaps I am being selfish. But I will fight."

She reared back and reached up with her powerful front legs. She dug them into the wall and began to pull her massive body up the vertical face of the tunnel. Grant watched her climb in stunned silence. The idea of the mother of the colony charging forward into almost certain death drove her to the brink of panic.

When the Queen left her sight she woke up to herself and rushed toward the huddle in the corner.

"Sloan!" she yelled, "what are we going to do!?"

The general glared at her fiercely as she barged into the meeting.

"We keep her alive," she hissed, "no matter the cost."

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 370: The Dark Army**

"What do you think, Ellie?"

"They're magnificent, Bella. Works of engineering, imagination, and unyielding effort! This must be the art that the Eldest spoke of when we were in training."

"I agree! This is art!"

"Do you think the other members of the council will agree with us?" Ellie asked hopefully.

"Not a chance," Bella replied.

The two Core Shapers didn't allow the perceived dearth of culture in their fellow council members to dim their enthusiasm at the successful culmination of their project. The colony had entered the mandatory rest period now and almost all members of the family had entered torpor. As non-combatants, the two Shapers were not expected to participate in the battle. But that didn't mean that none of the Shapers caste would be present. Fifty Shapers rested in the large chamber that had been constructed once the colony had approved the project.

These shapers were young, barely hatched in time through the dedicated nurturing of the Breed Tenders and then put through a brutal, accelerated training regime in the academy in order to bring this project online in time.

"I wonder if this is how the Queen feels. Gazing down on her children," Bella wondered aloud.



"Perhaps," Elligant mused. "Though, as beautiful as our creations are, can they really compare to the wonder of the ants the Elder created?"

"Of course not!" Bella scoffed. Then, "I do wish we could have gotten one more evolution into them before they were forced into battle."

"No point fretting. We were lucky to get this project off the ground at all. Don't you have confidence in our work?"

"How could I not? The Eldest put us onto this path with their own words! It's sure to succeed!"

"Which do you think will perform better, the Manglers, or the Reavers?"

The subjects in question were the one hundred shadow beasts that were also resting in the chamber. The council had been loath to give up the resources, but saw the potential in a force of Core Shapers with pet soldiers. How could they not? The Eldest deployed such tactics with tremendous success! It also helped to bolster the numbers of the colony and provide them with disposable soldiers who could be reconstituted and raised again provided the colony recovered the core.

The Shapers had laboured long and hard to turn Shadow Beast cores into these modified troops. Elligant's design, the Shadow Reaver, boasted enhanced arm strength, more devastating claws and fangs than the regular beasts. The Mangler, Bella's concept, sported increased leg strength and a streamlined body, dramatically increasing speed, along with nasty venom secreted by needle like claws.

Both shapers had found the 'budget' for their modifications by shaving away at the Cunning and Will of the original monster. With the Core Shaper controller, fully tooled up with pet related skills, in charge of the thinking, the pets didn't need that much intelligence.

"Did you remember how they performed in the Dungeon?" Bella gushed to her sibling.

"I do! I do! Wasn't it marvellous?"

"Who could have imagined the devastation that they would cause. Such ferocity!"

"And we didn't lose a single one! Mark my scent Bella, after this battle the Core Shapers will rise high in the colony! The Shapers will become the true elite force of our family!"

The two ants huddled together in the dark chamber with eyes that sparkled as they imagined the bright and glorious future of their caste. The thought that they might lose the battle never entered their minds.

Elsewhere in the colony...

"Surely the fire mages will cause the most damage!" Propellant declared.

"Nonsense!" Coolant refuted coolly, "the water mages will wash away the stain of the invaders by the hundreds. If not thousands. I struggle to see how your hot-headed members will keep up."

"Bah! You really think the enemy is going to be scared off by getting DAMP?! My Mage-Ants will be causing explosions, not hosing down the enemy! Are you trying to hurt them or clean them."

The two council members continued to bicker with each other as their fellow caste members rested within the chamber. Soldiers patrolled the space as this chamber was below ground level, a deliberate choice in order to afford the mages a chance to refill their cores and magic affinity glands.

A curious phenomenon had been observed by the colony as the numbers of the mage ants had continued to swell in the build up to the battle. Of the four base elements that were the cheapest and easiest to train, the vast majority eschewed earth and air, following their elders into either fire or water. A mild rivalry between the two camps had appeared immediately.

"Do you think the open field will have an impact on the result?" Coolant mused.

"You mean, as opposed to fighting in the Dungeon tunnels?" Propellant queried, her earlier ire vanished as if it had never been.

"Right. I've been thinking about the impact of the more open space on our respective element's spell selection."

"Any particular construct you have in mind? I can't imagine the bolt spell will be much less applicable in the open than it is in a tunnel..."

"I think it will be more useful due to the increased range. But no I was thinking of the barrier spells."

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Propellants eyes lit up.

"Do you mean, using them in an offensive capacity?"

"Quite."

"Ho! Ho! That does sound interesting! Have you calculated the mana expenditure against the expected damage inflicted?"

"The numbers appear to be very promising."

"Surely the fire barrier outperforms water in this capacity."

"It does enjoy a slight edge..."

"Ha! Do you think we'll be able to work it into our tactics before the battle starts?"

"Depends on how long we have after the imposed rest period ends and the call to deploy comes from the scouts."

"Hmm. It's going to be tight."

The two Mage Ants fell into contemplative silence as they pondered on the possible timelines they might be confronted with in testing and utilising this possible new tactic.

"You know," Propellant spoke slowly, her mind still occupied with the problem of timing, "after this battle is done, we, Mage-Ants, will be hailed as the heroes of the colony."

"Naturally," Coolant said absently. "We should already be seen as such, really. The battle will merely establish in the other's minds what we already know."

"Our resource allocation should double at least."

"Triple, I should think."

"What we could do with triple the resources..."

In the minds of both members of the twenty, a glorious future began to unfold. The colony would be reborn. At the pinnacle of the new structure would be the Mage-Ant! Given priority for cores, Biomass and the best assignments, the Mage caste would lead the colony into the future, every other caste subsumed into serving their more capable siblings.

After all, isn't the Eldest primarily a Mage-ant?!

The two Mages continued to imagine the incredible future that awaited them, neither one considering for a moment that they might lose the fight.