

Chrysalis 701

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Chapter 701: Final Mutations pt 2

Now, with my privacy secured, it's time to mutate. Time to dive once more into the depths of the menu lists and bring back only the finest mutations. It's time to begin where it all began: my eyeballs. It seems like a lifetime ago that I first mutated my eyes in order to improve my then terrible vision. Even now I'm not satisfied with my eyes, but then my memory of what it was like to view the world as a human is more than a little funny by now. I've been in ant form for months now, and even then I've been in five different ant bodies so far. It's hard for me to remember exactly what my eyesight was like as a hatchling at this point, let alone remembering what it was like in my previous life.

I might have been a human for fifteen years, but recency bias is real!

Alright then, my vision is currently sitting at +20. The Heightened Perimeter Eyes have served me well during the siege. The improved clarity has been a massive boon, helping me make the best of my reflexes by seeing the threats coming at me from all directions. In hindsight, my focus has really been to try and take all the best parts of compound eyes (multi-directional vision) and combine it with the benefits of a more humanish eye setup. The end result is that I still have compound eyes, but each one of the thousands of tiny lenses that make up my eyeballs are almost as good as those within a normal eye. It's pretty crazy to think about. That level of precision and complexity would be completely impossible for a normal creature on Earth, yet here I am on Pangera, an ant with super vision.

And there's no need to stop now! I want sharper eyesight! Better motion tracking! In all directions at the same time! Gweheheh!

The only way to achieve something like that is to just keep piling on the upgrades, one by one. The list of mutations in the menu is as overwhelming as ever and the crazy options overflow. X-ray vision, firing heat blasts from the eyes... why though? TIME VISION? See things ... after... they happened? Isn't that just normal vision? Or this like a peering into the past kind of thing? Seems far less useful than the future vision I get from my antennae... Weird.

I can't even begin to imagine the sort of things that would pop up in here if I cashed in my eye mutations when I evolve. Laser eyes? Curse eyes? Goodness knows. I trawl through the seemingly endless list until I find the sorts of things I'm looking for: upgrades that continue to track in the direction my mutations are already going. Plenty of stuff to expand the range of the vision, another upgrade like the one I chose earlier which creates patches of sharper focus. Eventually I find what I'm looking for in a generic focal enhancement. With this, my eye shall become the Sharpened Perimeter Eyes + 25!

Lock it in, what's next on my list?

The Pheromone Gland! The ol' faithful. Who would have thought that the simple mutation of the language gland would have such far reaching impact? Come to think of it, packing the capacity for language into one mutation is a little generous of the System, isn't it? It's not the sort of thing that Gandalf is known for, the stingy bearded bugger. I wonder if this became some sort of standard mutation for more intelligent bugs down in the depths? It does teach language, not really, it just expands the range of scents the pheromone gland can produce to have sufficient gradient that language

can be expressed. It does increase it a lot though... The pheromone gland went from "danger, food, warm, cold" to "hello guest, please be welcome. Care for some tea?" all in one mutation!

Eh. I'm not going to look a gift mutation in the pheromones... or whatever. What do I want here? To be honest, most of the upgrades here seem like a waste to me. There are options that do all sorts of things in here, turning pheromones into weapons, as a sleep poison, even a choice that helps create sensory illusions in organisms that smell them, basically hallucinogen scent! But since I use them strictly for communication purposes, most of these options are bunk. I'll just take one that makes my pheromones travel further so I can 'yell' harder. My last two mutations were both about making my pheromones more persuasive, which in hindsight is a bit of a waste. I don't need to be persuading the Colony, they don't need any help doing what I ask them.

So my Convincing Pheromone Gland +20 will become the Loud Convincing Pheromone Gland +25. Next!

I've got the three acid glands to deal with and the Gravity mana gland. I'll think I'll do the Gravity gland next. For every single mutation I've selected for my Gravity Mana Gland, I've gone down the same path, which is to expand the capacity. This is for a few reasons, namely that the Gravity Bomb takes a huge chunk of mana to cast and the better I get at condensing mana the more mana I need to fuel the spell. But I want to take something different this time, I want to borrow a leaf from (of all the beings) Tiny. His lightning glands have a great little mutation that condenses the mana inside the gland. It doesn't condense it much compared to doing the work manually, but it gets the process started. It also has the benefit of making every spell I weave with mana straight out of the gland a little bit stronger without me having to do any heavy lifting.

So the Unending Gravity Mana Gland +20 will now become the Compressing Unending Gravity Mana Gland +25

Three upgrades down and a cool three hundred and forty five Biomass gone, just like that. The only body parts I have left are the three new editions to the business district and the neural network, not all of which are sitting at +20 yet. This part is going to be expensive, I hope I have enough to afford it, I really don't want to have to eat anymore right now. Firstly, I'm going to look at the neural network. Who would have thought that starting to mutate my nervous system would have such a beneficial effect in the long run? Combined with my carapace and my antennae, this nervous system has been what kept me alive long enough to reach this level. Having impossibly fast reflexes is always a win, no matter what. The question is, what do I want to mutate into the network now? Trawling through the list, I can see upgrades that will help me make it even faster, but at this point, I'm not sure that's even necessary. I'm already reacting *to the future*, having my nerves send signals .0000001 of a second faster doesn't seem necessary at this point.

So what do I want my nerves to do? They do the job that nerves do extremely well already. They send signals and they do it really, really fast. What else can I possibly want here? I pour through the list, weighing up the options I find until I come across one that I like. This mutation creates nerve bundles at certain points in the body that help manage coordination better. It's like how an octopus has a separate set of nerves for each tentacle, helping to coordinate the movement of each limb so they can work together. If I'm not wrong, this may even synergise with my existing mutations, since the hyper fast signals will be transmitted to these new bundles, who could make my legs move without my main brain even having to be contacted! Perfect!

The Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network +20 shall become the Coordinating Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network + 25! Boom!

Now, it's nozzle time. So far I've upgraded it to increase the range of my acid shot and introduced a scattershot mode. I'm pretty happy with both upgrades as is, to be honest. I don't need to have absurd range with my acid, I'm not trying to turn myself into a sniper or artillery like some of the scouts are, and the scattershot does a good job spreading the acid over an area when I'm shooting at max range. If I upgraded that mutation more, the acid shot would eventually become more like a shotgun, blasting over an area up close, which I don't think I need. So I'm in the unusual place of looking for a new upgrade. What has the menu got for me?!

Lots. It has lots. Just like everything else, there's a ton of options that seem either excessive, weird or rather imaginative. There's the usual list of properties that the nozzle could add to the acid, including elemental damage, somehow. There's actually an ignition option here as well, which I suppose would be handy if I turned my acid flammable. Hang on, I could literally shoot fire out of my backside?! Holy moly! It's a bit more extreme than what I'm looking for though... As usual, I'm more interested in mutations that move along the lines of what the organ was intended to do in the first place. The nozzle makes aiming easier, helps me shoot further and can scatter the acid over an area. Is there something I can purchase that will help aim? I trawl through the list for a while until I come across just what I'm looking for.

It's an odd little mutation that adds a bundle of nerves to the nozzle that assist in making unconscious aiming corrections. Combined with my rapidly climbing accuracy Skill, this mutation could help me hit the target first time every time. Just what the doctor ordered!

So the Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle +20 will become the Guided Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle + 25! That's a mouthful. I guess that's what happens when you mash three different mutations onto one organ.

Now the acid concentration gland! I really like this gland, it was cheap to buy and its sole function is to be the acid gland's hype man. It makes whatever the acid is already doing, do it better, and I added the weakening property to try and drain my enemies during long fights. It's a solid combo and I think I'm going to stick with it by enhancing the weakening property this time around. It's pretty simple to find the mutation I want and with this the Thickened Weakening Acid concentration gland +20 becomes the Thickened Draining Acid concentration gland +25!

Nice.

One to go! Six hundred and ninety Biomass down the drain! Holy smokes this is expensive. Checking my Biomass total, I think I'm just going to have enough to squeak all of the necessary mutations in, although the last one is going to be the priciest. The Fatiguing acid stimulation gland of +10. I need to upgrade this dude three more times! Better get to it. Activating the menu I upgrade the gland to the +15 mark and choose to consolidate the existing mutation. The stimulation gland works to increase the production of acid, which is great, the mutation I chose lets the organ drain stamina in order to replenish the acid faster, which works well with my Vestibule since my stamina is topped up by that organ. For the +20 and +25 upgrades, I kind of want to go in a different direction, see what else the menu has to offer.

There's plenty to choose from, as usual. Most of them are around different ways to increase the regenerative speed of the acid, but others are a little more creative with their interpretation of what 'stimulate' means when it comes to the acid gland. Stimulate it to do what? Make more acid? Thicken the acid? Bring about change in the acid? Add properties to the Acid? It's a complex system I've got going on back there and only the finest produce are allowed to emerge from it, so I need to pick well.

In the end, I select something that works with what I have already. This mutation drains stamina, but rather than increase the production rate of the acid, it thickens it, making it more potent. This obviously synergises on multiple levels with my existing setup. By the time this is done my acid is going to be craaaaazy! At +25, I choose another mutation to enforce my new selection and with that I'm finally done!

The Fatiguing Acid Stimulation Gland +10 has become the Exhausting Thickener Acid Stimulation Gland +25! Whoo!

[Do you wish to confirm these selections? This will cost nine hundred and sixty Biomass.]

Holy McBiomass! That's a lot! Do I have enough? I do! By... two. Phew, that was close! Confirm it all, Gandalf! Let's get his show on the road!

... Any second now.

...

Here it comes...

...

BLATTAPHLATTACAAA! It's so bad! MY NERVES ARE ON FIRE DAMMIT!

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Chapter 702: The core of the matter

When the itch finally fades away I find myself on my back, my legs splayed in all directions and pinned down by the barbed tentacles of Crinis.

[Crisis? What happened?]

[You were flailing too much, Master. I thought it better to hold you down than have you slip out of my containment.]

That would be a disaster that would increase my risk of being seen by at least three hundred percent! That cannot be allowed!

[You did the right thing Crinis. Well done. Any chance you can let me up now?]

[Oh! Yes!]

Somewhat reluctantly, the limbs retract back into the orb of shadow flesh that still conceals me and I roll onto my feet. It was bad this time, real bad. Doing so many high level mutations at the same time? It's always bad, but a few of the organs made it worse. The sub-neural network is brutal every time, the eyes are a particular sore point for me, and doing three separate organs inside the business district just

made that whole scenario back there into a nightmare. It's done now though, Anthony, just forget about it and move onto the next job. Getting close to evolution time!

[Alright then everyone, job's done. Let's get moving to the next one.]

My pets file in behind me as I stumble out of the chamber and back out into the tunnels where I find Granin and the others waiting. My body feels a little awkward, as it always does after a heavy dose of mutation. I think the neural changes are affecting me the most.

[All done?] Granin asks.

[Fully mutated,] I confirm, [time to sort out the core.]

His eyes brighten at the mention of the core.

[I heard you had an interesting specimen you'd reserved around here somewhere. I'd love to take a look at it.]

[As long as you're quick,] I grumble, [I need to absorb that thing and I don't particularly feel like building up the suspense.]

As a group we file along the tunnels, with a few Colony members tagging along to keep track of me for the Council. Seems like they want to know where I'm up to with the process of evolving in real-time. I guess it's a big deal not only for me, but for the family as a whole. Not to worry, Colony! I won't let you down. After a quick journey we arrive in a chamber not far from the Core Shaper's work area and after a quick discussion with a nearby ant we settle in. A few minutes later, Bella and Ellie arrive with a selection of cores, including one enormous sample gripped in Bella's mandibles.

"Here you go eldest! This should be enough to max you out, and here's Garralosh's core, just as you asked!"

"You haven't fiddled with it, have you?" I ask.

The two of them look shocked.

"Of course not! We've studied it extensively, but we followed your instructions and made no alterations to the core itself! Even though we really wanted to!"

"Shut up, Bella!"

"Whoops!"

"As long as you didn't tamper with it, it's fine. Make sure you check with Crinis, she has some new cores for you to play with."

It wouldn't actually matter if they did. As far as absorbing a core goes, you can mess with it as much as you want before absorbing, the energy contained within the core is the same, but for whatever reason I didn't want them playing with Garralosh's core. It just didn't feel right.

"Is this it?" Granin brightens up when he sees the chunky core enter the room. "Can I take a look?"

He waits for me to give him permission before stepping over and gently lifting the core out of Bella's grip. What follows is a brief but vigorous discussion between the three golgari as they take turns analysing the core and giving their thoughts. Corun and Torrina have already had a look at it before, but it's clear how much they value Granin's insight by how attentively they listen when he speaks. The guy is an authority on monsters, after all.

[Are you guys done?] I break in. [I've got evolving to do over here.]

[Oh! Right.] Granin starts at my words then turns and places the core on the ground in front of me before stepping back. [It's not often I get to see the core of a monster one of our sister cults deemed worthy of mentorship. She was a powerful beast, although with a lot of wasted potential. I still find it staggering she was able to move on the surface at this level of strength, the effort involved for the Kaarmodo must have been exhausting.]

[I don't have that much sympathy, to be honest,] I tell him dryly as I look down on all that remains of the reincarnated human. You were one crazy monster, Garralosh, sorry you had to end this way.

I start off with the normal cores, reinforcing my own until I hit the limit. Last time I took in a special core as well as a rare core beyond this point, something I don't care to repeat. Gandalf himself told me that such a thing normally results in death and I'm not one to tempt fate twice.

"Okay then, here we go."

[Compatible Rare core detected. Would you like to reinforce your core, or reconstitute the monster?]

Reinforce me.

Just as every time before, the core begins to dissolve into pure energy that twists through the air and into my body, suffusing the hard gem in the centre of my being and growing it. The pain is terrible as always, the enlarged core pushing up against my insides in ways it was never meant to. Garralosh's core is *huge*, much larger than the rare core I absorbed last time. If I had to hazard a guess, if it were even a tiny bit larger it would no longer qualify as a rare core, instead being pushed to whatever stage came after that.

It takes several minutes for the process to complete and by the end I am feeling as if I had eaten another meal the size of the last one. I feel bloated, stuffed, gassy, and twinges of pain fire through my body every time I try to move. Ugh. I hate this.

Crinis wraps herself around my carapace and pats me on the back with one tentacle, which does help somewhat. Tiny just points and laughs at me. Damn ape, you'll get yours when you evolve again, just you wait.

With my core as large as it's going to get at my current evolution, my max MP now sits at a rather impressive 530. This is a heck of a lot more evolutionary energy than I've ever had to work with before. A nervous energy starts to bubble within as I get ready to take the final step.

[Alright then. Time to evolve.]

Granin smiles wide.

[What?] I ask him.

[Me? I just love this stuff,] he shrugs, [powerful monsters and evolution have literally been my life's work. Give me a break if I get excited.]

[Doesn't hurt that I'm also a candidate for an ancient that you identified either, does it?]

His smile widens.

[I have to admit that it does add a certain zest,] he agrees. [Where are you going to do this? Here?]

[No,] I sigh, [they want me back in the other chamber where monsters won't spawn.]

Which means I have to walk back. Yay.

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Chapter 703: Evolution pt 1

- It doesn't take long to make our way back to the chamber in which I force fed myself in order to afford those mutations. Despite the pain and discomfort, I'm super excited since each step is taking me closer to my next form. A new and more powerful me is on the horizon! Sadly, almost all of that enthusiasm drains out of me when I see what is waiting for me outside the chamber.

Filled with ire, I stalk up towards the morons and start yelling at them.

"Dammit, Beyn! What the heck are you doing here?!"

The priest and his acolytes are gathered at the entrance to the chamber, all dressed in their robes with the antennae sewn to the top with their hands in the air as if summoning the great sky god. At my yell, they all flinch and turn towards me, bowing deeply once they see me coming. It's Beyn who first replies, speaking to me with his human voice, which I obviously can't understand.

"I have no idea what you're saying, man. Give me a minute."

The priest looks frustrated by his inability to communicate via pheromones despite being able to understand them. How would he even 'speak' via scent? What sort of difference can a Class make in a human body? I whip together some mind mana and reach out to the one armed human.

[Well?] I demand.

[O GREAT ONE! WE HAVE HEARD OF YOUR ASCENSION AND HAVE COME TO -]

[Loud! Tone it down you oaf!]

[Ah! I apologise great one... My brothers and sisters have heard word of your ascension to a higher state of being through the Colony. We have no desire to interfere in the process, but merely wish to be present for this holy and sacred occasion.]

Seriously?! He's so sincere too! All of them are! They're staring at me with such light and hope in their eyes!

[Alright, fine! Just stand outside the chamber and try not to be a nuisance. I can't believe you were even allowed this close to the brood.]

The look of joy that breaks over the priest's face is so bright it almost burns away all ten thousand of my retinas. He immediately turns to the others and within seconds, all of them are shouting with joy and openly weeping.

"Quiet, would you!? The brood chambers are right next to this place! If you disturb the young, don't think the brood tenders will go lightly on you."

When they receive my pheromone message the gathered antmancers regain control of themselves and return to a much quieter form of dumb behaviour. How did any of these guys survive the siege? They're clearly damaged. They look so damn happy though, I just don't have the heart to chase them away.

"All right, move aside please. I need to get into the chamber."

As I walk past them, a few reach out to try and lay hands on my carapace, which I wouldn't really mind, but before they can touch me their hands are slapped away by small tentacles that emerge from the dark shadows on my back. Crinis says no, apparently. Inside the chamber, I settle into a comfortable position with the triad of Shapers assembled before me.

[Crisis, Tiny and Invidia. You guys chow down on the left over Biomass whilst I get settled. Once I start evolving, I'll be in your care until I wake up, okay?]

[Yes, Master!]

[*It ssssshall, be sssso.*]

Tiny is already eating...

[Alright kid, you ready?] Granin asks.

[Ready as I'll ever be, I suppose. Why are you guys here anyway? Aren't we basically done with the advice process and such?]

Corun steps forward.

[Yeah, we were just hoping to hear about the options you get in the evolution menu. We, as in, the cult, document these sorts of things and there's precious little information for powerful ant evolutions. Like, almost none.]

[Look, I don't mind *you guys* knowing about some of this stuff, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable with you taking it back to your cult. Come to think of it, will you guys even be welcome back with the Shapers?]

[Unlikely,] Granin shrugs, [bridges are pretty much burnt to the ground at this point. We can keep the info under our hat if that's what you want. There's a good chance we can learn more about your species and the different ways the System views your progress through the options you're given.]

[Alright then, here we go.]

Come on then Gandalf, let's get this show on the road.

[Would you like to use the evolution menu?]

Hit me!

[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.]

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: (All options are formica sapiens)

- Grand Major
- Senior Ant Mage
- Worker Commander
- Ant Archmage (special)
- Colony Guardian (special)
- Hive General (special)
- Elemental Ant (rare)
- Diamond Soldier (rare)
- All-seeing Scout (rare)
- Mature Colony Paragon (rare)]

[Holy moly! That's a lotta options!]

[How many did you get?] Granin asks, his voice intent.

[Three normal, three special and four rare.]

Corun whistles and Torrina looks impressed.

[That's a good number, means the System sees lots of potential paths in you. Only having one option isn't necessarily bad, but it means your avenues to develop have been narrowed to only a single path. Having lots at this stage means there's many directions for you that the System views as viable.]

I check through the list again.

[Looks like the rare options I saw last time aren't popping up again. Nothing about the Nascent Hive Mind or Collective Mage are here. I was kind of expecting they might still show in the list, perhaps in a different form.]

[Generally speaking, when a monster turns its back on a specialised path, the System won't present that option again,] Torrina says as Corun starts scribbling down everything I say into a little notepad. [Rare evolution choices tend to be very specific and often cut off paths when selecting them, so when you didn't take those options, the System disregarded them for you. Generic choices are still likely to show up all the way though. I'm guessing that there are Soldier and Worker type evolutions in the normal choices, right?]

I nod.

[Just so.]

Well, I'm not going to complain if the System no longer wants to turn me into an immobile mind controlling brain.

[Alright then, let's go through these. I'm going to assume you want all the descriptions and everything?]

All three of the golgari nod eagerly.

Sigh.

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Chapter 704: Evolution pt 2

In the interests of expanding the Colony's knowledge of future evolution options, I take the time to explore the normal evolutions I've been offered and let the eager triad document the stat gains, organ benefits and descriptions offered by the System. In truth, the stat gain for even these 'ordinary' evolutions was much higher than I expected and my hopes climbed sky-high for what the more delectable 'rare' choices would have to offer. With the first three options out of the way, I take the time to go through each of the special evolutions carefully. You never know if there might be a diamond in the rough!

[Special Evolution: Ant Archmage. +60 bonus to Cunning, +60 Bonus to Willpower. This evolution provides a significant boost to the power of the mind, along with a Manaweave Core Crystal. This new organ grows around the core and focuses the user's mind on the mana contained within, making it easier to handle and use. A new eye is also granted, the 'mana eye', which allows the Ant Archmage to project mental sensing abilities through the eye to increase their effectiveness.]

This is a special evolution?! Look at these stats! And the bonus organs are nuts? Manaweave Core Crystal? Excuse me?! This seems like a super useful organ for a monster like me who focuses more on traditional spellcasting using mana from the core than most monsters who rely on mana glands.

Granin looks impressed with the offering.

[That's better than I expected, to be honest. If you wanted to focus on a pure spellcasting build, this wouldn't be a bad option at all. Don't underestimate the Mana Eye either. It might not be as expensive as the crystal in terms of evolution energy, but it's no slouch. You can think of it as directly bumping your mana sense up a rank for free, and that's *before* you mutate it.]

[That's... super good. Isn't it?]

[Heck yes it is,] Corun seems excited, [if you took this option you'd almost be as good at spell shaping as Invidia!]

Being as strong as one of my pets, one that I already defeated, doesn't make me all that happy. Still, the gulf between Invidia's and my mastery of magic is vast. Even getting close to his level will be hard. It's tricky to remember sometimes, since he's just a little floating eyeball with tiny wings and arms, but Invidia's mass is like, ninety percent brain.

[The mage ants will want to know about this one for sure,] I muse, [make sure you guys let them know when you complete your report.]

[Of course,] Granin nods.

Onto the next.

[Special Evolution: Colony Guardian. +80 bonus to Might. +80 bonus to Toughness. Focused on physical prowess, the Colony Guardian receives a large bonus to physical stats, furthermore, additional purchase of physical stats are cheaper during this evolution. The carapace of the Colony Guardian will be reforged into Demonic Chitin (warning, this will reset all mutations).]

[There it is,] Granin whistles, [the first reset option.]

I'm a bit confused.

[The raw stats are great, but the bonuses don't seem as good as the first option. Am I missing something?]

[You're probably undervaluing what's being offered quite a bit,] Torrira frowns, thinking. [A reset consumes quite a bit of energy, so getting one for free is always an excellent thing. As to the physical stat cost reduction, this is also an excellent saving. If you poured all your evolutionary energy into physical stats in this evolution, you could gain a truly monstrous boost. It's like getting bonus evolutionary energy from thin air.]

[When you put it like that... I suppose it's better than I thought.]

[Honestly, out of the two options we've seen so far, I think this one is better,] Granin advises, [You would sacrifice your mental stats in this evolution, but you could make yourself a physical powerhouse. Still, as we discussed, I wouldn't recommend a carapace reset this time around.]

[Right.]

... and demonic chitin might sound strong, but it surely isn't as shiny as *living diamond*. Just wait for me, my precious...

[Special Evolution: Hive General. +20 bonus to Cunning, +20 bonus to Will, +40 bonus to Might, +40 bonus to Toughness. A frontline leader, the Hive general benefits from mixed stats and grows in power the more of their kind fight on the battlefield. The Hive Storm Aura gland will provide a scaling bonus to physical prowess, healing and ferocity to all members of the same species within range, the more affected by the aura, the stronger it becomes. In addition, a Collective Tactical Cortex will be added.]

Yeesh. This one sounds strong also...

[This is good stuff,] Granin looks impressed. [No reset, but that scaling aura is *nasty*. I've heard about it popping up a few times in the past when hive insects have spawned, it never ends well. Seeing it at tier six kind of surprises me, but then again not many insect monsters get that high, certainly not communal ones.]

It almost sounds a little insulting when he phrases it like that, but I can't disagree with him. With tens of thousands of members, the Colony will struggle to push many members to tier six anytime soon.

[What the heck does the cortex do?] I ask him, I want to see if he knows before I check with the System.

[From what I understand it's like having a mind map of every member of your species within range. You know where they are and how they're doing, generally speaking. I suppose the idea is that you can instantly respond to changes on the battlefield.]

[Fair enough.]

I double check quickly and the golgari is spot on. Granin really knows his stuff.

[Alright, enough with the appetisers,] the old Shaper rubs his hands together, [time for the main course! Let's take a look at the rare options!]

Just as excited as he is, I fire up the menu for the first of the rare options.

[Rare evolution: Elemental Ant. +80 bonus to Cunning, +80 bonus to Will, +20 bonus to Might, +20 bonus to Toughness. The Elemental Ant is a force of nature, with devastating spells that cover all the basic elements. In pursuit of Elemental perfection, some potential is lost. A mythic Omni-Elemental Mana Flux is formed around the core. The Antennae will be remade into Spectrum Crystal, able to better channel elemental mana and sense its flow. An All-Season Eye is granted. As a price, all non-elemental mana glands will be removed and banned. Non elemental mana based skills will be unavailable in the menu.]

Yikes! This is some heavy stuff! Holy stat gain! I relay the information to Granin and he once again nods appreciatively.

[I'm starting to think the System will reward communal insects who make it to the upper tiers. Spectrum Crystal is not third strata, maybe not even fourth... It's clear that your rank five fusion has opened this option for you. I have to say, it's strong. Very strong.]

[What is this Mana Flux thing?]

[A Mana Flux is like a ... whirlpool. It draws mana in and changes its attribute before storing it in the core. This is the only way I know of that a core can hold attributed mana.]

[And since its omni-element...]

[It'll hold all of the elements. You won't even need a construct to change it,] he confirms.

Wow-ee. This is impressive stuff.

[And the Crystal thing?]

[It's basically a substance that reacts well to elemental mana. If you were to cast spells through your antennae, they'd become more powerful. Mutations would only enhance that further.]

Right.

[The eye?]

[Lets you see elemental fluctuations. It's a specialised version of the mana eye from earlier.]

[All of this seems like good stuff.]

[It is,] he agrees, [that's why the cost is high. You'll cut off a lot of future potential, but the payoff is massive.]

This bears some thinking about...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 705: Evolution pt 3

After discussing the various benefits of the Elemental Ant, which were impressive to say the least, I was ready to move on. As cool as the evolution is, I'm not about to throw away my precious gravity mana. Powerful elemental spells? Sure, that'd be great and all, but would they really match up to what the Gravity Bomb can do? Can they match up to what the gravity bomb will be able to do in the future? The more mental strength I accumulate, the deadlier the gravity bomb will get. If I ever manage to actually snipe the Gravity Mana Affinity skill, then my proficiency will soar!

Besides, trading future growth for strength in the present is just not my style. I'd much rather go the other way!

Moving onto the next option, the Diamond Soldier. I've got a good feeling about this one!

[Rare Evolution: Diamond Soldier. +20 bonus to Cunning, +20 bonus to Will, +100 bonus to Might, +100 bonus to Toughness. The Diamond Soldier is an unbreakable frontline warrior and leader who is capable of turning the tide of battle single handed, without drawing on the support of others of its kind. The carapace and mandibles will be reforged into Fetid Diamond, a material as hard as it is toxic, enemies who draw too close, or suffer a bite, will experience the immensely powerful poison embedded within (warning, this will reset all mutations). In addition, a diamond parasite hive will be added.]

Uh... what? Granin winces.

[I was worried about this happening,] he says.

[What do you mean?]

[This is basically the option you wanted *next* evolution. Despite how it sounds, this is actually better than I thought you might get at this stage. Fetid Diamond is a fourth strata material, it's exceptionally powerful. Hard as nails, much more so than your current exo-skeleton, and even a touch of the stuff is capable of killing the unprepared. Your mandibles would effectively get not only a hardness upgrade, but an exceptionally potent toxin upgrade for free.]

[But what's this about a parasite hive?! I'm not sure how I feel about that!]

Torrina raises her hands in a calming gesture.

[It's a good thing, even if it sounds... a little weird. Basically a small nest of symbiotic parasites would be created within the carapace and they excrete material that hardens and toughens your shell over time. It's a powerful upgrade.]

I'm really not comfortable with voluntarily adding parasites to my carapace.

[If you'd gotten this option next time, you probably would have seen some of the diamond types from the fifth strata, like I told you about. There's still a chance you might see it, but since it came up here...]

[The odds are diminished...]

[Right,] he nods.

Well damn.

[Is Fetid Diamond even shiny?] I ask.

All three of the golgari look away.

[It's more of a dull yellow-green,] Torrina mutters.

REJECTED, DAMMIT.

I really had my hopes up for the Diamond Soldier! The stats are great, the cash-ins are good, just the material is wrong! What a waste! If this costs me my perfect diamond upgrade next time, I'm going to be super annoyed! Annoyed I say! Bah to you, Gandalf! Even if I have to pay for the cash-ins myself, I'm getting me a sweet, fifth strata diamond shell, no matter what!

Next!

[Rare Evolution: All-Seeing Scout. +40 bonus to Cunning, +30 bonus to Will, +80 bonus to Might, +80 bonus to Toughness. To see all and know all is the purpose of the All-Seeing Scout. The eyes are remade into Demonic Lenses (warning, this will reset all mutations). In addition, a Visual Array Matrix will be added to the brain, along with a Spectral Wave Eye. Together, these will eliminate the ability of the All-Seeing Scout to see, instead allowing them to view all things in the mind's eye.]

Wait... So becoming an 'All-Seeing Scout'... makes me blind?!

[Pretty much,] Granin says, [you'll be a bit like Crinis, except with much more potent non-visual 'sight'. The two Demonic Lenses don't act like eyes at all, more like receptors that will coordinate with the Spectral Wave Eye to capture signals that normal eyes just can't see. The Visual Array Matrix is pretty much a must for this sort of build since your normal brain won't be able to interpret the scope of information that you'll be getting.]

Huh. So if I think about this with an Earth analogy, the two demonic lenses are like satellite dishes, the Spectral Eye is like the antenna and the Matrix is like a computer. The eye detects the signals collected by the dishes and the matrix interprets it all. I mean, it sounds handy and all, but I'm not convinced that it's for me.

[This is actually strong,] Corun pipes up, [sensory upgrades are *expensive*, very much so, and a package like this is pretty much top of the line for a monster of your tier. You'd be impossible to sneak up on, and don't underestimate the benefits that these types of senses can have for mages.]

I turn to Granin.

[It's true,] he shrugs, [your sensitivity to mana will go way up. Forget Mana Sense, with this setup you'll be able to *see* mana. Heck, you can actually 'see' a short distance into stone if my memory serves. And this is all *before* mutations. You can upgrade the lenses to be more sensitive, have longer range, collect in a wider area, specialise in a certain type of input, and ditto with the Spectral Eye. A small side benefit,

demonic lenses are, as I said, not eyes. They're hard, much harder than chitin. You'd effectively eliminate the weak point in your carapace with this evolution.]

That *is* an unexpected and potentially juicy side benefit. Initially I was quite disappointed in this evolution, but I've warmed up to it after their analysis. It's true that having better information is a key component of battle. Knowing where your opponent is at all times, finding them before they find you, it's all extremely important, especially for the stealthy, one on one style combat that scouts tend to engage in. If I spent more time roaming out on my own than I did fighting alongside the Colony, this would be a better combat evolution than even the Diamond Soldier in my opinion. I'll have to think about this one carefully if the next evolution disappoints.

I hesitate for a moment.

[I'm not sure how much I'm going to tell you about the next evolution,] I tell the triad, [it has to do with my current species and there's a few things in there I'm not sure I want to share.]

[I wondered why you wouldn't let me take a look at your core,] Granin muses, stroking his chin, [I can make a few guesses, obviously, but I was never confident I was right.]

He turns to look at his triad mates. Torrina gives him a small nod and Corun shrugs, then Granin turns back to me with a smile.

[Our advice will obviously be limited without full information, but you have every right to your secrets. I will just say this, evolutions that go in a sequence, like from minor to major or young to mature, are usually better to be seen through all the way. There's a pattern or a set of benefits that the System intends will be completed over the course of multiple evolutions. If you bail part-way through, you *generally* won't get the full package that the System intended. Sometimes there are perfectly good reasons to go in a different direction though, so don't feel trapped.]

I nod my antennae.

[Thanks, Granin, and you guys also. I appreciate you respecting my boundaries.]

[Hey, this is your decision,] Granin tells me, [we're just here for the ride.]

[More like you want to stuff me on a throne.]

Granin laughs.

[More like I want you to climb onto the throne on your own. But that's still a long, long way off.]

Who knows how far off, I still don't even know how deep the Dungeon *is*. I asked Granin and he told me that he had no idea, apparently nobody did. According to what the Cult of the Worm knew, nobody had ever encountered the Ancients on their own strata, only in higher layers during particularly powerful waves, and of course during the Cataclysm. For all I know there's thirty strata and I won't reach the strength of an ancient until I'm tier fifty!

Bah! No more stalling. I'm nervous for this one. Okay. Here we go.

[Rare Evolution: Mature Colony Paragon. +40 bonus to Cunning, +40 Bonus to Willpower, +90 bonus to Might, +90 bonus to Toughness. The Colony Paragon grows in strength and stature, pioneering in all

areas in which the Colony seeks to excel. A leader, a soldier and a symbol, the Paragon is one with the Colony and the Colony is one with the Paragon. The Collective Will Vestibule (formica sapiens) will be reforged into Soul Crystal (warning, this will reset all mutations). In addition, a Communal Spirit Nave will be attached.]

Uhhh, wot?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 706: Evolution pt 4

First of all, these stats are insane. Look at these numbers! It wasn't as if the Juvenile Colony Paragon had bad bonuses to begin with, but this is taking it to another level. It feels like what Granin told me is true, but more than that, I can almost sense the System, the bearded one, urging me to stick to a path and see the evolutions through. I wonder if there's another Paragon type evolution to follow after this one? If so, how far does it go?

Questions, questions.

Beyond the mandible clacking stat gain, the Vestibule being cashed in is pretty much what I expected. It's the defining piece of the Paragon evolution and a key element of the species that clearly is going to be built on. The main issue I have is that I don't know whether or not 'soul crystal' is any good, or if I should be holding out for better. It certainly sounds good. Souls are powerful... right? I've certainly not heard of anything like it. There's no obvious demonic link to tie this to the third strata, or the fourth to be honest. Perhaps Granin can fill me in... do I ask?

I'm not sure exactly why I'm as hesitant as I am to reveal information about my species to Granin, Torrina and Corun. I trust them, and after everything that's happened, they've thrown their lot in behind me to a degree that only fanatical cultists could probably justify. On the other hand, there are aspects to the Paragon that I'm not totally comfortable with, like the Will of the Colony seeping into me constantly, a process that will probably only get worse with this new 'Spirit Nave', whatever that is.

For now, I won't ask. Perhaps if I get further into the evolution menu, I'll be able to suss something out about the crystal.

Come on then Gandalf, tell me something about this Nave. You were awfully quiet about it in the description!

[The Communal Spirit Nave acts as a channel for the energy of the Vestibule, directing and focusing it, concentrating it into a more dense and powerful energy.]

Huh. Interesting. So it's like an amplifier for the regenerative energy that the Vestibule already provides? That's nice, I can handle that. Nothing too... strange... about it. For a moment there I was worried I'd be hearing the voices of my sibling's spirits as well as their minds, and quite frankly, I think that would just about drive me nuts.

What do you have to say about the Soul Crystal then, oh beardy boy of the bristling brows?

[Soul Crystal: An exceptionally rare material of pure condensed souls. Soul Crystal is the perfect medium through which to move spiritual energy.]

Alright then. I'm going to assume that the energy gathered by the Vestibule counts as 'spiritual' energy, otherwise this upgrade would make little sense. Reading the description, there really doesn't seem to be any tie to the third or fourth strata that I can detect, which makes me wonder if this is actually a fifth strata material? If so, this is an absolute payday.

[All right, I have decided on my evolution,] I announce.

Granin smiles.

[I'm going to assume it's the last one then?] he asks.

I nod.

[Right,] he sighs, [I would love to know more about it, but I completely respect your desire for privacy. I hope you can give us some general information so we know what to expect and can offer suggestions before you go into the final phase of the menu?]

I give the triad the general information, such as the stats, and make a few allusions to the choice buffing certain advantages that I already have.

[Also, I don't want to expose too much here, but I suspect that the reset I've been offered might be from the fifth strata...]

All three of their eyes go wide at that and Granin whistles sharply.

[If that's true, it's a big deal. The types of matter found in the deeper parts of the Dungeon far outstrip anything you find higher up. Each level down is a real qualitative leap. The amount of evolutionary energy packed into that reset alone will make evolution worth the while, besides the rest of it.]

That's good to hear, makes me feel a little more comfortable and secure in my choice.

[Do you have any advice going into the next phase?] I ask.

The three of them confer for a few short minutes before they come back to me.

[Keep in mind the things we talked about and make sure you hit your stat goals. If you make it the values we talked about, you should be able to achieve what you want. The extra stats you get from this evolution help a lot and you can either put in the energy that we planned and push your numbers even higher, or you can spend that energy elsewhere, try and shore up a few weaknesses.]

[Good advice. Alright, I'm going in.]

Having confirmed my species, I'm taken deeper into the menu and the vast playground that is the manual evolution screen enfolds me within its embrace. I have quite a few decisions that need to be made at this point, but before I worry about any of that, I take a moment to admire the vast pool of evolutionary energy I have at my disposal. The core of Garralosh is paying dividends to me right now in the form of this enormous wealth, truly the most I could hope to extract from my current tier. With the bonus on top for max mutations, I have a lot of largesse to unload.

First things first, I need to spend my bonus stat points. I've spent a lot of my Might on increasing my size, getting as many stats as I could at the expense of getting larger. This time I feel comfortable

concentrating more on increasing the density of my musculature. As I spend the free points, I can tell that my size is still going to increase significantly, but the overall strength I can exert skyrockets and my muscles compact and become more dense.

The Toughness I spread around fairly evenly, hardening my body overall and increasing the amount of punishment I can take. The exoskeleton thickens and hardens, the chitin on my legs grows tougher and my internal body grows ever so slightly more durable. Next is time for a big spend. The first thing I do is make all of my brains mutable, all four of them. It takes more energy to do that than I expected, I think just because brain matter and neurons are so much more complex than something like muscle fibre or chitin.

With that job done, I get to the more difficult task of allocating my bonus stats. The aim of the game here isn't to create more sub-brains, absolutely not. After chatting with Granin, I've come to understand that my earlier strategy to increase my brain power isn't the most efficient way, but with further investment, will pay off. I need each of my brains to be capable of weaving and handling mind magic constructs. This is going to take a ton of energy to achieve, even after the generous bonus stats from my evolution.

I get to work, beefing up each of my brains with additional brain matter and pumping up the Will investment in each. I decide not to hold back and push harder in this department, raising my mental power to the point where my suffering when trying to use the omni-elemental construct will be utterly scrubbed from my mind. It's not a sexy spend, but I'm satisfied with it. All in all, it costs me almost half of my available energy to achieve, but with this, my days of magical dominance are just beginning.

With what remains, I need to start shopping for my cash in option. There's so much to choose from here, but after I take the mandibles and carapace off the table, there are only a few main body parts for me to play with. In the end, I decide to focus on my antennae. It might seem like nothing, but my antennae have evolved to become a key component of my build. The future sight alone pulls its weight and is something I will absolutely reinvest in once I can. I'm a bit disappointed to see that the Spectrum crystal is outside of my budget. That would have been a real nice pickup, but sadly, it isn't to be. Instead, I look through the many possible options that are within my limits, and there are many.

Most of the shiny new antennae I have available to me are clearly from the third strata, with titles like 'Infernal Lattice Antennae', or 'Weave of Greed Antennae'. As little as I like the idea of these demonic sounding names being attached to me, I'm sure there's something I can find in here that is going to serve my purpose. I'm pretty open to the benefits I get, I don't mind if it's something that helps my future sight, or something that helps my spellcasting, or even something that just improves my sense of smell to a high degree. There's a heap of options that give weird stuff, like giving my antennae the ability to blast enemies with fire, to turn any fire spell channelled through them into a more powerful infernal flame variant, even one that allows me to sense, of all things, people's inner desires. What the heck do I care about people's inner desires?! I already get the wants of my family seeping into my head through the Vestibule! People outside of the family don't matter to the point I need to peek inside their head!

Bah. There has to be something I can find in here...

Aha! What have we here?

[Twilight Filament. A material with extreme sensitivity to vibrations and reacts to sensory input of all kinds.]

All kinds, eh? Including THE ECHOES OF THE FUTURE? I'm getting the sense (heh) that it will be based on that vague, all-encompassing description. I feel good about it, and I'm happy to dodge some of the more bizarre and evil sounding options. What's up with these demons?! Lock that in.

Huh, what do you know? A little more energy left over after that one, which is a happy surprise. I think I'll make use of that and bulk up my physical stats a little more. This will be the evolution where I finally stamp my authority as a physical and mental powerhouse! Muahahahahaaaa! No longer a weak little hatchling, I'm going to be so mighty!

I eagerly look over my selections. I cannot wait to evolve!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 707: The magnificent beard

I look over my options one last time before I confirm everything. I have to say, the ol' status sheet is looking pretty darn good. A massive boost in stats, my brains becoming mutable, a heck of a lot more physical power and the benefits of expanding my Vestibule setup to become even more of an enduring powerhouse. I can hardly wait! Not to mention the slow process of reforging my body into something better than what I started with is quite exciting. It may only be the antennae and Vestibule so far, but eventually the whole body will be remade! We can make it better! Faster! Stronger! We have the technology!

Satisfied with what I see, I confirm the options and once more feel my consciousness falling into the now-familiar sinkhole of nothingness. The sensation of having your awareness circling the drain filled with a black void is a little disconcerting, I have to say. But as the saying goes, you can adapt to anything, so it's more of a detached fascination that I feel as I fall endlessly until I come into the presence of the great bearded one once more.

[I don't actually have a beard, you know.]

The voice echoes out into my mind, sounding mildly amused.

Look, Gandalf has a beard. Gandalf without a beard just isn't a thing. I don't think my mind could even comprehend it. Like... fire without heat or water without wet. If Gandalf didn't have a beard, would he even be Gandalf? Actually, this is getting deep...

[I am not this Gandalf that you keep calling me. You do realise that, don't you?]

Are you going to tell me your name this time?

[No.]

Gandalf you remain.

[... I suppose that's fair enough. In terms of the level of delusion those in your position usually possess, this is quite minor, all things considered.]

Yeah, that's a question I have actually. How many of my kind are actually kicking around down here?! Since the last time we spoke, I've met three. Three! It's not like I've covered a wide range of territory either, only a tiny sliver of the world! Are you snatching souls from Earth constantly? What's your deal, man?!

[The collection and injection of souls into the world is not something I handle directly. It is mere happenstance that your world aligns closely with this one. When a suitable soul is detected, it is drawn here and reborn into the Dungeon. It is simply a thing that is.]

Huh. You've mentioned this before, but 'suitable' tends to mean 'a bit nuts' from what I understand.

[Most minds are not capable of surviving the transition to a monstrous form. The following challenge of having to endure within the Dungeon breaks the rest.]

It sounds like you have experience with this...

[Oh, yes. It was quite some time before the filter could determine who had the better chance of survival. The first generations of transplanted souls were... disappointing, to say the least.]

Sounds like a relatively mild way of describing people suffering breakdowns and getting eaten in by monsters...

[As I said, it isn't something I control directly, it is merely part of the working.]

Uh-huh. Well thank goodness the Dungeon is filled with crazies, eh? So much more stable and easy to deal with. You weren't lying about Garralosh, by the way, she was completely gone. Fully nuts. To be honest, if it weren't for that, I probably wouldn't have survived fighting her.

[It's true that she had suffered long. She showed much early promise, but her savagery was not tempered by cunning. She grew too fast, and did not hide her strength from those who would do her harm. Any monster that shows such rapid growth is marked with a target, something she failed to grasp until it was far too late.]

Do I have that same target painted on my back now, seeing as I was the one who killed her?

[To some extent, perhaps. You have already drawn to your side those that would see you grow to your full potential.]

Do you mean Granin and the triad? You know about the cult? Or should I say, cults?

[Of course. There is nothing that happens on this world that is outside of my purview should I wish it to be so.]

Then I suppose you would know all about the ancients and the stuff that they have going on?

[Of course. *Everything* the System touches is within my scope,] the voice sounds rather smug at this, [regardless of what they might wish, they are bound by it still.]

You make it sound as if they want to break *out* of the System. Is something like that even possible?

[Should I fill in all the blanks for you? What reason would I have to answer such a question?]

... Because you're super nice?

Well *that* got a laugh out of him.

[You *are* an interesting specimen, I must admit. Your species has become *quite* a force, and you yourself continue to rise from strength to strength. Your current path of evolution has you on a powerful trajectory. I am curious, however, if you are so comfortable tying so much of strength into the survival of your species. Without them, you will only possess a fraction of the strength.]

I mean, it's fine I guess? If they all die, it's not like I'm going to be alive anyway, right?

[...]

...

[Why?]

What do you mean why?! It's obvious I'd die attempting to save them! As if it were even possible that the Queen would be killed before me!

[I find it so curious that someone with your own history of families would be so attached to what could only loosely be described as a family in this world.]

Loosely described? Don't be absurd! We're all related! Heck, most of us are straight-up siblings! And my previous experience might not have been perfect...

[You were abandoned and left to starve to death...]

You bring up the starving thing *every time*. It might not have been perfect, but I couldn't have asked for a better family this time around. I get so much trust and support from them. It would be weird if I didn't try to give it back. Which brings up something else I really wanted to say to you, now that I have the chance.

[Oh? Something you want to say to me?]

Yes. I've been thinking about this for a while, and I thought I should say in case I don't get another chance. I uh, suppose I, uh, just wanted to say thanks... I guess. Thanks for letting me be born here, as an ant. I feel like I fit in here, probably better than I ever did on Earth... and it's been... good. So... thanks.

There's a moment of silence between us.

[You know, I don't think anyone has ever thanked me for being born here, not in the entire history of the System,] the voice muses, [I have to say the experience is a little... odd. You're welcome? Is that what people say at moments like this?]

I suppose so. Just how out of touch with manners are you?

[Very,] the voice chuckles. [Our time has come to an end, I sense. Good luck until I see you again. Try not to die.]

Well, that's cheery Thought to... end.... On.....

The darkness takes me. Once more, I feel my soul return to my body and then all sensation disappears as I begin to change. My last thought is that I hope I'm not asleep for too long...

Chrysalis

Chapter 708: The Sanctum of Sleep

The nameless one idled against the side of a tunnel for a brief moment, checking her surrounds. Activity had been furious within the nest ever since the siege had lifted and opportunities to enter the Dark Passage had been harder to come across. Thankfully, the Eldest blessed her and the tunnel was, for this brief window of time, empty. She leaned against the deep shadows, ingeniously created by a collection of wrinkles that were so unobtrusive it was hard to even notice them. Even if one were to see, would they ever realise that each centimetre, every angle, was a deliberate choice designed specifically to create this convergence of shadows.

As the pressure increased, there was a small 'click', and she felt a brief sensation of falling before she landed on her feet in a tunnel shrouded in complete shadow. The Dark Passage. A feeling of comfort overtook the nameless one as she was embraced by the darkness, this was the place where she felt most at home. There were no scent trails in the Passage, a strange oddity for any place within the nest, but she wasn't surprised. She reached out with an antennae, seeking along the wall until she found what she was after, a groove, dug in a particular way, that told her just what she needed to know. Now confident, she turned and began to move, her antennae always seeking along the tunnel wall as she ran.

Before long, she began to run into others, but they did not greet each other, no scent was exchanged, for such was forbidden. Instead, they ran alongside each other, working together whenever they came across a vile Dungeon spawn infecting the tunnels. The wave had complicated things, but she had learned of the great working undertaken by the mages to peel back the Dungeon veins. It would only be a matter of time before the same method had been applied here, their work was too important to allow for distractions. As they ran, enshrouded in perfect dark, they came across more tunnels, each bringing more of her siblings into this main branch. Every tunnel was lined with the same enchantment, powered by pure back cores filled with Shadow Mana, the light eaters.

They ran together until finally, the tunnel, which had been growing wider as more branches folded into it, came to a dead end. A wall loomed before them, studded with light eaters to the point where it appeared more as a wall of pure shadow rather than stone. Without pause, the nameless one approached and extended her antennae, feeling this, then that, until she found an almost imperceptible indent. The first located, it wasn't long until she identified the second and pushed against both at the same time. She had to concentrate, if the timing was even slightly off...

'Click'.

So soft she nearly couldn't hear it, the mechanical device slotted into place and in a second, the wall that blocked the way was suddenly gone, dropped into the floor below. What lay beyond, was the sacred ground of the order, the Sanctum. Each of her siblings ducked their heads to pay their respects as they crossed the threshold, as she herself did when it came her turn to enter. If anything, the darkness was even more complete in here, not a single speck of light allowed to exist within. There was no scent either, which meant each of the order was required to rely on their other sense, that which marked them apart from the rest of the Colony.

Once inside, she found herself within the antechamber, staffed at all times with several acolytes who stood as still as statues, mimicking the state of torpor as best they could. The nameless one had intelligence to share, so she approached the acolyte of knowledge.

Greetings, Sister. You have wisdom for the Sanctum? The acolyte signed, her antennae performing an intricate dance in the air.

A test? Too obvious, the nameless one had been part of the order since its very foundation.

The Eldest rests, she signed.

Eight hours a day, the acolyte wryly signed back, before both performed the eightfold genuflection.

It was a sacred number, the ideal amount of sleep, as proscribed by the Eldest. It was central to all that the order sought to accomplish.

Yes, Sister, I bring news from the mining shafts.

The acolyte's antennae twitched in surprise.

I thought the shafts were closed for the time being. They weren't planned to be reopened for thirty-one hours.

Trust the Acolyte of knowledge to have such intricate knowledge, it was her role, after all.

Some of the workers have banded together with a team from Vibrant's army. They have arranged to reopen early, though it is only possible if they agree to work double shifts.

This cannot be borne, the acolyte showed dismay, *without rest, the workers will be sloppy, the soldiers, unable to properly perform their duties. All shall suffer from their greed to work! How dare they shun the wisdom of the Eldest in so blatant a manner.* She shook off her irritation. *The Sanctum thanks you for this news, sister. Be welcome, and find rest within.*

Her task complete, the nameless one backed respectfully away from the acolyte of knowledge, who had already turned to the acolyte of strategy, and made her way deeper within the Sanctum. Passing through the antechamber, she found the outer training grounds, where new members for the order endured the harsh training necessary to achieve full membership of the order. At the moment, it appeared as if a fresh induction group was being trained. An acolyte of instruction hung from the ceiling by a single leg, waving her antennae in slow, exaggerated motions, instructing the initiates in the hidden language of the order. Twenty young ants hung from the roof in front of her, each gripping the ceiling with only a single leg. Their weak grip Skill was evident in their wobbling and the nameless one knew from experience it was only a matter of time until one fell to the stone floor below.

In fact, before she passed by one did indeed fall. The crack of chitin on rock was impossibly loud in this silent place and the initiate lay on the floor, leg twitching in pain for only a moment. Several other acolytes of training appeared from the walls to minister to their sister. In short order, the leg was tended to, the initiate righted on her feet, and sent back to the ceiling. Now she would train the next leg until it too was no longer able to bear her weight.

The soldiers were always the first to fall, their increased strength not enough to offset their higher mass.

It was necessary though. A high rank in Grip was the foundation on which the order was built, running claw in claw with Stealth. Observing targets from above, from the side, hiding on pillars and anything else they could hang onto was a necessary part for any member of the order. The nameless one herself had spent an entire week hanging upside down once, even entering torpor whilst hidden on the ceiling.

Moving past the outer training grounds, she reached the main part of the sanctum, the most sacred of all of its many chambers. Inside she found thousands of her siblings and fellow members of the order, each engaged in their most sacred of duties: torpor.

The Eldest had decreed long ago that it was the responsibility of every member of the Colony to ensure that they rested, and from that moment on, the order had begun to take shape. Members of every caste had been welcomed, for theirs was difficult work and every advantage and strength was needed to ensure it was done perfectly. Too many within the Colony spurned the Eldest's wisdom and worked beyond their measure, but they could not escape the order for long.

The grand resting chamber was carved in the shape of a great wheel divided into eight segments. An acolyte of rest stood at silent attention on the outer area of one segment and the nameless one made her way over. Each segment of the chamber was filled with ants at rest, but soon it would be time for one segment to wake up and return to their work, then it would be time for the nameless one to sleep. She was looking forward to it, her sixteen hour shift had been all too brief, but the work had been hard. She was ready.

This nameless one greets you, one of her siblings signed to her.

I see you, she replied, this nameless one is pleased to see you once again.

Was your work fruitful?

I was able to uncover a planned breach.

Excellent! The sleep cells will once again be filled I see.

The two friends chatted for several minutes, as they tended to do whenever they met here at the end of a shift. Before long, the acolyte indicated to them that it was almost time and they readied themselves for rest. Already the deep lethargy of torpor was beginning to take its grip on the nameless one and she waited patiently for the others to wake.

Which gradually they did. Up and down the segment, hundreds of ants began to stir, jolted into wakefulness, they turned and moved to exit the outer ring of the segment and clear space for the incoming shift.

I hope you rested well, nameless ones, the acolyte signed to them as they passed.

Once the last ant had exited the segment, the acolyte turned to them.

Good work, nameless ones. Please take your deserved rest, as the Eldest intended.

They each performed the eightfold genuflection, slower now that they were each on the verge of sleep, before shuffling into the segment, ensuring that all had room. The nameless one felt her consciousness slipping and gladly let it go, surrendering herself to torpor. After all, when she woke there would be so much work to do, and only sixteen hours in which to get it done.

Chrysalis

Chapter 709: The Sanctum of Sleep pt 2

The nameless one came back to herself precisely eight hours later, rested and refreshed. Truly the greatest experience of torpor could only be enjoyed here, on the fulcrum of eight amongst her fellow members of the order. As the rest of those on her shift came awake and began to move off their segment they greeted each other in the hidden language, signing with their antennae and exchanging plans for the day. As they passed the acolyte on the outer edge of the fulcrum they greeted her as she did them, exchanged a few signs with the now ending shift and then they were away, ready to start the shift.

The nameless one was eager to begin. Sixteen hours of solid work lay in front of her and it was imperative that she make a fast start. They never skipped their rest in the order, which meant they had to work harder, faster and more efficient than every other member of the Colony, otherwise how could they hope to police them? So it was that all of the newly awakened broke into a sprint the moment they were clear of the inner chamber, running to their assignments as fast as they could, vanishing into the Dark Passage and emerging from hidden exits all over the nest. The nameless one did not join them immediately. Her rank was such that she needed to make an additional stop before she could begin her work.

She rushed through the sanctum, completely soundless, until she came to a small, elaborately carved chamber in which an acolyte stood completely still. She approached respectfully.

The Eldest rests, she greeted the acolyte of shadows respectfully.

Eight hours a day, came the reply and both genuflected.

What word from the shadows? The nameless one asked. Is there a task?

There is, came the solemn reply. The many-headed beast has stirred against us once more, seeking to escape their responsibilities and our notice.

Again!?

So soon? Are we sure of this intelligence?

The acolyte eyed her reproachfully.

It is not for us to question the shadow, she reprimanded.

The nameless one bowed her head in repentance.

If not for the shadow, we might not have come across this news. The many-headed beast is cunning beyond compare, it has hidden its plans deep. The acolyte waggled her antennae in a slow chuckle. Just not deep enough.

When and where do I strike? The nameless one asked.

Go to the confluence of ways, beneath the croca-star. A waypoint has been established and an acolyte of planning will meet you there. Shadows take you, sister.

I go.

So saying, the nameless one turned and ran. To tackle an enemy on this scale wasn't something that usually came up, but things had been hectic in the Colony lately, and many were beginning to push the bounds... They would learn, of course, that it was impossible to escape from the order. Though they slept the most, there were none who worked harder, of that, she was certain. Once more into the Dark Passage, the hidden way between the tunnels. Long had the carvers and mages in the order laboured on these narrow tunnels. Undetectable, devoid of light and intricate in their design, they were woven throughout the very heart of the Colony and reached nearly every part of it. Even the new satellite nests had the Dark Passage woven into their design, carvers of the order building the tunnels and establishing the secret network right under the noses of their siblings as the nests were established.

Everywhere the Colony went, so too did the order.

She ran through the still darkness, her antennae constantly moving, feeling and sensing for the hidden location markers carved into the walls. It was additionally tense in the Passage during the Wave, she had to constantly be on the lookout for monsters. Although she ran past a few, she knew that these were pets, controlled by the core shapers within the order who had tasked their charges with sweeping the tunnels clean. She gave them their space and continued to run.

After ten minutes of zig-zagging, she arrived at the confluence, a wide meeting point of many tunnels close to the heart of the Nest. Many of her siblings were here when she arrived, moving from tunnel to tunnel, gathering into teams, or meeting with the present acolytes of action to coordinate their strikes. She had other business. She turned her attention and antennae to the roof and began to feel her way amongst the descriptive carvings there. The entire ceiling was an elaborate mural, though she had met none who could claim to know who carved it, which contained many scenes radiating out from the centre of the chamber, each filled with breathtaking beauty. It was the outer edge of the chamber that contained what she sought, and she headed there directly and began moving clockwise around the edge. At various points she came across various monsters defeated by the Eldest emblazoned on a star as if they had become part of a constellation that illuminated the Eldest's strength. Eventually, she found what she was looking for, a croca beast, jaws wide open and a savage gleam in its eye, as if ready to leap off the stone and consume the ants around them.

The croca-star.

She approached the nearby acolyte and greeted her. Genuflections complete, they began to discuss the mission.

The many-headed beast has made plans to skip torpor and gather in one place, which will give us the perfect opportunity to strike, the acolyte told her.

Do we know the meeting place? The nameless one asked.

We do not, though our every effort has gone into discovering just that. From what we have been told, the location has not been shared with any not of the beast.

The beast grows ever more cautious.

Indeed.

Where can I rendezvous? I am eager to begin work.

I will lead you. There are three teams assembled for the task, with two more on the way. Find your place amongst them quickly, we cannot allow this breach to occur.

The nameless one nodded. Once one ant thought they could get away with skipping torpor, the desire seemed to spread like a contagion. Every attempted breach needed to be put down harshly. Only that would be enough to discourage infractions. It wasn't possible to get everyone, the Colony was just too large for that, but they would try, and some days, they got very, very close. She followed the acolyte as they raced down a side tunnel and it wasn't long before they entered one of the small operation chambers that dotted the Dark Passage. Small, compact spaces in which the order could gather to run localised operations, serving as a planning headquarters, gathering place and briefing room, all in one. Inside she found a full team awaiting instructions.

Welcome, nameless one, she was greeted by a general who stood over a map a carver had magically engraved on the floor, please join us.

She signed her greetings and got to work, familiarising herself with the operation further. She quickly learned that timing was of the essence, only an hour remained until the breach was expected to occur, and they still didn't know where. It was possible they could try and nab the targets separately, but that would create a logistical nightmare. And if they weren't careful, word would leak the moment the first target went down, driving the rest into hiding. They would still be caught, but only at a great cost of time and energy. The order *had* to be efficient, otherwise they would be ineffective.

The work quickly drew her in as they discussed theories, options and strategies. Plans were proposed, debated and discarded rapidly as the discussion evolved. In ten minutes, they had a working plan and scattered through the tunnels, ready to return forty minutes later for the final briefing.

To think she had been ready to hunt down a few miners and soldiers in this shift, now she had much bigger fish to fry.

It had been a while since the nameless one had put the Council to sleep.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 710: The sanctum of sleep pt 3

"Ensure you hit your targets, here, here and here. With these junctions secured, the digging teams will be able to move relatively unhindered. That's where the difficulty comes in. You'll need to make sure that the crossroads remains blocked and sweep out spawning monsters at the same time. I know that's going to be hard, but we can't spare the antpower to send another team. The diggers will help you, all you have to do is -"

The nameless one allowed the words to wash over her as she focused her mind. This was a difficult infiltration, but nothing she hadn't done before. She knew from experience however that a lapse in concentration would be fatal, exposing her cover for all to see and forcing her to retreat, her prey alerted to her presence. Not that they didn't already know she was after them, that much was already clear.

Down below was the Dungeon Map, created in the central planning hub of the general caste. She was stuck to the roof, her claws like steel traps that wouldn't allow even a speck of dust to leak from her iron grip, overlooking Sloan as the general discussed plans for securing sections of the Dungeon for construction. Except there was a problem. She wasn't sure what it was that rubbed her senses the wrong way, but every instinct in her body was telling her something was deeply wrong.

Beneath her, Sloan waved away the general she'd been talking to and returned to perusing the map, discussing a few points with a carver representative, hammering out the finer details of their plans. Looking down at her, the nameless one saw no sign of tension or stress to indicate that this individual was planning to breach her sleeping obligations. To all intents and purposes, Sloan had the appearance of an ant coming to the end of her workday and wrapping things up so she could find a sleep chamber and enter torpor.

Could the shadow be wrong?

The nameless one drew the shadows deeper around and pulled her body flat against the ceiling. It was impossible for the shadow to be wrong, she had to push all such thoughts out of her head. So the shadow was right, a breach was happening, then what was it about Sloan that bothered her so? She focused her eyes and homed in on every detail of the general, every movement, every little tic and shift of weight, every change in her scent. No detail was too small to escape her notice, there was nowhere to hide from the eyes of the order.

Wait, what was that?

A strange flicker of the light caught her attention. It was such a minor thing that had she not been concentrating, she would have missed it entirely. Where was it again? She focused, patient as a predator as she continued to observe Sloan beneath her. There! The shadow! How could she not have seen the shadow!? As Sloan went about her business, discussing and planning, the nameless one focused instead on the play of light around her feet, and after a few moments, she realised something.

The shadow doesn't fit!

It wasn't anything major, the legs were just slightly off, the abdomen and thorax not quite the right dimensions, but you could see it if you were looking for it. The shadow that Sloan projected didn't match the shape of her body. It was a double!

She cursed admiringly in her mind as she drew the shadows around her like a cloak and began to sneak her way to the exit point. The council had replaced themselves with doubles cloaked in some kind of illusion spell! The mages within the order would need to learn of this technique as soon as possible. They needed to find a way to better break it. For now, the slight differences in shape had been enough for her to see through the ruse. She had to inform the others!

[Ghost Stealth (VI) has reached Level 94].

Not now! She focused her senses and body to the utmost, ensuring that no sight or sound would be noticed as she made her escape. She was fortunate to scuttle away without being seen and made her way back into the Dark Passage. Once inside, she urgently messaged her fellow team member who awaited her inside.

It's a body double! Sloan has been replaced by another ant cloaked in some kind of light or illusion spell!

Are you certain? The other ant signed back intently.

The shadow betrays them! It doesn't fit the body. I believe that every member of the council we are shadowing has been replaced and the real members are hidden!

Her fellow order member cursed silently.

We will need to confirm this as soon as possible. Return to the meeting place whilst I spread the message. We should have confirmation in ten minutes.

The two of them rushed to perform their tasks knowing that time was of the essence. When she arrived back at the planning chamber and relayed the news to the members gathered there, the reaction was much as she expected.

Damn this beast! Are they daring us to put them under 24/7 surveillance?

They need to put more effort into their work rather than spending all this energy trying to dodge torpor!

What is wrong with their heads?!

It was fine to be angry, but they didn't have the time to waste on such useless emotion. The nameless one stepped forward.

Your frustration is understandable, but a waste of energy. We have a task to perform, don't lose focus on the work.

With her signed message, the group quickly got back to planning how they could overcome this disaster together. They were deep in discussions when word came back from those shadowing the other members of the council. As suspected, all of them were fakes.

What do we do? One member of the group demanded. *We've already lost track of the targets and we have no leads on where they might be! Regular methods have been exhausted. I suggest we appeal to the shadow.*

The others paused for a moment as they contemplated that suggestion. It wasn't forbidden to ask the shadow for assistance, but it certainly wasn't encouraged. Even if they *were* to ask, there was no guarantee that they would get an answer. The entity known as shadow preferred to communicate through those few acolytes dedicated to receiving their messages, rather than reaching out to just anyone. The nameless one considered the suggestion and decided it might be worth a try.

We are out of time. The meeting is intended to take place in only ten minutes and we have no clues as to where. The situation has become desperate and I am unwilling to let it go. I suggest we all appeal to the shadow and see if it will intervene on our behalf. This mission was brought to us by the shadow originally, after all.

After a little more discussion the group agreed and got to work. The chamber entrance was sealed and all light in the room was suppressed as each member channelled as much shadow mana as they could, blanketing the room in utter darkness. The mana thickened gradually, seeping into the air around them and saturating all it touched as the ants bowed low in supplication, covering their eyes ceremoniously

and waiting. For several long minutes, nothing except the growing density of shadow marked any change in the space as they each remained perfectly still. Then, there was a faint sound, almost like a sigh, and the gathered shadow mana scattered in an instant, bringing the light back.

The nameless one raised her head eagerly as others leapt to reopen the chamber. As sight returned to them, they found words written in pure darkness engraved on the wall and they felt joy in their hearts. There was no escape for the targets of the order.