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Chapter 471: The first fight

The combat grounds had been used by the Cult of the Worm to conduct field tests and training for prospective candidates for many years. It was a wide, circular field of loose sand and obstructing stones that had been created for this purpose. It wasn't easy to operate this kind of facility under the nose of the Shaper's circle, which is why the cult strictly practiced these sorts of activities in out of the way outposts, away from the cities and the prying eyes of those who would obstruct them. This was, however, the first time the combat grounds would be used for such a brutal and bloody competition as this.

Oridene Gravus shifted in his seat as the murmur and hum of his fellow cult members around him increased in pitch and intensity. Tonight, the first few battles of the contest would take place and there were several bouts that he was looking forward to, in particular the first. Customarily the viewing area would be a place of silent reflection and learning as diligent cult members helped to train their candidates through live battle. On this particular night, things were a little more ... energetic. Even though he was happy to acknowledge the influx of energy and enthusiasm into the Cult over the last decade, Gravus could admit to himself that he wasn't fully comfortable with the rapid pace of change taking place.

But he would endure it, gladly. Creating and guiding the twentieth ancient was a sacred task, bestowed upon them by the Eternal Worm itself, a being so much greater than the entire Golgari empire put together. When the circle was complete and their shackles were broken, they would experience true freedom. For this, any sacrifice was worth it.

A rattling sound reached his ears and he turned his head toward the main gates, sitting forward in anticipation. This promised to be an interesting spectacle. On the far end of the combat grounds, the gate inched upwards until it locked into position with a resounding crash. From the shadowed recesses of the tunnel, a large monster emerged tentatively. The ant had arrived.

Immediately the tone of the watching Shapers became derisive and critical. Gravus didn't even need to hear what they were saying to understand the sentiments that they expressed. Although the ant type monster was amongst the most feared and despised of all the different archetypes, nobody had high hopes for this creature. It was almost ironic. Ants had caused untold amounts of devastation throughout the Dungeon over the centuries, wiping out cities, annihilating eco systems and cleansing vast swathes of territory in breathtakingly short spans of time. The discovery of a nest was enough to put most of the Dungeon's civilised powers on a war footing until complete extermination had been achieved. Yet Gravus couldn't muster any fear of this creature. A lone ant was only fearsome because it signified the presence of a horde of similar creatures nearby. No Dungeon inhabitant throughout all of Pangera would lose to a single ant! Baseline stats were too low, offensive potential was weak, defensive prowess was still below average, well below average for an invertebrate. They came from such a low base and potential evolutions just had such little promise. It was just this creature's poor luck to be reborn as such a weak monster.

To his knowledge, this was the first and only reincarnator to be born into an ant monster, at least that had come to the attention of the Cult. In many ways, it was quite a waste. This Anthony character had an ... interesting attitude. If circumstances had been different, there was a chance that cooperation between them would have been fruitful. Alas, the unfortunate nature of his rebirth made it impossible. Reincarnated monsters were something of a special interest for the cult, as they often provided the greatest insights. A cooperative monster like Sarah was a gold mine of information and research. What was so pitiful about Anthony's case was that there was simply no interest within the cult to investigate the possibilities of an individual ant.

Gravus almost started when someone suddenly sat down heavily beside him, interrupting his musings as he looked down on the unnaturally still insect brooding in the grounds. He was quite irritated to realise it was Granin Lazus.

"Don't you have somewhere to be? Like supporting your candidate alongside your triad?" Gravus groused.

Granin responded with a wry chuckle.

"I don't think too much fussing is going to be necessary for this one, Gravus. Do you?"

Oridene Gravus grunted in response. At least Lazus wasn't a complete fool, despite what his record might suggest. He'd probably seen the writing on the wall the moment the pairings had been released and not bothered wasting any time on the creature.

"I'm glad to see you've held on to a little of your intellect." Gravus harrumphed.

"Oh stow it, you cantankerous goat," Granin replied, "always convinced you're on the right side of everything, aren't you? Not much has changed. If I didn't want to see your face at the end of this, I wouldn't have bothered sitting up here."

Having said his piece, Granin folded both arms across his chest and stared down into the pit with rapt attention as the opposing gate began to rattle open. Somewhat taken aback by his fellow Shaper's words, Gravus took a few seconds to process what he'd heard. Did Granin actually think that the ant could *win*? Had he gone completely soft in the head? Too much time out in the field might have weakened his judgement perhaps? With a contemptuous snort, the older of the two Shapers turned his attention back to the field. He'd ignore this fool's jibes for now, plenty of time to make him eat his words when his charge had been flattened and eaten.

With a resounding crash, the second gate slammed into position and from the shadows a massive creature shuffled forward. When it was fully revealed there were gasps and a wave of excited chattering arose from the spectating cult members. A huge, bulky frame supported on eight thick, powerful legs, the Rhinosergradon was an imposing sight. A large, brutish head that sported three gleaming horns emerged into the light, thick bone plating pushing through the leathery skin provided even more defence atop the rock hard skin that covered the creature.

It was a slow moving boulder of a monster, at least four times the weight of the ant that faced it from across the field. The moment it laid its eyes on its opponent, the hulking brute huffed out a blast of air, lowered its horn and charged! The ground rumbled beneath the beast's feet, even the seat beneath Gravus vibrated with each step, causing an appreciative gleam to light up in his eye. Trying to contain

the smug feeling that arose in his heart, he glanced toward the Shaper sitting next to him. To his surprise, Granin didn't look in the least bit worried. In fact, he looked more calm than before.

"It's even slower than I thought it would be," Granin observed, "this thing is so slow moving, no way you could trust it to hit a deadline."

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Chapter 472: Getting bogged down

Gravus wanted to retort at the idiocy being spilled from the seat next to him but things developed quickly in the combat grounds. The charge of the Rhinosergradon rapidly gained momentum and speed, smashing through the boulders in its way as if they were made of paper. He leaned back with satisfaction at the sight and couldn't help musing out loud.

"An experiment from our brothers and sisters in the north of the empire, this creature represents the distilled wisdom of the Cult in the fields of strength and toughness! Not many will be able to resist its devastating charge."

A cold snort was his only reply as Granin continued to keep his eyes glued to the battle. The ant attempted to retaliate, firing a rapid series of dark purple bolts at the oncoming threat, as well as raising its rear most segment to unleash several blasts of acid. Reincarnators often presented with interesting and unusual builds and Gravus was interested to see what the ant was capable of, but even he was disappointed at the total lack of effect from the strikes. The purple bolt spells struck their target with ease, the Rhinosergradon being as large as it was, but as far as he could see there was no visible effect. Some kind of curse perhaps? The acid was even more ineffectual, sizzling and bubbling away, it wasn't able to penetrate the thick hide of the charging Rhino.

What was that magic? Not being able to identify a particular spell at first glance wasn't unusual, but the complete and utter lack of visual effect was baffling. What was the ant hoping to achieve?! When the Rhinosergradon had reached halfway across the field, the ant still showed no sign of moving from its position. Blast after blast of the purple bolt flew out along with more acid strikes. The target for the acid appeared to have shifted as it began to land lower on the body, striking the legs and shoulders of the beast, but there was still little effect.

Undeterred, the powerful Rhino monster built more speed the further it charged. This was one of the key mutations that had been built into this creature's build. An impressive innovation by the Shapers to say the least. The more the beast charged, the faster it would be able to go, turning itself into an unstoppable hammer of mass and power! Though it appeared to be slow and overburdened by its excessive mass, the opposite was actually true! By standing still, the ant had played directly into the strengths of the opponent. If he'd had the wit to move closer to his larger opponent and attempt to circle, it would have been harder for the beast to build up sufficient speed to achieve an unavoidable charge. By standing in one place, the Rhinosergradon was absolved of needing to turn and bleeding momentum. It appeared that this battle was all but over.

"I hope you guys thought to reinforce the wall before you allowed that thing to come out," Granin observed idly.

Gravus' eyes narrowed. He wasn't sure if that work had been done actually. This could be bad.

"You aren't worried that your charge is going to get splatted all over the wall?" Gravus sneered?

"No. I'm worried that several of my fellow Cult members are going to experience serious injuries."

It seemed as if the cult members felt the same way. Those who were in line with the unstoppable beast charging in their direction were beginning to scramble out of the way and make a run for safer seats. They didn't have long to execute the move, for the final stretch of distance, the Rhinosergradon finally utilised the *Dash Skill* and transformed itself into a blurry streak that shot forward as if it were launched using air magic. At the same time it lowered its horn and stabbed forward, sending a wide blast of light streaking toward the hapless looking ant.

BOOM!

The massive Rhino slammed into the wall like a gigantic, speeding boulder, causing the entire outpost to shake. The Shapers in the viewing areas not sitting down were bowled over and even those sitting were rocked back and forth, having to take a moment to recollect their balance. Dust and debris of what was left of the wall trailed through the air before slamming into the ground. Many onlookers were forced to employ their own magical arts to deflect the projectiles. Fortunately it appeared nobody was hurt.

"It would appear that sufficient power and a well-crafted build are more than enough to overcome an insect with enhanced mental stats. Hardly a surprise." The leading Shaper sneered.

Granin shook his head.

"This is the problem with you people. So sure of what you think you know, you can't change your minds when reality is smacking you in the face."

"What are you talking about? Are we even watching the same contest?"

"Apparently not. Look down there, moron."

One granite covered arm rose to point and Gravus turned his head almost despite himself. The dust had begun to clear and the scene that was revealed was comical. The Rhinosergradon had executed its charge splendidly, achieving an almost irresistible amount of force at the apex of its charge, certainly for creatures of the same tier. Anything struck by that blow would be annihilated. Yet that impressive attack had left it lodged firmly in the reinforced stone wall. Only the back half of its body remained visible, the rear four legs scabbling at the loose sand of the combat grounds to try extricate itself from its predicament.

Where the ant had stood was now revealed to be a hole in the ground from which two antennae had begun to emerge. The two sensory organs twitched this way and that before the mandibles and head of the ant cleared the top of the tunnel, followed by the rest of the creature. Seeing its opponent wedged into the debris, even the ant appeared to be stunned for a moment before it happily began to renew its barrage of purple bolt spells, once again to no apparent effect.

"One dimensional monsters are wonderful thought experiments," derision and contempt dripped from Granin's voice as he delighted in the sight of his candidate tormenting his opponent. "Achieving theoretical maximums of force and toughness, it's great fun. Everyone loves to see the big numbers. But they *are never* and *have never* been viable monsters outside of a vacuum. I almost spat out my drink when I heard a triad had spent four years grooming this Rhinosergradon. A colossal waste of time and

effort. Being too rigid is a tremendous weakness, the cult has been aware of that for almost a thousand years."

The criticism stung Gravus, just as much as his expected winner's feeble attempts to extricate itself. He had to retort.

"It's not over yet. The Rhinosergradon has the strongest defence of all the candidates in this experiment. An ant has only a feeble offensive base. Despite the fact that it's buried in the wall, the Rhino has yet to take any damage at all. It's too soon to declare yourself the winner!"

Granin just shook his head as he watched Anthony cast Gravity bolt after Gravity bolt into his hapless opponent. Considering the starting mass of that fat Rhino, after being hit with twenty condensed gravity bolts, how heavy had it become?

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Chapter 473: Tiers of magic, delicious meals

Anthony had been prepared to share a few things with Granin, even though he'd remained guarded throughout their conversation. The revelation of Gravity magic had been the most startling to him, something that had surprised Anthony quite a bit. When Granin had pressed him, he'd been happy to admit that this was a force that was quite commonly understood in his own world. It was quite odd that in the Cult of the Worm's long history of cultivating relationships with reincarnators, records of this branch of magic hadn't become widely known. The ant had theorised that because deeper understanding of just how important and powerful Gravity could be was relatively recent on his past world, and that the time relationship between the two places was quite 'wibbly-wobbly', it's possible that most of the individuals they'd interacted with in the past simply hadn't known about it.

Regardless, the conversation had developed and Anthony complained that he was yet to gain access to the Gravity Magic Affinity Skill, which had given Granin an opportunity to share his knowledge. Magic, he'd explained, was divided into distinct tiers. Gaining access to the next tier required either a certain mastery of the previous one, or a powerful affinity with a particular type of mana. A monster who chose many death related mutations would be far more likely to gain access to that particular type of mana earlier, even if they didn't have a Death Mana gland. In terms of what magic fell into which tiers, that was sometimes a little fuzzy.

The first and most accessible were the base elements. Water, Earth, Fire and Air. Almost everyone was required to start with one or more of these. Some Shapers chose to spend a significant amount of time mastering two, three or even all four of these base elements whereas others tried to level up just one of them as quickly as they could in order to move onto more powerful forms of magic. There were positives and negatives to both schools of thought, but Granin tended to think that having a strong foundation in the elements was useful, especially in the field. The spells were easier, the mana more forgiving to work with. When you were exhausted, stressed and mentally drained, it was far easier to draw on Air or Fire mana than it was to try and manipulate something like Lightning, Shadow or Poison.

From those base four elements, there were lots of places to go. At certain levels of mastery the base elements could be fused to create more powerful varieties, or ranked up to give access to specialised or powerful forms. Water could be ranked up to unlock ice, fire could be ranked up to unlock blue flame. Earth and fire could be fused at rank three mastery to form Lava Mana Affinity. Similarly Ice and Water

could unlock Fog Mana affinity. Or those options could be discarded and the practitioner could perhaps unlock the rare elements: Lightning, Wood, Metal and Decay.

Above that the more abstract powers began to appear. Healing, Mind, Life, Death, Doom, Fate, Space, Heart, Poison and many others. There was a great deal of disagreement about exactly which affinity belonged in which tier, because each individual was given different options by the System depending on a myriad of factors that nobody had been able to accurately map. Anthony himself was a perfect example, skipping ahead to Mind and Healing mana without having to progress through the rare elements. Granin had surmised that this was due to his Gravity Mana gland and regular use of that mana type, combined with his generally weak base element Skills causing the System to shunt him higher up.

Exactly where Gravity mana fell into the tier ratings, Granin couldn't be certain. From what he'd been able to understand from the ants somewhat rambling explanations, it was probably on par with Space, or even above it. Granin had cautioned him not to be too flagrant with the more powerful aspects of this mana type. If he were to pull off something too crazy then he'd be set upon by the Cult who would be desperate to unlock the secrets of this new magic. At that point, he would never have any semblance of freedom.

Still, judging by the reaction around him, quite a few were growing curious about this strange purple mana that the giant ant seemed to be happily pelting at his opponent. The more the Rhinosergardron was hit, the slower and more lethargic it became. It's originally vigorous and powerful movements had become increasingly sluggish and pained, as if the creature had the weight of a mountain on its back. Which it did, in some ways.

"What is going on?" Gravus couldn't help but ask out loud.

Such a physically powerful monster was acting as if it had been drained of all its strength, no longer able to even support its own body! Had the ant drained its physical stats in some way? Or inflicted some sort of strength reducing curse? Such a thing usually didn't stack well, each successive cast achieving less than the last, it wasn't capable of achieving this sort of effect!

He ground his teeth in irritation. The more lopsided the battle below became, the more satisfaction radiated from the seat beside him. The blasted fool Granin wasn't even bothering to hide it, openly grinning and even chuckling to himself as his charge fired spell after spell into the now faltering backside of its opponent.

"Such a powerful beast," Granin happily mocked, "so strong! Look! It can almost stand up under its own weight! Oh. No. Never mind, it collapsed back onto the ground. For a moment there I thought the finest minds in the Cult had wrought a true masterpiece. The next ancient was right before my eyes!"

"It's not over yet!" Gravus snapped. "Whatever curses that damned ant has applied will wear off eventually. I don't believe it has a way to break through the Rhinoserrgardron's defence!"

Granin couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Still not giving up? The damned fatty can't even stand! Don't be more stubborn than the stone on your skin, Gravus!"

Indeed, even the ant seemed to think that things were getting pathetic. Before the boggled eyes of the watching shapers, the ant ceased firing its spells and climbed directly up onto the back of the struggling Rhino monster. Goodness knows what the team who'd designed and reared this creature thought, watching a pathetic ant of all things literally walking over their masterpiece and standing on top of it.

What occurred next was even more jarring. The ant turned this way and that, its antennae tipping and tapping rapidly as it clearly tried to find a gap in the tough bone plating that covered the Rhino. When it was unable to find one, the ant almost seemed to slump with weariness before it reared back and bared its mandibles.

CHOMP!

The bite was far more powerful than those observing had expected. The dark energy that manifested bit down hard on the plating, sending chips flying into the air. One bite wasn't nearly enough though and the ant continued to chomp as the creature struggled weakly beneath it.

CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!

The gallery was then treated to the sight of an ant flopping down on its own opponents back to rest and recover its stamina for a full five minutes. At this point Granin was sure he heard the sound of the Rhino's triad passing out from pure rage.

CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!

...

CHOMP!

"Uh. We have a victor! The Rhinosergradron has fallen to the... ant."

Granin frowned. Even the adjudicator was being so unprofessional. Standards in the Cult had fallen badly. Sitting next to him, Gravus ground his teeth audibly as muttered conversations broke out amongst the stands.

Oblivious to it all, Anthony had once again slumped down to rest. After a minute or two he shook of the lethargy and watched by the apoplectic gaze of the Shapers who had sacrificed years to rear the perfect Rhino, he began to eat.

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Chapter 474: Eye of the tiger, mouth of a teamster

Hmmm...

He... hehe....

Heheha.... Hoo...

Ha!... Hahahahaha!

MUAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!

Victory! Sweet, sweet victory has been secured! For the colony! For all of ant kind! I almost felt sorry for that stupid Rhino monster. I rate the monster as little more than a ridiculous concept. It was too slow when it mattered and unable to defend itself in so many situation. Hardly the kind of thing that could be depended on in any sort of situation. After battering it with a hail of condensed gravity bolts, it was unable to muster any sort of resistance at all!

When the monster can't even move, surely they couldn't have believed I wouldn't be able to break through that tough defence eventually? Morons! Pure morons! Now they will be forced to bow before the mighty strength of ant kind! They have no choice but to acknowledge our superiority!

GWEHEHEHEHEHEHE!

[They still think you're useless,] Granin broke into my triumphant internal monologue.

WHAT?!

After the battle I'd eaten my fill of the Rhino and been escorted back to my cell. Fortunately the Shapers weren't cheap enough to rob me and my hard won Biomass was delivered to me along with the core of the slain monster. Granin appeared shortly after, radiating smugness, for a debrief.

[How did you even know what I was thinking?] I demand.

[It's not hard to work it out. You're very prideful of your species and your antennae do this weird twitchy thing when you get overly happy.]

Dangit.

[It's nice to see you in a better mood at any rate,] Granin continued, [you've been a little unsteady for a while now. If you don't mind me saying so.]

[I wonder why that would be?!]

I feel like he has a point. Being captured and thrown into this terrible situation has thrown me off balance. It's been a real struggle to adapt to the rapid change in my circumstances and face being put at the mercy of others for the first time since my rebirth. My stress had been building to dangerous levels. Although it would be weird for a human to say, having the opportunity to battle and triumph has really helped me settle down. I feel like I'm thinking more clearly and I feel much more calm.

I can't hold onto the grudge, that doesn't help me get out of this situation. That's something I need to keep on reminding myself. The time to hold tight to the grudge is after I've made my escape and made contact with the colony...

[See, you're doing it again, the happy antennae wiggling thing.]

[Ah... How curious.]

[Don't waste the core of this beast either. It's a tier six and they made sure to stuff it full at every level. Could even make an interesting pet...]

[Rejected. I already have a meathead power pet. I don't need another.]

[You mean the ape? This creature is much superior to that...]

[Rejected.]

[Fine.]

Granin shakes his head and dismisses the thought with a wave of his hand.

[Have you taken any time to look at your status since the fight?]

[I haven't actually. I know I got a few levels...]

[May as well take a peek, then we can work out what you need to do before the next battle. We should have a few days.]

[Right.]

I quickly brought up my menu and checked out my status.

Name: Anthony

Level: 23 (Rare) (V)

Might: 91

Toughness: 79

Cunning: 64

Will: 45

HP: 158/158

MP: 250/250

Skills:

General:

Expert Excavation (III) Level 7; **Expert Grip (III) Level 2**; Expert Stealth (II) Level 1; **Tunnel Guide (III) Level 2**; Iron Mind (IV) **Level 6**; Expert Stamina (III) **Level 12**; Profound Meditation (III) **Level 16**; Flicker Dash (III) **Level 10**;

Mana:

Mana Moulding (IV) Level 2; Condensed Mana (III) **Level 11**; Finer External Mana Manipulation (III) **Level 15**; Mana Coveter (III) **Level 7**; Expert Water Magic Affinity (III) Level 3; Empowered Mind Magic Affinity (III) **Level 6**; Expanded Mana Sensing (III) **Level 8**; **Enhanced Healing Magic Affinity (III) Level 4**; Advanced Fire Magic Affinity (II) **Level 5**; **Advanced Earth Magic Affinity Level 2**; Air Magic Affinity Level 1;

Pet:

Distant Pet Communication (II) Level 5; Core Crafting (IV) **Level 2**; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 1;

Defensive:

Master Exo-Skeleton Defence (IV) Level 2; Advanced Dodge (II) level 8; Advanced Endure (II) Level 4; Advanced Grace (II) Level 3;

Offensive:

Deadly Acid Shot (III) Level 9; Expert Precise Shooting (III) Level 2; **Omen Chomp (IV) Level 8;**

Mutations:

Senses:

Perimeter Eyes +15, Future Sight Infrared Antennae +15,

Defence

Complete Diamond Carapace +25, Supportive Inner Carapace Plating +15,

Physical

Rapid Absorption Legs +15, Empowered Mandibles +15, Regrowth Regeneration Gland +15, Loquacious Pheromone Gland +15, Vast Hungering Stomach + 25; Blink Musculature +15, Transmission Sub-Neural Network +15;

Acid:

Mana Binding Acid +15, Hyper Pressurised Acid Nozzle +10; Potent Acid Concentration Gland +10, Fatiguing Acid Stimulation Gland +10,

Mental:

Adaptable Coordination Cortex +15,

Mana:

Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +15, Collective Will Vestibule +5;

Species: Juvenile Colony Paragon (Formica Sapiens)

Skill points: 8

Biomass: 327

A lot of progress has been made! Having my sub-brains grinding away at skills has been worth it. My mana manipulation has reached rank four, which is nice. External Mana Manipulation is climbing particularly well, this can only be a good thing. The elemental magics are chugging along. I haven't started on air yet, but I should get there at some point. After grinding for food and chomping on most of the Rhino I've piled up a good bank of Biomass as well, all of which needs spending!

A heck of a long way to go for my next evolution. Level eighty seems forever away. I doubt I'll manage to get to it during this darned competition at any rate.

I'm not willing to reveal too much information to Granin, but I feel as though the rock man has earned at least some level of trust from me. Certainly, there is a lot that I can learn from him. Whereas the Sophos were willing to share with me their secrets of Core Shaping and pet rearing, they were a little more close

mouthed on general System knowledge. I was able to learn some stuff from Beyn, but his knowledge is more specialised for helping humans. *These* guys, the cultists, have an incredibly in depth knowledge of the System from the monster perspective. I'm not likely to find another opportunity like this for a long time!

After I share some of my information with Granin he pauses to think for a few minutes before confirming something with me.

"So you have four brains inside that shell of yours?"

"Yep."

"And a coordination cortex?"

"Sure do."

"... why?"

Isn't it obvious?

"So I can think about multiple things at once? I can cast multiple spells at the same time, maintain multiple mana constructs at once. It seemed like an inevitable choice if I wanted to use magic in fights."

"... In a way, you aren't wrong. There is a lot of value for a monster to have multiple minds. The reason we don't see it often in monsters that occur in the Dungeon, or even those that we raise in the Cult, is that it takes a tremendous amount of evolutionary energy to develop mental stats, brain matter being as complex as it is. By investing so much into your brains, you've sacrificed a lot in other areas."

"I mean, yes. I did go very much in a magic focused direction to begin with."

"Right, but what's happened is that your other stats have lagged behind where they would need to be in order to be competitive at your tier of evolution. I also doubt that your mutations focus in one direction, but rather have all sorts of effects? Right?"

"Maybe."

"Right. On the multiple brains, did you ever consider how the surface races raised powerful mages seeing as we can't develop new brains?"

...

"You know what, I never considered it."

"No reason why you should, I suppose. For those of us with Magic related classes, we gain mental stats with every level up, which can lead to some big numbers, but even so we can't think of multiple things at once. If you level up external mana manipulation and mind magic far enough, you'll be able to use external mind constructs. Essentially they're constructs made from mind magic that simulate a brain. They still rely on the thinking power of the brain which cast it, but it allows a Shaper to think about multiple things at once."

"So wait a moment. If I have four brains, and each of them is able to create these simulated brains..."

"With high level skills, you could have each brain running three constructs, for a total of twelve."

Holy moly!

"Don't get too excited," Granin warned, "right now your brains are more than likely too weak to make effective use of the technique. A small amount of mental power divided into three just means you'll have three useless mind constructs. Having powerful minds that utilise this technique isn't incredibly more efficient than simply creating more brains, but it *is* better by a decent percentage. You'll want to develop in this direction in the future, so you'll have more evolutionary energy left over to supplement your other stats."

"I thought you'd want me to pour it all into mental stats."

"That would be better" Granin nodded, "but you aren't an unthinking monster I get to shape. You have your own mind and you can do what you want."

"*I knew* we were friends, Granin!"

"I hate you, deeply."

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Chapter 475: The Regimen

[Still, one advantage you have over monsters of your tier is that you have a fairly capable basis for multiple thought threads, which is the optimal way to grind your mental Skills.]

[That's what I've been doing. At least lately. The idea was to advance my magic as fast as possible to try and unlock the Gravity Magic Affinity. I have a feeling that once I get it, it'll be strong.]

Granin nods.

[I've no doubt of that. Space magic is one of the most advanced forms of magic known and only old boulders like myself manage to level our Skills to the point we can unlock it. Even then, it levels up extremely slowly. Only the most powerful and gifted of Shapers can do more than create and open gates with it.]

Thinking of an army of ants teleporting around through magical gateways, I mutter: [yeah, well, gates sound pretty good.]

[You aren't wrong. They form a huge part of every Dungeon civilisation. I'd go so far as to say, colonising the Dungeon would have been impossible without it. If your Gravity magic is as fundamental as that, it may be some time before you're able to unlock the affinity.]

[Dammit.]

[Agreed,] Granin sighs, [acquiring that skill would be the easiest and fastest way to power you up. Since you don't have access to it, and we don't know when you will, there's little point in trying to grind for it now. If we throw all our eggs in that basket and the Skill doesn't show up, then you'll end up in a bad way.]

[I don't know about that,] I protest, [it's not as if that last battle was a real struggle. I dealt with that supposedly powerful monster with ease.]

Granin gave me a long steady look at that point. I could almost hear his thoughts turning in his head, I could see how hard he was struggling not to call me an idiot.

[Out with it then,] I sigh.

The Shaper shrugged heavily and sat down before looking me in the eye.

[Look, Anthony. That Rhino was a stupid thought experiment. Had it landed that charge on you, you would have exploded into a thousand tiny pieces in an instant.]

[What about my Diamond Carapace?]

[In an *instant*,] he insists, [your carapace wouldn't count for squat. It was carefully raised over a period of years, fed cores and Biomass, tested in battle after battle. It took the blood, sweat and tears of a team of three Shapers to create that creature and it was a certified killing machine. Luckily for you, it wasn't that smart, and it was inflexible. I don't think the poor creature even considered you would use Earth magic to open a tunnel beneath you whilst casting all those other spells.]

[So you're saying I was lucky.]

[In a way, you were very lucky. The opponent was lacking in intelligence, which is something you have an unfair advantage in, since you're a reincarnator. Most of the monsters that you'll face will be smarter, most of them will be just as clever as the average human.]

[I thought it wasn't popular to invest in mental stats at this tier?]

[That's true, but creating a hulking brute without a brain is just asking for your expensive, labour intensive project to club its own brain out with a rock. Remember, these aren't pets. They are true, wild monsters that have undergone extensive core shaping after spawning.]

He makes a good point. Tiny has been as much a hindrance as he has a help at various points. In some ways it just adds to his loveable charm, but in others it's nearly got us killed. It's all trade-offs.

[So what's the play then? What do you think I need to work on?]

Instead of answering directly, the Shaper asks me another question.

[What are your basic elemental skills like?]

[You mean, fire, water, earth and air? I mean. I have them. None of them are past rank three though.]

[Oh? That's better than I thought. If you can get all of them to rank three and fuse them then you'll have a bit more firepower in your corner.]

[To rank three? Is that all? I thought fusions would be better the higher rank the Skills were. Shouldn't I try and hold on for rank four at least?]

Granin hesitates.

[Yes. Technically, yes. The rank four fusion is much stronger than the third rank one. The fifth is even better than that. I'm not sure that anyone has done rank six. Certainly I've no idea what that fusion results in. You'd have to level up the four skills one hundred and fifty five times each, which would take a heck of a long time.]

[But it would be worth it in the long run...]

[Surviving in the short term has to trump planning for the long term at some point...]

He has a point there. But nobody got anywhere without taking risks! I have a feeling like if I compromise too much then my path to power in the future is going to get cut short. Compromise now, compromise in the future, when will it end? I need to push hard, right now. Also, I have an advantage that Granin doesn't know about. The Gravity Bomb. I know it's a risk, but if I get deep enough into this tournament, hopefully the Cult won't be so prepared to sacrifice me to learn about my magic and I can snag a free win by blasting some poor monster into a compressed ball of their former selves.

[You've got to go big or go home, Granin! We're shooting for a more powerful fusion! Rank five! Hit me up top!]

I raise a foreleg for the inevitable five but to my mounting shock it appears as if Granin fully intends to leave me hanging. Perhaps he's able to sense my mounting despair over the mental link because he speaks up after a moment.

[I have no idea why you're raising your leg up in the air. I need to hit you where? And by the way, you do realise that in this case 'going home' means being murdered and then eaten?]

[It's a 'high five', you need to... never mind. Yes, I understand that I'm taking a significant risk. I just feel like if I can get as much strength as possible from the base elements, then I won't need anything else to push me through until I can finally get my Gravity Affinity.]

Granin thinks about it for a few minutes.

[I take your point. If you can get hold of a more powerful fusion then it may prove to be more efficient going forward. I just hope we can keep you alive to that point.]

[If I don't manage it, it's not as if I'll have to worry about what comes after.]

[True. Just what sort of life did you live on your world?]

[Pretty ordinary I suppose. I mean, I think so? Stabbings are common, or so I believe...]

[You died from stabbing? That sounds rough.]

[What? Nonono. A stabbing is just a hospital visit, no worries there. Got patched up a few times. No, I starved to death.]

[How the hell...]

[Doesn't really matter does it? Bug off, Granin. Time for training!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 476: An unlikely ally

I spent the next two days training my Skills. In order to maximise my training speed, members of Granin's triad came to assist me. Something I'd already noticed is that Skills train much faster in a combat situation. Field practice, so to speak. The System doesn't seem to be too picky about what exactly counts as combat since I can shape the earth beneath Torrina's feet over and over again and hey that counts. I'm not complaining about it, it means my Skills go up faster after all, but I can't help but feel a little put out that there are such obvious loopholes in the mechanics of the System. Surely Gandalf could have thought of some of these exploits.

I've no idea where Granin has got himself off to, but I don't seem him across these two days. Torrina and Corun keep me company instead. The former doesn't say much but her quiet competence and advice with handling magic are well received, the latter doesn't shut up and keeps me informed of all the goings-on back in the combat area. I can feel the battles occurring now and again. Even here in my chamber, over a hundred metres away from that arena the floor shakes and dust shakes loose as the roof and walls rattle from the force of colossal impacts.

It's going down out there in a big way, so I'm told. Every day, multiple battles, occur as these mad Cult members throw their proto-ancients at each other to see which monster comes out alive. After every fight Corun runs into my chamber to rave about the battle, filling me in on all the gossip. I'd prefer it if he stopped telling me about how all the Shapers were reacting to the results. What do I care if some ancient stone person was reduced to tears and movingly eulogised his monster pupil of ten years? I don't! I don't at all! These people are maniacs running a death tournament!

I mean, monsters kill each other all the time, right? We fight and eat each other, it's only natural if you can call anything considering monsters that are born out of pure magical energy to be natural. But being forced to fight by these Shapers for their reasons is really rubbing me the wrong way. However, I have to admit that making use of their resources and knowledge will help me, and I can take all of this knowledge back to the colony if I ever make it out of here. Just thinking of what the family will be able to do with all of this knowledge is enough to make my mandibles quiver. The teleporting ant empire of doom will become a reality!

After two days of grinding, I manage to get my Earth Mana Affinity to level eight of the second rank and my Fire Mana Affinity to level nine. With a little more time I'll manage to get both of them to rank three, then I plan to switch over and start working on Air Mana. I also manage to gain two levels in Mana Moulding. I love that Skill. Every time it levels up the knowledge of how to handle mana just matures in my mind and I gain a little more speed, a little more finesse and a bit more confidence. With my multiple minds, each sunk into the blessed tranquil sea of meditation acting as a force multiplier, I get faster and faster at weaving my spells.

Toward the end of the second day, Granin finally reappears along with another team of three Shapers, each looking super serious. Torrina had been acting as my 'opponent' for training and she quickly stands to one side as the others enter my chamber through the above door. Very swiftly a mind bridge stretches out toward me and Granin's voice echoes in my mind.

[How goes the training?]

[Good, I suppose. Numbers are going up, still a long way from where we want to be.]

[From where *you* want to be, you mean,] he can't help but throw that in, [I'm pretty sure you'll be able to reach tier three in each of those basic elements before the next bout. But no matter. Get ready to move out, these three are going to be your escorts.]

I'm a little confused.

[Uh... Why? Didn't you just say I'm not fighting now?]

[Not a fight. The matches for the day are done. Tomorrow will mark the end of the first round and you'll be up fairly quickly after that I imagine. No, I've gotten permission for you to meet the other reincarnator that the Cult has taken under its wing.]

[Oh, right! James, I think his name was?]

[Right. He's also not in the tournament, mainly due to some higher-ups pulling some serious strings. Lucky for him really. He's not that strong in a fight.]

Poor guy. At least he's not in this deathmatch tournament, so it's not all bad.

Much the same as when I was brought to meet Sarah, the three escort Shapers bring me out of my cell and through the tunnels before guiding me through the gates and out into the combat area. The space looks a great deal different after two straight days of brutal monster combat. Chunks have been ripped out of the ground, stones are smashed to pieces, the walls are scarred or outright destroyed in a few places. Not to mention the ichor stains on the ground and about the place. Phew, this is grim stuff.

What I don't see is a monster. Where the heck is this James guy? Is he hiding behind a gate like Sarah was? If I wasn't scared of the huge bear of death, I'm not likely to be scared of whatever this 'weak at fighting' guy has become.

After a few more moments of confusion, a mind bridge connects to me from somewhere in the chamber.

[Eyyy. My fellow invertebrate! How's things?]

I still don't see anything. My antennae twitch but I can't sense any heat either. Where the heck is this guy? Is he invisible?

[Uhh. Good! I guess? Not really? Where the heck are you? Hiding? There's no shame in being a monster, man. Come out and own it!]

[Me? Ashamed? Of this glorious form?! Never! I just prefer it down here is all. I think you'll understand when you see me. I'm coming up!]

Below?

Twenty metres away the ground begins to rumble before abruptly bursting upwards to reveal a weird, pointy mass of flesh that bulges outwards to reveal a giant... worm? A body divided into segments, a bright pink colour, a distinct lack of eyes. He looks nothing like the intimidating worms of death but rather a squishy style worm ready for the end of a hook. The only remarkable thing about him is his size, more than twice as long as myself, possibly as much as fourteen metres in length.

[Soo... you're a worm James?]

[Yep!] His voice rings happily in my mind. [Check out this glorious body. Have you ever seen anything like it? I mean, technically I'm not a worm, I'm a Mature Elemental Worm of Earth.]

[Earthworm James?]

[Well, I mean, most of my friends call me Jim.]

[Nice to meet you, Jim. I'm Anthony. As you can see, I'm a big 'ol ant.]

[I do see! Spines are overrated!]

[Agreed!]

Finally, someone who speaks a little *sense*.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 477: Another Perspective

[Yeah, these Cultists are crazy. I shouldn't have to say that should I? They're *Cultists*. Just because they worship the biggest and baddest worm in this world doesn't mean they get to skate on that.]

[You make a solid point. Sarah didn't seem to share your point of view though. She seemed a little more forgiving of them.]

The massive worm gives a little wriggle that I can only interpret as dismissal.

[Sarah's just too *nice*. They took her in when she was desperate, gave her rest and someone to talk to and she was won over inside a year. They basically let her get out of the monster life, go back to being civilised. I can't blame her too much.]

[What about you? You've been here for a few years, so I hear. Gone native? Out of the monster game?]

[Me? Hell no! This incredible specimen of a Megadrile is still in the game! I'm just taking a rest and grinding my Skills. I had it rough out there, man. You think you had it tough as an ant? Try being a worm! How am I supposed to fight?]

The man has a point. Actually, the former-man-now-worm has a point. How exactly *was* he meant to fight?

[So how did you fight?]

[I didn't! I hid underground and snuck up to steal scraps of Biomass like the gorgeous detritovore that I am.]

[Not too dissimilar from my own early strategy to be honest. How long did you have to keep that up?]

[About a year.]

[A YEAR?!]

[Took a long time! Food was hard to come by, I spent most of my time starving, buried under the ground in the dark. The only way I could tell when monsters were near was through the tremors they sent through the ground.]

[That sounds rough. How the hell did you even get to this point?]

This is compelling stuff. I really didn't think that I'd ever run into someone that had a harder start than I did. It seems impossible that someone would be able to go from a blind, almost completely harmless worm to evolving at least three times by the look of him.

[Once I'd gotten up a few mutations I started to gain confidence. Defence was a little better, sneaking skills levelled up a bit and I was able to inject a poison with a bite.]

[You have a mouth?]

[Of course I have a mouth! You think worms can't eat?]

[You're right. Stupid question. Go on.]

[So I was able to start doing a little hunting. Small creatures here and there. Took another year before I was able to evolve.]

[Wait,] I broke in, [you didn't form your core first?]

The giant worm in front of me twists angrily.

[How the hell was I supposed to know that core first is better!? I spent *two years* getting to level five! You think I had the patience to wait before finally getting some safety!?!]

[You make a good point, again. I apologise, Elemental Worm of Earth Jim. Do go on.]

Worms can't shrug, the lack of shoulders makes it difficult, but somehow Jim manages to convey the general sense of one.

[Not much more to it. Kept slithering, kept grinding. Got my core, evolved a few more times, snuck my way down here and got picked up by the Worm Cult. They like having me around, being a worm helps with that I suppose. Wouldn't mind meeting the big fella one day. Yarrum? Would love to know what sort of species he is? Wonder if he'd be willing to accept a worm bro. Worm son? Mini-me? I'll work it out.]

This guy seems to have bottomless confidence in his way of the worm. It's kind of inspiring. This is someone who has stuck fast to the path of loving the skin he's in, just as I have. I need to stick to my guns, not that there was much chance of me doing any different! My ant soul burns bright, too bright! James and his worm obsession have nothing on my love of ants. I *literally* died for ants, dammit!

[So you plan to just keep grinding here before leaving? Do you think they'll let you leave?]

[The Shapers? Oh yeah. They might be nuts, but they're usually on the level. Well, except lately. This whole death tournament thing? What the hell is this? Madness! They've lost what little they had left of their minds. Nuts, I'm telling you, nuts.]

[So you still think they'll let you go?]

James spoke slowly, as if he were explaining something to someone very young. Or very dim.

[Anthony. I'm a worm. I literally eat rocks and dirt. At this point of my evolution, I think I can melt down metals and eat that as well. How would they keep me here?]

I think he's being a little naïve. These Shapers have a whole lot of tricks up their sleeves, even though they don't wear shirts. The moment he tries to wriggle out of their sight, I bet they knock him senseless with mind magic and drag him back up. Heck, maybe Jim knows that and he's working on his mental defence Skills. It's not really my business I suppose. Just like with Sarah, other than being formerly human, what do we have in common? James is living his best worm life and I have a new family, one that actually loves me.

God damn that stung me in the thorax. Something I ate?

[Well, judging the by shifting feet of my escort over here James -]

[Please, Anthony. Call me Jim.]

[Alright, Jim. I think they're going to drag me back to my cell where I'll resume grinding away at my Skills in the hope that I won't die. Any advice before I go?]

[Yeah, I think you're right. Their faces don't change much but you can tell when they get fidgety.] Jim sounds a bit depressed as he confirms my suspicion. [Look, just try to cover your bases, alright? From what I know, the members of this Cult have been trying just about everything to create a new ancient. Which means that there's all types of crazy monsters in this place. Just be aware that they can come at you from weird angles. You're still young on Pangera, you haven't seen how crazy stuff can get. So just, be careful.]

[That's... given me something to think about. Thanks Jim.]

[Anytime.]

The giant worm in front of me coils up like a plump snake and waves a friendly tail at me. I can't help but wave my antennae back and with a happy little wriggle, the worm dives, *literally* dives, into the ground and in a flash, he's gone. He can seriously move through that dirt! He might actually be able to do what he says. If he ever meets up with Yarrum, I hope he doesn't get eaten.

[Alright boys and girls. I'm ready to go back to my cell! And when's dinner around here anyway?]

Another march through the tunnels and back to my cell where Granin is waiting.

[Did you have a good conversation with James?]

[Oh yeah. He thinks you lot are as crazy as I do.]

Even Granin cracks a smile at that.

[I know. He's smart. If you survive the next fight then I'll try and get the three of you together. The least they can do is let you all talk together. That I had to fight so hard to get you to meet James is a disgrace.]

Wait, what?

[They don't want me meeting the other former humans?]

[Hmph. I get the impression they think you're a bad influence.]

[Ah. I definitely am.]

[I know.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 478: Meanwhile, back at the colony

Vibrant bit down hard on her prey and the System notification rang within her head a few moments later. Without pause, she flung the Biomass behind her and pressed forward whilst a silent throng of furious monsters swarmed in her wake. Her group was all around her, she could feel them now, ever since her latest evolution, sharing her strength. She'd become something between a Soldier and a General now, empowering those members of the colony who were willing to join her group. Not only their speed was enhanced, but also their Skills, an increase to movement and bite-related abilities that turned them into Dashing, Dodging and Chomping machines with boundless energy. Vibrant pushed hard and they pushed hard alongside her. Always the vanguard. No retreat.

The Eldest had called them, and the family had answered. In all directions, the colony had exploded outwards in aggressive expansion. Thousands of ants filled the tunnel, ripping and tearing everything in sight and dragging it back to Queens to fuel future expansion. The academy had graduated many new siblings for Vibrant and her fellow council members and all were hungry to work for the family. The colony was exploding with energy right now and the catalyst had been the arrival of the guardian.

"Vibrant!"

"Who's that?"

The pheromones were thick in the air as ants battled and communicated with each other, trying to coordinate, calling for assistance, it was hard for Vibrant to make out the scent of who was trying to contact her. Frustrated, she backed out of the fight and allowed others to climb over her to reach the front.

"Over here!"

The tingle in her antennae told her what she needed to know and she turned to her left to find Victor waving in her direction. At first, Vibrant didn't recognise her sister, there had been quite a change.

"You've evolved?"

A nod.

"Just yesterday."

"Nice. We need more Tier fours in the deep."

"That is why I have come. The Soldiers have already evolved, and we are pushing hard to evolve as many support roles as we can, but it's going to take more time."

"We can try and feed more experience to the healers, in particular," Vibrant proposed, "we need them more than anything else right now. They're keeping our momentum up."

Victor considered for a moment before she agreed.

"You're right. I'll tell the scouts to get the word out. That's not why I'm here though. The guardian found something and we need you to take a look."

"Where?"

Vibrant wasted no time and asked where she needed to go. Not a single member of the colony was willing to wait for even a second whilst the Eldest languished in need of help.

"Follow me."

As Vibrant followed closely behind the newly evolved General a hundred other ants peeled off the fight to follow in her footsteps, quickly replaced by fresh soldiers who had been hovering behind the front lines. Off they raced, through the dark and cold of the second strata. All around them the air was thick with the scent of pheromone trails. The colony was battling on many concurrent fronts, in tunnels, in various expanse' and every battle was being fought with overwhelming numbers.

The colony had quickly realised that teams of ten members weren't going to be enough in the Second Strata, tier three and intelligent they may be, but the danger in this world of shadow warranted greater security. After all, wasn't it the Eldest who had taught them that every death of a colony member was a waste? A waste of potential, a waste of labour, a waste of resources! It couldn't be borne! As new soldiers, scouts, generals and healers had poured out of the academy the number of ants in each conflict swelled instantly. With hundreds of ants working together they'd swept everything before them.

It didn't take long for them to arrive. Vibrant started when she noticed the huge, menacing form of the Eldest's guardian looming in the tunnel. Powerful, writhing tentacles filled the space around the gaping mouth filled with razor teeth. It would be intimidating to any creature not of the colony, it certainly wasn't going to cause any fear in Vibrant.

"Crisis! How've you been? I haven't seen you for a few days!"

The two monsters were much larger than they'd been when they'd first met but their friendship remained strong. Neither could suppress a burst of happiness at seeing the other, Vibrant bounced up to her friend full of energy and Crisis's tentacles wriggled with joy for a moment before they returned to their aggravated lashing at the air.

A nearby mage ant struggled hard for a minute before connecting the two of them with a mind bridge.

[I keep forgetting you can't talk ant. What have you found, Crisis?] Vibrant quickly asked.

[This is the place where Master vanished, I'm sure of it. At the end of the tunnel.] She used a tentacle to indicate the solid wall in front of them. [I couldn't get close enough to see what happened, but this place is a dead-end and when I followed after they were gone.]

[Great! We're finally getting somewhere!]

[No, we aren't!] That massive mouth snapped at the air in frustration. [I don't see anything! There's no hidden door or tunnel here, I'm sure of it!]

Already a team of ants were combing through every inch of the tunnel with their antennae tapping furiously at every surface. If there was anything to find, they would surely find it.

"Do we have any of the mage caste coming?" Vibrant turned to Victor.

"We do," she nodded, "I think Propellant is coming personally."

[The mages are the way. There's bound to be something here. We'll find it.] Vibrant assured her friend.

[This is taking too long. I need to get to my Master. I feel strange Vibrant, I'm worried.]

Agitated, the guardian of the Eldest, Crinis, become more and more knotted. Her tentacles extended and split before they twisted back on themselves again and again until she'd become little more than a gigantic mass of tentacles. Vibrant could easily sympathise with the sentiment. Ever since Crinis had arrived at the colony and told them the Eldest had been abducted, every member of the colony had felt as if their core had been gripped by an icy pair of mandibles. The already obsessive and workaholic ants had become infused with a desperate frenzy. Every project had been pushed forward and caution had been thrown to the wind.

[Don't worry Crinis. We'll find the Eldest and return them to the family. Anything that tries to stand between us will be annihilated, be it the Dungeon or anything else.]

A cold fire burned in Vibrant's eyes as she spoke. The Eldest had sacrificed all for the colony. The colony was prepared to sacrifice all in turn.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 479: Antdustrial Revolution

The history of enchanted equipment is as long and storied as that of Classes themselves. Though many gloss over or even ignore the manifold achievements of the crafters, it is an undeniable fact that without their expertise in producing powerful weapons and armour, the Sapient races of the surface would have had enjoyed none of the success in delving that they have achieved.

The early records of

System made equipment are completely lost to us, of course, but following the Cataclysm there are many records of scavenging the strange wonders that had been attempted and constructed in that time. A society put itself back together, the uptake of talented individuals into the crafting fields was slow, as the surface needed to be reclaimed and with the recent memory of the disaster fresh in people's minds, martial and magical classes proliferated.

At first, progress was

slow, staves that allowed mages to recharge their mana faster, shields that

were enhanced to improve their durability. Weaving mana into objects is as much an art as it is a science, but slowly the Skills of the artisans rose and so too did the demand for monster cores. A demand that quickly became voracious.

With more hands at the

till and more resources, developments came thick and fast. Agni Ruffterson developed the first reflective shield, the lauded Ms Bromina Steelhand was the first to channel elemental mana through a weapon, building the construct within the weapon itself. It was the great mage artificer Wyrin Lella who discovered the secret of enchantments that could directly increase the Stats of a person, and his research lead directly to the uncovering of Skill enhancing enchantments. These breakthroughs changed the world and now even the meanest mercenary delve will be equipped with such gear, as even a paltry +1 can mean the difference between survival and an ignoble death.

- *Excerpt from 'The historical significance and progression of the Crafting arts' by T.J. Smithinson*

"Why are five of my best smiths passed out in the tunnels?!" Cobalt bellowed.

The artisan in charge of the new forge was just as indignant.

"I told them to wait until the chamber was properly prepared! The air vents aren't in yet and neither are the heat sinks! The second I turned my back they rushed in and started working!"

Cobalt slapped herself on the forehead with an antenna. These morons. She understood why they'd do it, the pressure piling up on the worker caste becoming a mountain that pressed down on their backs. This was the second forge they'd constructed inside the nest in the past week and it wasn't finished yet. Putting in the air vents required specialised enchanted cores that drew the air in so it could expelled on the

surface, and the heat sinks were yet more enchanted cores that sucked the heat and allowed it to be dispersed into specialised cooling channels.

It was all work, work,

work! The demands never stopped coming! More nesting space, more brood chambers! Construction on the new deep nest, a secure location for the three queens and a new launching point for the offensive, just inside the Second Strata, had already begun. Combined with the relentless push for new territory which demanded even more time for the carvers, they were pushed to the breaking point!

And they loved

it! Cobalt and Tungstant had been relentless, chewing through work faster than they chewed through dirt and their fellow caste members had done the same.

The council had to step in and send detachments of soldiers to enforce the mandatory rest periods before the carvers had worked themselves to collapse.

Seeing their fellow caste members being forcibly dragged away, legs kicking at the air had only spurred the remainder of the carvers to work harder! If they were going to be forced to rest then they needed to complete more work in less time!

"Why are five

smiths lying down in the middle of this work avalanche!" The angry rush of pheromones blasted down the tunnel.

"Hey, Tungstant,

what brings you down here?"

"Cobalt! I came

to complete the installation of the cores for the new forge. Did these idiots try and work in there before it was ready?"

Cobalt gave a solemn

nod.

"Damn fools!

Everything we've learned about ant biology tells us how dangerous that is! Not to mention they're losing work time!"

The colony had been

furiously learning all it could in a huge number of fields but one which had been the most impactful had been ant physiology and beyond that, monster physiology. Things that they had known instinctively, preferred temperature, moisture levels, humidity, where now being explored to discover the reasons why. One of their primary discoveries as they'd ventured into the world of forging, is that the damp environment they enjoyed in the nest didn't mesh very well with a blazing hot furnace for shaping metal. For the ants to work with such tools, a specialised environment needed to be constructed. Experimentation had started immediately, the heat sinks and air vents where the early fruits of this labour.

"No help for it.

Come on then, Cobalt. You and I can get this done as fast as possible, we need this forge operational."

The two council

members got right to work. Tungstant had brought the required materials in a carry bag slung over her neck, yet another creation of the carver caste, and the two began installing the precious enchanted arrays with their empowering monster cores in key locations around the forge. After an hour they were finished and stepped back as the enchantments hummed into life. The air immediately began to move within the chamber as the temperature dropped. Everything seemed to be working properly.

They didn't even have

time to congratulate each other before the five smiths barged into the chamber and began to fire up the forges, preparing to heat metal and shape it to suit the colony's needs.

"Work hard to

make up for the wasted time!" Cobalt berated them before the two left the chamber.

"What's next on your agenda?" Cobalt asked as they sped away down the tunnels.

"I'm headed to the new nest to oversee construction there. Things are getting to a critical point and we need to make sure it's secure."

"Isn't the Queen already stationed there?" Cobalt asked, concerned.

"She is,"

Tunstant confirmed, "but the Core Shapers have set up their new workstation down there and are acting as defence whilst the Soldiers are out, From what I hear the entire area is crawling with their Shadow Pets. They perform excellently in the Second Strata I'm told."

"Makes sense I suppose. How about the brood transport tunnel? We don't want to risk moving them through the regular tunnels, surely?"

"Work finished on it yesterday and the scouts have started transporting brood already. Once they've cleared the backlog the tenders should be able to handle the load. Getting Carvers to learn some Earth magic has been a great call."

The two ants quickly reached a branch in the tunnel where they would need to part ways.

"Don't forget to take your mandatory rest periods, Cobalt," Tunstant warned her sister, "think of what the Eldest will do when they get back and finds out you were skiving on taking breaks."

Cobalt shuddered.

"Same goes for

you. Work hard for the colony."

"For the colony."

Chrysalis

Chapter 480: If you got it, spend it

I need to prepare. Granin's gone to check my draw for the next round and time is going to be short. I was up first for the first round, the second is likely to be the same. I've done what training I can to improve my elemental magic and there have been definite gains. The temptation to fuse them is real. I'd have a weapon in my hands that I could employ right away. The fact that the weapon would be so flawed is holding me back. It might be useful to me right now, might even help carry me through this tournament of death. After that? It'd fade in power quickly and become a waste of Skill points. I refuse to allow the effort I've put in go to waste! Instead, I'll use it as the foundation of even greater strength in the future.

All I have to do is survive.

To that end, I need to make use of the resources I have available to me right now, and the resource I have in greater abundance than any other is Biomass! It's itchy time! After the hunting that I did with Tiny and Crinis, the Biomass I secured from the Rhino, as well as the food Granin was able to secure for me here in my cell, I've piled up quite a little money bin of points. As I've already begun, I'm going to push my upgrades to +25 for the maximum effect I can get. With a little bit of time, hopefully, I can become accustomed to my new mutations before the fight begins.

Alright then, let's see what we need to upgrade. At one hundred and fifteen Biomass a pop, upgrading from +20 to +25 is so costly it makes my carapace hurt, but there's nothing for it. I want to get all my mutable organs up to +25 as soon as possible. I still have quite a few at +20 that need to be given that final push. My Carapace plating, my eyes, my antennae, my legs, mandibles ... GAH! So many! It's going to take thousands of Biomass to get all this done... Luckily I'm getting some nice and dense food from this tournament I suppose.

I think the first thing I want to upgrade is my mandibles. My primary physical attack option and certainly a powerful one. I think the best choice will be to continue the emphasis of the mana channelling. The more types of mana that I become able to fuse into my mandibles the more variety I'll be able to introduce to my attacks. Being able to target the enemies weakness will certainly help me. When I eventually fuse the elemental Skills to create some powerful new Skill then I assume it'll propel my bites into a new realm along with the rest of my magic.

Alright. Just to be sure, I'd better take a look at the options.

As usual, taking a glance at the menu immediately creates a list that is far too long to manage. Scrolling through shows me so many options that are tempting, including a few new ones. Cursed mandibles, diamond mandibles(!), Paralyzing mandibles, extending mandibles and so much more. Making my mandibles as shiny as the rest of me is certainly tempting, I take a great deal of pride in my diamond exterior. The extending mandibles are pretty cool. A new part is added to my face that essentially allows the mandibles to extend outward from my head, increasing the range by almost fifty percent. I assume it would do the same for the energy projected by my Skills which would represent a powerful extension in

my range. Alas, I can't allow myself to be distracted by these baubles. I have to knuckle down and get my mana infusion on.

[Do you wish to improve Bright Empowered Mandibles to Mana Flooded Mandibles? This will cost one hundred and fifteen Biomass.]

Put a pin in that one. Although this means I'll become more reliant on my mana infusion for damage as opposed to raw physical power, I think the versatility will make it a worthy trade-off. Onto the next!

I'm anticipating a lot of pain in this tournament, so I suppose I should prioritise working on my defences. I'm not as reliant on the healing gland now that I have healing mana, but it does give me a massive burst of healing without requiring me to form a mana structure in the middle of a fight, which is certainly more convenient. What I'm longing for is the day I can pass off my healing duties to my third pet, but I still haven't come across a creature that is suitable for the role. Hopefully, I'll find one soon. In the meantime, I'll look to upgrade both my Inner-Carapace Plating and my Regeneration gland.

First, time to dive into the Carapace plating. The list is always long, no matter how specific the body part and some of the options are just weird, whereas others are questionable at best. My focus with the plating has been to increase its capacity to absorb damage and tack on a little healing. The idea is to increase the physical defence of my carapace to an almost unbreakable point whilst giving it some in-built healing. The trick here is, do I want more damage absorption or more healing? Hmmm. Last time I went with healing, so this time I think it's time for hardening.

There are a few options that serve my purpose, the first being upgrades to my earlier defensive choice, distributive. These options give the plating more flex, which will help disperse more force and prevent the connected carapace from cracking when struck with direct force. After sorting through the options, I decide to take one of these. The idea behind the carapace plating was a good one. If the carapace is excellent against a blade, then it's weak against a hammer. The plating exists to help shore up that weakness.

I lock that choice in and then move onto the next organ, the regeneration gland.

So far my choices regarding the regeneration gland have been to allow it to regenerate faster and to increase the speed of limb regeneration. Trying to cover up the weakness of my legs wasn't the wrong choice. Although not as thin and spindly compared to the rest of me as normal Earth ants would be, they're still very weak and not nearly covered by the same level of protection as the rest of me. Right now the limb regeneration is pretty darn quick, but not quite enough for me to be able to pop out new legs in the middle of a fight. I have healing magic now to compensate for that, but perhaps it isn't enough...

If I think about it though, my Collective Will Vestibule helps to recharge and refill the gland faster when more ants are around me. This might make me look at faster recharging mutations as a waste, but instead, it makes me think of what Granin spoke to me about. Synergy. If I can stack recharge effects on my healing gland, won't I be able to repeatedly heal myself throughout a single fight, thus transforming myself into some sort of unkillable juggernaut of death? If my defences continue to strengthen and my healing continues to pile up, isn't that a powerful example of synergy right there? I quite like it! Let's go down that direction!

[Do you wish to improve Supportive Healing Inner Carapace Plating to Braced Healing Inner Carapace Plating +25? Do you wish to improve Potent Regeneration Gland +20 to Frequent Potent Regeneration Gland +25? This will cost 230 Biomass.]

All up an expenditure of 345 Biomass. Ouch. That's going to leave me with... fifteen. Yikes. Hopefully, my next opponent is; a: delicious and b: doesn't kill me.

Time to bring on the itch!

I confirm my choices and wait, tense.

SHAGGABAGARNIFLOP!