

Chrysalis 741

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 741: Surfs up!

[Get him, Tiny! Hit him with the left! Then the right! Ooooo, here comes the C-C-C-COMBO!]

The big ape flashes a grin, more than a little happy with my ongoing fight commentary as he duels with the latest demonic offering from the third strata, a particularly nasty, snake-like creature with a huge number of clawed hands rising from its back to form a hood similar to what a cobra would have. It's the first of its kind that we've come across and I sent Tiny out to have the first crack at it. He's levelled his Skill significantly over the last few days of concentrated fighting and so far he's managing to more than hold his own against his opponent.

As he should! I don't care about this first strata is weaker than third strata nonsense, he's a full tier above it! I refuse to accept that we are significantly weaker just because we happened to be born higher up. I won't accept this prejudice!

[Get 'em, Tiny! Look for the upper, the upper!]

Totally unnecessary advice on my part, since Tiny is *always* hunting for that sweet, sweet uppercut. A few moments later, after a masterful feint, he finds a chance when the snake demon rises above him, either to bite or perhaps grapple with the ape using its many clawed hands. Big mistake! Light on his feet as a dancer, the giant ape glides forward one step, his body held low, hands in close to the chest as he drops his centre of mass and begins to rotate his shoulders.

Here it comes!

His hands flash with light as he activates his Skill, forming a giant fist of pure energy that manifests in front of his own. In one burst, his wings unfurl to their full length and he leaps, springing up from the ground as his fist extends, sending the punch straight into the chin of the looming demon whose head smacks straight into the roof of the tunnel with a thunderous crack, the stone above its head splitting on impact.

Groggy from the blow, the snake-thing reels, trying to put some distance between it and the furious ape-boxer but Tiny is having none of it. Shoulders forward, he charges with surprising speed, his wings beating a powerful rhythm to give a boost of acceleration. As he closes the distance, his fists come alight with chittering electricity that ripples down his shoulders and coalesces around his hands in a near blinding light.

[Yeah, Tiny! Finish it!] I cheer from the safety of the back row.

He sways left, then right, then plunges forward, hands flickering as he punches with maximum speed. Still recovering from the previous blow, the snake struggles to react, trying to swat at the gorilla with its tail but failing to push him away as he lays blow after blow into its body, each one discharging a potent jolt of electricity that sizzles flesh and shocks nerves. Once he gets going, there's no stopping him and the furious rush of punches doesn't cease until the enemy lies still, overcome by the pummelling.

[Yeah! Good job, Tiny! Drag that thing back this way, we'll get some Biomass out of it for sure.]

[What about me, Master? Have I done well?]

I turn to Crinis who's spent this entire time fighting off masses of shadow beast by herself, allowing Tiny the space to have his one versus one. Dozens upon dozens of tentacles ranging in thickness from wire thin to tree trunk move in a constant flurry of grabbing, twisting or bending monsters into shapes they were never intended to be. I can see the fear effect trigger in numerous enemies, sending them scurrying in terror from the dark orchestra that Crinis is conducting. When it comes to thinning out large groups, she really is in a class of her own.

[You did exceptionally well, Crinis. Can you cover us whilst we retreat back to the lines?]

[I will!]

[Alright then, let's go!]

Full of good cheer, we march back the short distance to the defensive wall of the Colony and slip inside, turning over the defence to the detachment of soldiers, scouts, generals and mages placed here. Healed up and rested thanks to us taking over their duties for a few hours, the ants look fighting fit and eager to get back to work. Tiny drags through his hard won Biomass and once we clear the second defensive line with its second garrison getting ready to rotate with the previous one, we settle down to eat and discuss our progress.

[Still not level eighty, Master,] Crinis reports mournfully, [I have gone passed fifty, however.]

[How about you Tiny?] I ask the big ape.

He doesn't pause between shoving huge mouthfuls of Biomass into his face, just waggles a hand back and forth to indicate 'about the same'.

Hmm. The levelling is going well, all things considered. Despite the huge amount of fighting we're doing, there are simply too many weaker monsters to boost the two of them much more quickly. If it weren't for the juicy xp they were getting from the tier four demons who pop up relatively frequently, it would be a much slower grind. Even so, I'm happy with how things are going and I try to encourage my first two pets.

[You're doing super well,] I praise the pair of them, [we are going to keep grinding at this until you two are both the same tier as me. We aren't going to fight in the third strata until I'm confident that all of us will be able to survive down there, and that means evolutions. Keep doing what you're doing and we're going to be fine.]

With Tiny and Crinis reassured, I turn my attentions to the roof.

"And how are all of you going? You have a deadline, don't forget. When this wave is done, any of you who aren't tier five will be barred from coming with me to the third strata, you hear me?"

"... yes. We're making progress," comes the muttered reply from thin air.

"Good. This is for your own good, I won't hear any excuses."

The past few days have been rough on the Colony, the endlessly surging wave is putting pressure on the defenders all around our territory, especially in the deepest half. No matter how much we try to help,

the moment we arrive at the next site the defenders are hard pressed and struggling to hold on. We relieve them for a while, let them get their legs back under them, only for them to be back under the pump the moment we leave. It's not as if the ants aren't improving either, this sort of sustained combat is giving them Skill levels and Biomass out the wazoo, but with every hour that goes by, the wave grows more intense. The mana levels continue to rise and the strength of the monsters rising out of the depths keeps growing. It won't be much longer and we'll start to see tier five demons showing up in small numbers, I feel confident of that.

Thankfully, we shouldn't see many tier six like Anga, since they're sentient to some extent. I don't expect many of them will be wanting to leap out into the middle of the Dungeon during a wave. Which means all we need to do is keep holding the line as the pressure ramps up. I've been seeing a few tier five ants popping up here and there, which is going to help. Other than Vibrant that is, who I've seen blitzing about the place even faster than she was before. I think she mutated her aura gland to give even more of a speed boost than it did before as well, since everyone around her was really zipping along.

[Alright,] I announce to Tiny and Crinis, [I think I'll take a look at your cores so we know exactly what we're dealing with and can start making a few decisions as we get closer to your evolution. It's a slight invasion of privacy, I know, but I think we can agree this is for the best. Who's first?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 742: Status Update!

It's been a long, long time since I took a gander at the cores of my two longest serving companions. All in all, a little inspection is probably overdue, but I've grown to feel that poking at their status too often is probably a bit invasive. They've never complained about it, but so far I've hesitated to ask. But the time has come! I can no longer shy away now that the momentous moment of evolution is approaching. After a bit of wavering back and forth, it's Tiny who winds up first on the chopping block.

Bringing my antennae forward to tap him on the arm, I activate the core shaping skill that hasn't been used in quite a while. Immediately a flood of information pours into my mind, but far from being overwhelmed by it, my recently minted super brain is more than capable of tackling the load. Quite different from my past experiences, I navigate through the disjointed mess and find my way to the core of what I'm looking for. The summary of everything that Tiny is, the status page!

Name: Tiny

Level: 52 (Rare core) (V)

Might: 267

Toughness: 51

Cunning: 11

Will: 28

HP: 102/102

MP: 262/262

Skills:

Grand Master Kong Fist Boxing (V) level 56; Horizon Piercing Uppercut (IV) level 25; Comet Leap (IV) level 30; Master Heavy Smash (IV) level 11; Expert Athletics (III) level 17; Expert Grappling Level (IV) 25; Penetrating Smashing Blows (IV) level 6; Glittering Fancy Feet (IV) level 8; Flicker Dash (III) level 18; Expert Dodge (III) level 14; Expert Kong Combo (IV) level 31;

Mutations:

Detonator Enhanced Musculature +25, Condensed Granite Bones +25; Collapsing Meteor Legs +25; Stone Shattering Sonic Enhancer +25; Compressing Rapid Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +25; Compressing Rapid Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +25; Rapid Combusting Energy Conversion Gland +25; Potent Flex Shadow Wings +25; Magnifying Tesla Fur +25; Regenerating Steel Flesh Fists +25;

Species: Shadow Kong Emperor

Skill points: 20

Biomass: 211

Holy mackerel! Look at these Skills! How the heck has he managed to raise them so high? Actually... when I take a look through the list, almost every skill is related to punching in some way... so long as he's hitting stuff, he's pretty much leveling every skill. Also, it appears as though he fused a bunch of skills to make Grand Master Kong Fist Boxing, which would explain why his fighting style looks so much more organised than it did before. His punches are so much cleaner, far less wild swings, and much faster. I notice that his dashing and dodging skills are lagging a long way behind his general hitting skills. Typical Tiny, far more interesting in belting his opponents around than he is in avoiding damage. Fancy Feet has certainly come a long way though.

Looking through his mutations, all of them are as straightforward as they could possibly be. More explosive muscles for hitting harder, more solid, regenerating fists, so he can hit harder, extra energy, for hitting more often and more solid bones to absorb the force of his punching. Is this what Granin was talking about with his 'synergy' talk. Somehow, despite putting no thought into the process at all, Tiny has managed to turn himself into a lean mean punching machine, with almost all of Skills, body parts and mutations dedicated to hitting things as hard as he can. And blasting lightning at stuff, let's not forget that also.

[I'm actually impressed, Tiny. You may be thick as three bricks fused into one, but you know what you like and you've stuck with it. I think the things we discussed with the shapers will work perfectly for you, although I'll have to talk you through it since you slept through the whole thing...]

Tiny gives me a quick thumbs up as he gets back to eating.

[Just keep in mind that I'll be bumping your Cunning up to twenty before you evolve so you can use the manual evolution menu. Which means you're going to lose a little muscle mass.]

He freezes in horror and clutches at his biceps whilst staring at me reproachfully. I ignore him.

[Alright Crinis, your turn. You can keep eating if you want, this won't take long.]

[Oh, no! I'll wait.]

Enlarged to her full size, Crinis is a much more intimidating sight than her usual blob. Three fanged filled maws that seem to be wrapped around a dark void, a mass of shadow flesh that sprouts innumerable tentacles, each one covered in oscillating barbs that gleam razor sharp. In many ways, she's a terrifying creature, but I sincerely struggle to think of her that way after all of the time we've spent together.

I bring my antennae forward to touch her mouldable flesh before I activate the skill once more and navigate the stream of information that comes flying my way.

Name: Crinis

Level: 54 (Rare Core) (V)

Might: 130

Toughness: 110

Cunning: 86

Will: 64

HP: 210/210

MP: 260/260

Skills:

Grand Master Shadow Flesh Manipulation (V) level 45; Grand Master Grappling level 18 (V); Master Shredding (IV) Level 39; Omniscient Tremor Sensing (V) Level 39; Barbarous Dismembering (IV) Level 22; Quivering Fear Inspiration (IV) level 26; Mana Moulding (IV) level 11; Dextrous Tentacle Walking (IV) Level 2; Master Tentacle Fu (IV) level 25; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) level 12; Master Shadow Magic Affinity (IV) level 34; Expert Stealth (III) level 18;

Mutations:

Amorphous Armoured Shadow Flesh +25; Disintegrating Ion-Void Maw +25; Bottomless Endless Dimensional Stomach +25; Tri-Legion Tentacles +25; Sharpened Diamond Barbs +25; Visceral Teeth +25; Far-Seeing Omniscient Mana Sensory Gland +25, Compressing Reservoir Shadow Magic Gland +25; Instantaneous Shadow Flesh Generator +25; Piercing Shadow Eye +25; Broad Masterful Tentacle Conductor +25; Broad Masterful Tentacle Conductor +25; Fathomless Light Sink +25; Hyper Shade Phase Organ +25; Disintegrating Ion-Void Maw +25; Disintegrating Ion-Void Maw +25; Mouldable Cell Structure +25;

Species: Tri-Maw Amorphous Horror

Skill points: 45

Biomass: 149

A much more diverse build, Crinis has also made excellent progress on her Skills, as well as ensuring that her mutations are in tune with each other. Her ability to create a plethora of tentacles and control them with incredible dexterity continues to grow. Her dual tentacle conductors act like sub-brains whose sole responsibility is handling tentacle movement, each capable of managing sixteen separate limbs without

the input of her own mind. The three disintegrating maws are fearsome offensive weapons, capable of breaking down almost anything that she manages to get her teeth into. She certainly has a lot more versatility than Tiny in her build, but is very, very good at what she does.

[You've done really well, Crinis,] I praise her enthusiastically. [You've set yourself up perfectly to implement the ideas we discussed. I can already tell that your next evolution is going to be very, very impressive.]

[T-Thank you, Master!] she replies, her tentacles writhing with glee as the three-mouthed horror sways back and forth in a strange display of bashfulness.

With the inspection complete and the two of them finished eating their way through their Biomass, it's time for us to get back on the road. We gather ourselves together and head to the tunnels once more. The wave continues and we need to do our part to push back the tide.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 743: Look within thyself

Examining Tiny and Crinis' status reminds me that I really need to take a good hard look at my own. I've stacked up a reasonable supply of Biomass, certainly enough to start investing in upgrades to the two most expensive organs I have, the Vestibule and Nave. I've brought my antennae up to +15 since the reset, but to this point I'm yet to even have a look at the options for those two new(ish) additions. In the past I expanded the range of the Vestibule, but that was due to a rather specific reason, namely being captured and hoping the Colony would be able to detect me. Now that no such conditions are pressing on me, I have a little more flexibility in what I want to choose.

I watch and assist as Tiny and Crinis continue their rampage through the ever growing wave, turning my thoughts over in my mind. I mean, first and foremost amongst my concerns is that I still don't really understand precisely what the combination of Vestibule and Nave actually does. The sustained energy that pours into me, ensuring I never get tired, refilling my reserves and refreshing my body so long as there are ants nearby, that's all great, and certainly the effect is vastly more pronounced than it was before. As long as the Colony is nearby, my energy is absolutely limitless, to the point I think I could run at top speed forever, without ever growing tired. Something else I noticed is that my health regeneration around the Colony is also much higher, my cells regenerating with incredible alacrity so long as the Vestibule continues to provide me with its power.

When you add on top of that the rapid healing provided by the regeneration gland, and the fact that the gland refills super quick thanks to the Vestibule, my level of heal tanking is getting out of control. Combined with my general defensive setup, being both hard to hit *and* hard to damage, I'm very, very hard to kill. Which is obviously a good thing! I'm sure that if I poured all of my evolutionary energy into it, I could have been an absolute brick of a monster, with multiple carapace and supporting structures in between, with additional healing glands to keep the juice pumping in a continuous cycle, but I've had other considerations.

All in all, I'm fairly happy with my current build. Good defensively, good with magic, reasonable physical fighting capacity. To be honest, it's the physical fighting that I'm by far the worst at. My stats lag far behind in the pure brute strength department, and I just don't have the kind of Skill synergies that Tiny has that give his punches extra destructive power. I might be far more flexible than my ape companion,

but other than specialised attacks like the gravity bomb, my ape like pet has me beat on pure offensive output and he's only a tier five! I suppose in the long run I'll out sustain him. I'll be using Doom Chomps long after he's passed out from exhaustion so long as there are a few of my siblings nearby...

Alright! This cannot stand! I'll have to dive into the menus and see what I can do about powering up! Surely some new Skills must have unlocked for me since the last time I had a poke through the list!

[Good work you two! Let's pack it up and move back behind the chokepoint. Make sure you bring some Biomass back for snacking.]

They happily get to work complying, especially Tiny, who's living in a kind of heavenly bliss right now, fighting, eating and sleeping every day. Enjoy it while it lasts, big guy, it isn't going to last forever. The two of them cooperate to grab a few of the more delectable offerings that they were able to defeat and fight off the monsters swarming around them as they retreat. Invidia and I provide cover with a few healthy blasts of magic and before you know it we're back behind the wall and inside the safety of the Colony's territory once more.

[Great. Let's eat and then I'm going to go through my menus and do a bit of mutating. You guys know what to do, right?]

The two of them nod solemnly, though I can tell Tiny is already thinking of his nap.

[No sleeping until it's done,] I warn him, [you know how important this is.]

He grudgingly nods again and I turn around, satisfied, and start poking away at the menu while they eat. Honestly, what could be more important than maintaining the dignity of the Eldest within his own family? There's more at stake here than just my shallow pride! This is Colony shattering stuff! Also, I'm certain that if that damn statue carver ever saw me mutating there would be a gold plated monument of me rolling around on the ground with my legs flailing in the air before the day was out! Unacceptable!

Now, menu time. Ah, the endless lists have returned once more. Back in the good ol' days there were like, five Skills I could purchase? Look at me now, there has to be hundreds available, unlocked by glands, or size, or crossing stat thresholds, or just pure mass, or any of the other things I now know can unlock skills in the menu. There's a ton of good stuff in here too, makes me wonder why I don't go poking around in here more often...

Wait! This is actually something Granin warned me about! Even though Skill points feel as though they rain down from the skies above, if you actually purchase a whole bunch of skills and then level them until they actually become properly useful, say rank three or four, suddenly you've invested twelve levels worth of Skill points! Then maybe you find a nice fusion, that could be another ten, or more... It adds up. Skill purchases need to be carefully managed to avoid bloat.

With that in mind, let's see what we can see. I'd really like some more combat actives, although active Skills tend to be hard to come across. At the moment, the only active Skills I have are Doom Chomp and Dash, which doesn't lead to a whole lot of variety. Granted, Doom Chomp is a fusion of three different active bite Skills, but still. That brings up a good point, what do I want to be able to do? To be honest, I'm not really sure. I suppose I'll just take a look at the options and see if there is something I like.

Leaping Strike? Do I have the physical stats to qualify for this now? At rank one it basically helps you coordinate better as you jump at an enemy, but I can tell this will turn into an active as it ranks up. Do I really want to be jumping at my opponents? I'll think about it. What's next?

Charge. Seems fairly straight forward. I bet I had access to this Skill ages ago but never bothered looking for it. According to the description, this is more about using your mass to inflict damage as you move forward than it is about moving as fast as possible, ala Dash. I'm willing to bet my left antenna that the two Skills fuse. This one is a possibility. What's next?

Antenna Whip. I mean... really? Who in their right mind wants to use their sensory organs to hit their enemies with? Does a human attack with their eyeballs? Wait... does the Queen have this Skill?! I don't think she did back when I modified her core... but it wouldn't surprise me if she picked it up somewhere along the way... Not interested.

Slash Attack. Ah, the Slash Attack, I haven't seen you for a long time. You were one of the first Skills I could buy, allowing me to attack with my legs... which seems really, really unnecessary when I have powerful mandibles right on the front of my face. Besides, my legs aren't really made for attacking... I could have mutated them for it, or attached blades to the end of them when evolving I suppose. It just doesn't seem very... *ant*.

Come on, there must be some other useful Skills in here?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 744: Upgrading

Trawling through the list I see tons of interesting but niche Skills that would be useful but would contribute to Skill bloat that I pass over after a glance. Do I want to have a digging active? Sure, it might sound nice to have Shovel Mandibles to work in tandem with the Dig Skill, but it's just way too niche. I bet a lot of the carvers focused on construction have it at a high rank though...

There's actually a few sensory passives that I spy which would probably be exceptionally handy to have. Sharp Eyes, Open Ears, Fine Touch, Particular Taste, Picky Smell are all passives that give a boost to their respective sense, and I have absolutely no doubt that they fuse at almost every rank as well. It's also possible that they might turn into actives in the higher rank, allowing me to expend energy to enhance a particular sense. This is really tempting, I'm just not sure which ones I would want... or at what rank I would fuse them... I know I need to avoid buying too many rank one Skills... I mean, if I picked up eyes and touch... would those would be the most useful for me? Eyes is obvious, and touch would help my antennae pick up vibrations in the air. Ears... doesn't really appeal, since ants have pretty poor hearing in general. Smell might also be good... since my antennae are so sensitive now... Argh! This is hard. Shelve it for now and move on. Combat actives! Focus on the Goal!

Oho! What have we here?! Mandible Parry?! Helps the wielder to use their mandibles to parry blows? Starts off passive, but I bet this turns into an active down the line! Not to mention that it provides another layer to my impenetrable defences. Gweheheheh. This one is in for sure. I wonder when this chap unlocked? I'm not sure, but I'm very happy to see them now!

What else, what else... there has to be some more juice in here somewhere.

Mandible spear?! Are you serious?! How do you even stab with mandibles?! Well... again, I suppose you could mutate or evolve to make that less of an issue. Another one that is likely to turn into an active as it levels up. I'm not sure I'm sold on this one, but is there a chance that it fuses with charge? There could be something in that combo that is worth my while...

I keep flicking, evaluating and dismissing dozens of Skills until I find something like what I'm looking for.

Crunch Combo! A bite attack combo skill similar to what Tiny has for his fists! This is good stuff! Tiny's turned active at rank four, letting him turn it on to give a huge boost to his punching speed for an increased cost of stamina and I'm fairly certain this will act in a similar manner, which will prove hugely useful. With my effectively bottomless stamina reserves, is there a chance I'll be able to activate this together with Doom Chomp and unleash a torrent of potent bites in rapid succession? Gah! I'm practically salivating just thinking about it! So exciting!

With a number of Skills as likely contenders, I turn my attention over to the mutation menu to see what I can see in there. The Vestibule and Nave are... particular and somewhat intimidating organs whose functions go way beyond what I might have expected of a biological component of my body. Which naturally makes me more than a little bit nervous when it comes to messing around with them, but in all honesty, I can't just ignore them. They are powerful, and will be more so with mutations, so I need to make it a priority to max them out. For now, I have enough Biomass to take both to +15, which means two mutations and a fusion for each.

Ideally I want the options I choose for both to have good synergy, a multiplicative effect, if you take my meaning. But what aspect of the organs do I want to improve? Sigh. No point delaying any further, let's get into the menu and take a look.

Hmm. Being honest, there are less options for the Vestibule than I expect, ditto for the Nave. Has it been reduced since the last time, or was it always this size? I honestly can't remember. Perhaps this is a product of the reset? It wouldn't shock me if Soul Crystal was perhaps a touch less mutable than a more base component.

No matter. If anything, this will help make things a little easier on me.

Starting with the Vestibule, what sort of options do we have? The range extension is there, just as it was before. Pretty straightforward, it allows the Vestibule to collect Will from further away than it could before. Something I've noticed since the reset, is that the Soul Crystal has already expanded the range of the organ from what it originally was before I mutated it the first time. It isn't the same as the +25 range I had before evolving, that would be nuts, but it's a significant boost nonetheless. Certainly enough that I don't see range as an issue.

There are a range of other options that surprise me, such as the determination mutation, which would allow me to manually direct the energy to emphasise a particular aspect of the organ. Do I want increased Stamina regeneration? Direct it that way. Increased healing? Off you go! Recharge my organs faster? Get on it! Obviously pointing the energy at one thing makes the others replenish slower, but being able to push the resources in the direction you most need at the time would be handy indeed.

The Pure mutation will simply make the Vestibule better at doing what it already does, refining it and allowing it to collect and distribute Will more efficiently, increasing the regenerative effects. This is a

straight forward option that is hard to criticise. Do what you do now, but gooder! Might lack the oomph of some other choices, but is certainly a safe bet.

I don't see the option to include more species in the Will collection anymore, which is odd. Not that I would ever pick it...

There's an option that allows the gathered regenerative energy to be shared out as an aura, which is a cool one. I'd become a walking healing battery for all the ants around me, refilling their energy and stamina during battle. I have to admit, that's a tempting option, but it's not exactly how I see the Vestibule functioning for me. I like the Vestibule because it allows me to fight *for* my family, rather than help them fight *with* me. The whole idea is that they don't have to fight! That's what I want!

I wonder what else there is? I poke through the list and find various options that might suit what I'm looking for. Buried in the list I find something that sounds decent. The Empowering Vestibule. Basically allows me to convert the energy from restorative to strengthening for a limited period of time. Judging from the description, this essentially translates to a boost in my effective Might stat whilst the effect is active, improving the mutation will increase the size of the gain, as well as the duration, which is fairly short.

I can see this mutation coming in clutch when I'm under the pump, so long as there are enough members of the Colony nearby, as well as helping me overcome my still somewhat lacking physical strength. It's certainly tempting... There's another mutation which does something similar for toughness, which would make me more durable in a pinch, but I feel as though my defensive options far exceed my offensive ones at this point, so perhaps I'll put that option on the backburner.

Alright, I think I'll commit to the empowering mutation and take it all the way to +15. This will help create a new trump card that I can use as a last measure, shoring up one of my weaknesses.

Which leaves me with the Nave. The Communal Spirit Nave is a strange organ, to say the least. Attached to the Vestibule, it acts as a signal booster, a force multiplier, taking the energy fed to it and strengthening it as it focuses and delivers it to... nothing right now. Once the energy exits the Nave it's dispersed into my body where the regenerative properties kick in, but the more I think about it, the more I think it's likely there's another component to these connected organs which I'm likely to be offered in a future evolution. I wonder what it could be? Maybe I should have poked through the evolution menu and looked for it... ah well.

As I browse through the options for the Nave, and there really aren't that many compared to most organs, probably due to the rather narrow focus it has, I can't help but feel like knowing what the 'destination' would be that the Nave is supposed to connect to would have a significant impact on my decision regarding mutation. Well, if worst comes to worst, I can reset the thing and move on with life. For now, I'll go with the Purifying Nave, which essentially means the organ does its current job, but better. I'll take that to +15 as well whilst I'm at it.

Which means my final purchases of this session of self-improvement look like this:

Empowering Collective Will Vestibule +15 (Soul Crystal).

Purifying Communal Spirit Nave +15.

And my new Skills:

Charge.

Crunch Combo.

Mandible Spear.

Mandible Parry.

I'm going to leave the sensory passives for the time being, but I'll look to pick at least some of them up at a later date. I'm grabbing spear in the hopes that it can fuse with charge to make something interesting, as I really don't see my mandibles as stabbing weapons. Let's confirm the purchases!

... here we go...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 745: Generally fighting

The days of the wave rolled on and the mana level continued to rise, increasing the spawn rates of monsters throughout the Dungeon to an absurd rate. Every hour, thousands of newborn monsters clashed in the tunnels around the Colony, warring and fighting, the losers feeding the winners who grew rapidly in strength, feasting on their lessers. A hundred thousand tales of victory and death were woven every day in the area just outside the Colony's defensive line.

Not that it mattered. The monsters from the deep were rising, crushing those from above and pressing onward, desperate to escape those from beneath who drove them from their territories. They savaged those weaker than them, absorbing their power and seeking more until they inevitably ran into the iron wall that was the Colony.

Hundreds of defenders manned fortified chokepoints, bombarding the encroaching beasts with acid and spells until they fell on the ravenous jaws of the soldiers. They never fought an even numbered fight, always dividing the enemy and destroying them with overwhelming force before turning to the next. Should the pressure become too great, they would fall back, retreating to another prepared position, with a fresh wave of troops ready to fill the breach. After gathering their strength, the ants would shove back the wave and retake the outer wall, reinforcing it again within the hour.

On and on it went. The wave was relentless, but so was the Colony, and every day that passed, their numbers grew. And grew.

Organising it all had been enough to drive Victor to the brink of exhaustion, but as the days ticked by the Colony defence practically ran itself. The local generals were intelligent and capable, experienced in the ways of the caste after fighting off the siege, they hardly needed input from herself or Sloan to run their checkpoints. As new recruits graduated the academy, they slotted into the existing structures with barely a ripple, the size of each garrison growing every day.

Which is why she found herself on the front line, providing buffs and taking her turn in the line to fight. Without the need for her at central command, what other choice did she have? Sit around and do nothing? Don't even suggest it!

"Big push coming!" she called back to the line of mages and scouts behind her, "Brace! Brace! Brace!"

The massive soldiers, with their thick carapace and huge frames, packed themselves tightly together, covering the narrow entrance they defended from every angle until she could barely see past them. Activating her aura gland along with her commanding presence Skills, she did her part to coordinate the troops, make those last second adjustments before contact.

With a deafening roar, the crush of monsters beyond the wall made their last second charge, smashing into the ants with concussive force that rippled through the air and blew back the general's antennae. The soldiers absorbed the punishment without flinching, sparks flying as the enemy tried to scrape and bite at their chitin shells.

"In three! Two! One! PULL!" she called.

In one coordinated motion, the soldiers drew back to clear the opening which was immediately bombarded by the waiting scouts and mages. A huge volume of acid, fire and shards of ice were hurled into the teeth of the horde who recoiled from the barrage, all except one. Working together, a few of the strongest soldiers darted forward, latching onto a monster and dragging it back through the gap where the rest of them fell upon it, chomping with controlled fury until it was no more.

"BRACE!" Victor ordered.

In a flash the soldiers were back in position, blocking the entrance as the endless monsters pressed back against them once more. They endured the hammer blows of the enemy as the mages and scouts prepared their next spells and readied their acid.

"On my order we will pull, rotate and heal! Be ready!" she shouted, watching the narrow chokepoint with an intense focus.

"In three! Two! One! PULL!"

This time, as the soldiers pulled back in perfect coordination, they also rotated their position around the opening, moving in a clockwise direction. As the scouts and mages poured out as much damage as they could, a team of healers rushed forward to minister to the wounded, pouring their healing energies into them to help them recover in as short a time as possible. Despite the constant stream of acid and magic being blasted through the narrow gap, monsters still manage to press closer to the opening, only to be dragged through and set upon by the waiting mandibles of the ants, including Victor herself.

After ten seconds, she roared out her order again.

"BRACE!"

And so the cycle repeated, over and over, until their team was finally relieved by another group and was able to fall back to eat and rest. Several of the Soldiers sported semi-severe injuries, their carapace unable to hold up to the constant beating. They'd need a day of healing to be back to full strength, most likely, which meant Victor would be short a full complement of Soldiers for the next shift. A problem she would work to solve after she had some time to recover. The toll of having to concentrate so fiercely for hours on end was great and she was keen for some torpor. But first she had to report in.

"General," she snapped out a quick salute to the general in charge of this checkpoint.

"General," the officer snapped one right back, "come to report?"

"Indeed."

She went on to give details of their shift, had the concentration of mana and monster spawns gone up? How many demons had been seen, what types of demons, any sighting of tier five or above monsters, injuries sustained and so on.

"Seems a successful shift," the general in charge observed, "you might not have killed as many monsters as some others, but your injury rate is much lower."

"We are in for the long haul, general," Victor sighed, "the experience will come, but only if our people are well enough to fight."

"Right you are," the ant nodded, "go get some rest. You've earned it."

From there it was off to the recovery area to be checked for injuries, then into the prepared chambers with the rest of her unit to huddle together in torpor. In six hours, they'd be back to the wall, putting their bodies on the line to try to fend off the never-ending press of the wave, only this time, with three less soldiers. Perhaps she would be able to take the place of one of them? She wasn't as durable as the soldiers were, not even close, but she was certainly tougher than most generals thanks to her better evolutions. Maybe if she rotated with a few of the larger scouts...

Enough, she scolded herself, *get some rest*.

And so she stilled her thoughts and allowed her body to drift off into torpor whilst only a hundred metres away the fierce battle continued.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 746: City Livin'

"What I want to know, *Captain*, is when you and our new oppressors will settle the matter of reparations!" the old man sneered.

Wallace Dalton, former Captain of the Rylleh City Guard and now the appointed military adjutant to the Rylleh branch of the Colony, suppressed the urge to spit and continued to grind his chew between his teeth, hoping the repetitive motion of his jaws would help burn off his irritation.

"Citizen Alliornus..." he began.

The old man's eyes blazed with fury.

"THAT'S LORD ALLIORNUS TO YOU, BOY!" he bellowed, spittle flying.

Wallace took a quick step back to dodge the expectorant and giggled internally at the impotent rage of this relic.

"*Citizen* Alliornus," he repeated with an added emphasis that he relished, "you are certainly aware that within this city, there is no such thing as a lord or lady, are you not?"

His needling produced the desired result as the once wealthy council member swelled up like a toad, jowls swinging as his temper took full hold.

"My family worked to found this city!" he declared with all the pomposity he could muster, "securing the future of their descendants and creating enduring prosperity for all the traitorous residents of this once great place. My authority, my belongings and my wealth have been illegally seized by these interloping insects and I DEMAND that they pay it back!"

Every day with these people. Would their self-interest ever cease? Wallace sighed and fixed the idiot in front of him with a steely glare that deflated the man like a puffed up balloon.

"Let me be as clear as I can possibly be with you, Charitus," he dropped formality and used the once powerful man's first name, "as grateful as the residents of this place are for what your ancestors did, they aren't so grateful that they are prepared to happily suffer under your incompetent and corrupt governance. If I were to hazard a guess, if the Lion Fist of city legend were to come back and see what his house had fallen to, he'd spit in your face."

The ex-lord blustered and tried to speak up but Wallace spoke straight over him.

"The Colony does not care about you, and I want to emphasise this, *at all*. I would be absolutely shocked to learn if any authority figure within the ant power structure knew your name or had heard of a single complaint you've lodged, which I *have* filed with them. There is absolutely no chance that they are going to return whatever it was that they took from you."

The man had grown so red in the face during this speech that he almost appeared as if he were going to pop. Wallace watched the colour change with a vague sense of fascination, wondering just how dark a human complexion could possibly turn before they suffered a stroke.

"This is THEFT!" he hollered. "PIRACY and THEFT! Where is the justice?!"

"In my experience, former councillor, there is never any justice when the weak are picked on by the strong. How many times did I send guards to evict those who were unable to pay the high rates you demanded for your loans? Loans that only the truly desperate with nowhere else to turn would dare accept? I can remember many scenes of widows weeping in the street, begging for justice that they would never receive. The Colony has come, and in their eyes you are a pathetic, weak individual with no strength or power to speak of. Why would they deal with you? Can you compel them to sit at a table with you?"

Silence was the only response to *that* question.

"... as I thought."

Filled with contempt, Wallace leaned to one side and spat a wad of coloured spit on the ground next to the man's shoe.

"Right now, *Lord Alliornus*, you are the widow in the street, I am you, and what do you know? I hear you wailing and I *just don't care*. So why don't you shut up, crawl back to what's left of your mansion and diddle one of the maids you can still afford to pay?"

Taking careful measure of Charitus' face, Wallace judged he'd pushed the man close to a major aneurism, but hadn't quite managed to tip him over the line. More's the pity.

"The people won't stand for this," he said stiffly, "the city cannot survive when those insects run roughshod over traditions and disregard our laws. There will be an uprising. I personally guarantee it."

"By the Dungeon, I hope so," Wallace replied flatly. "I'm bored out of my mind and could use a little action. Also, frankly? Anyone in this city who would be willing to go back to *your* rule is far too stupid for me to want them to continue living here. That is a segment of the population I would gladly see excised. Now, please, get the hell out of my office."

Unwilling to be insulted any further, the enraged scion of a once mighty house turned on his heel and left, striding out and collecting the few lackeys he'd left outside on the way. Turning around, Wallace found his spit bucket and cleaned out the foul taste in his mouth with a rinse of water, levering in a new wedge of chew once he was done.

"Do you have to be so... direct... with them?" came the voice of his secretary, his former lieutenant, Yasmine.

"Yes," he grunted, "what's next?"

She ruffled a few papers on her desk.

"I think you're clear for the rest of the afternoon, surprisingly," she almost looked puzzled by that fact. "Can you imagine being this relaxed during a wave... before?" she asked.

He idly noticed she still had trouble acknowledging the admittedly traumatising invasion that they had suffered through. There wasn't a man, woman or child in the city who could possibly forget the events of that fateful day, with the exception of one child, Thomas Barnes, who somehow managed to sleep through the whole thing. What Yasmine said was true, there really wasn't that much to do. Although he was still nominally in charge of the town guard, they had been reduced to essentially a police force, no longer responsible for defending the city from monstrous incursions. The Colony had taken care of that. He was one of the few people to know of the vast territory that the Colony had claimed, so large that Rylleh had been included within it, and of the measures they had taken to manage the wave, measures which meant that, so far, the citizens of the city had barely noticed a change other than the rising mana levels.

"I really can't," he smiled and shook his head. "You have to give it to the ants, when they go about getting something done, they don't do it by half measures."

At his mention of their new insect overlords, Yasmine flinched slightly, but he pretended not to notice. She was well on the way to recovery from the terror she had felt that day, but was still very uncomfortable around the monsters.

"If my schedule is clear then I may as well mosey over and check in with the envoy," he said. "Take the afternoon off, Yas. Go shopping, or sleep, or whatever the hell you young people do."

She favoured him with a small smile before she snapped out a quick salute, purely out of habit, then turned and left.

"Let's go see what those mad bugs have gone and done now," Wallace muttered as he slung his jacket over his shoulders.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 747: City Livin' Pt 2

Wallace was an old soldier and he knew enough about himself that he could be fairly confident of judging his own state of mind. He was pretty sure that during the invasion, he'd gone ever so slightly mad. Perhaps more than slightly. That wasn't what he thinking about though, having your mind crack a little on the edges wasn't all that surprising given the stress and near certain death he'd thought he was about to experience. What he was reflecting on was the sneaking suspicion that he was *still* mad. He must be. How else could he look at a scene like this and consider it normal, without being at least somewhat insane?

"All for one," intoned the ant-robed priest.

"One for all," the crowd chanted back.

"Remember always, that the individual has worth as part of the group, and that the group has worth *because* it is a collection of individuals. We *choose* to work together, to sacrifice for the betterment of each other. *That* is the source of our strength."

"Praise the Colony!"

Wallace turned his back on the preacher and his congregation and walked to the nearby guard post. Pretty much any time of day there would a priest or priestess giving a sermon to crowds of varying sizes. Considering how much work got done around the city these days, he was always surprised that so many of them found space in their schedule to stand around listening to person with antennae sewed onto their hood with a glazed look in their eyes. He nodded to the soldiers on duty who snapped out a quick salute.

"You do remember you don't have to salute me anymore, right?" he asked dryly.

"Force of habit sir," the guardsman grinned at him.

Wallace shrugged it off.

"Any sign of trouble?"

"None, as usual," came the reply. "The sermons have been pretty restrained and the crowds quite happy overall. I head there was a bit of a ruckus over in the market district this morning. Apparently the ants found a merchant cheating his taxes, which went over about as well as you could expect."

The former captain grunted and spat for good measure. Merchants. They never stopped thinking they were more clever than everyone else, always willing to try and pull the wool over the taxman's eyes. Apparently willing even when the taxman was a giant ant monster who could literally read minds if they wanted to. The ants might not really understand the concept of money, but they could certainly appreciate the idea of taxes. Every citizen contributing a portion of their wealth to the city to ensure the wellbeing of all? Of course they should! There had been long, long discussions with Enid when she had been here about the implementation of the new tax code and she'd revealed to him that the initial tax rate proposed by the Colony had been a hundred percent.

After *strenuous* negotiations, she'd managed to talk them down to ninety, she'd informed him, but it was only when the ants had seen the merchant delegation literally foam at the mouth and pass out did they realise the culture gap might be a little too wide to accept their idea of what constituted a proper contribution to the betterment of the collective. The final tax rate was still high, by the cities standards, but it turns out people didn't mind paying it so much when the individuals in charge were incorruptible insect monsters. Every coin collected went straight back into the city, without exception.

"I'll head over later to see if I can smooth anything over," he said, casting his eyes across the newly refurbished town centre.

What had once been the enclosed sanctuary of the powerful, housing the treasury, council chambers, portal structure and other offices of government, was now a public garden centred around a massive ant hill that rose dozens of metres into the air, easily visible from all over the city. All beaurocracy was handled by the Colony now, so the other buildings had been summarily removed. The preachers had established a platform on the lower reaches of the hill, with a wide flat area for people to stand and listen to them.

Naturally, the area was crawling with ants, literally. Most of them were worker variants, running hither and thither about their duties, antennae twitching this way and that as they moved. Wallace knew for a fact that there was a sizeable detachment of soldier ants deep within the structure, ready to emerge at the first sign of danger. Anyone foolish enough to assault the ant hill would find themselves in a world of pain very quickly.

Wallace made his way to the petition platform, constructed by the ants as a place where citizens could come and directly make requests or inform them of issues that they believed where necessary. They'd gone all out making it as well. The petitioners, common citizens all, were seated on marble benches padded with soft woollen pillows and blankets, with proper back support and all. The ants provided water and snacks to those waiting as a matter of courtesy, though goodness knows where they came from. There were numerous petitioner booths open at any given time, each staffed by an ant mage ready to converse, as well as a human representative to help 'translate' anything that the ants might not conceptually understand.

He could remember one incident when a cheating husband had been dragged by his irate wife before the ants where she'd demanded they extract retribution for his unfaithfulness. What had followed was an exhausting, multiple hour long discussion in which the ants had learned what a male was, what marriage was and about human mating in general. Their ruling on the matter? 'Make one human the Queen and let her take care of everything.'

As he approached, one of the mages broke away from the others and moved toward him, a mind-bridge connecting to him as it did so.

[Adjutant Wallace. We welcome you to the nest. Is there anything pressing the matter?]

He frowned a little.

[Is that you, Lucy? Or is it Rosetta? I find it damn hard to tell sometimes.]

The ant flicked an antenna in irritation.

[I do not have a name,] she replied.

He shrugged.

[I need to have some way to tell you all apart! It would be rude to just think of all of you as 'ant' wouldn't it?]

She tilted her head.

[Can't you tell by smell?]

[No I can't tell by smell. Human, remember?]

[I forget you have such poor senses of smell. It must make it hard to move around without having scent trails to follow.]

He was about to explain the concept of signposts and maps but closed his mouth in the nick of time. They were endlessly curious about other societies, constantly looking for ideas that they might adapt to their own way of living, but her couldn't be bothered going into right now.

[Just checking in, really,] he said, [though the former rulers of this city are still agitating for you to give them their money back.]

[Have you told them to come and make a petition?]

[Must have slipped my mind,] he lied.

[They are free to come and put their questions to the Colony, same as everyone else. Make sure you remember to inform them next time,] the mage admonished him mildly.

[I see the gifts are piling up again,] he nodded toward an area at the base of the hill which was heaped with offerings from the townspeople. Lucy, he was sure it was Lucy, seemed to huff in frustration.

[We keep telling them not to bother, but every day more of them come. What are we supposed to do with this stuff?]

[The people are simply expressing their gratitude,] he said softly.

[For what? Conquering the city?] she sounded halfway between amused and puzzled.

[What do you do with all of it, anyway?] he asked, curious.

[Give it to those who need it,] she shrugged.

Typical ants.

[How goes the defence against the wave?] he enquired. [Any chance you need more of us to volunteer and head out to fight? I can rustle up a few squads in ten minutes I bet.]

[You would be in one of them, I wager,] Lucy was wise to his game, long used to him trying to escape his duties and get back to fighting monsters. [Our defences are holding, though the pressure continues to build. From what I hear, the Eldest has been out fighting personally in the depths for days on end to try and stem the tide. If they are out there, I'm sure things will be fine.]

He didn't need to try hard to recall the visage of the enormous ant he had seen during the assault. Apparently the 'Eldest' had evolved again since then, something Wallace wasn't too keen to see. Tier six monsters were no joke. The sheer size of the Queen was shocking to him still.

[Let me know if you change your mind,] he grumped.

Chrysalis

Chapter 748: Visitation

As the days of the wave drag on, my pets and I maintain the same routine. We fight, eat, rest and then repeat. It's pretty obvious after all this time why pet obsessed Dungeon dwellers like the Sophos are so rare, getting a monster to tier six is a massive pain the butt. Let alone two. Obviously what I'm doing isn't all that similar to what the Formo and his kind do, they raise their monsters over a period of decades, caring for them and pouring all of their time, energy and designing every aspect of their build around raising and training potent monsters. I'm just power levelling my pets and hoping it all works out for the best.

Still, imagine the pain and anguish of a normal Dungeon delver when the tier six monster they had poured endless wealth and resources into dies in the Dungeon. Years of effort, a literal fortune in cores, all gone. If you were able to get the core back, then all wasn't lost as you could reconstitute it again, but the soul of your pet would be forever lost. If you couldn't get the core back... which was likely considering the trainer is always weaker than the pets they keep as a rule, you just had to eat the loss and start again.

I can see why not many are tempted by it.

For me though, it's all good! To be honest, despite the exhausting and relentless nature of the wave, I've been quite enjoying my time with Tiny, Crinis and Invidia in the tunnels. It's almost like the old days, with just me and my pets, fighting against the odds, although the Colony is literally only a few dozen metres behind us. As we draw ever closer to my two magnificent pets approaching the goal line, I'm reminded of Enid and her request that I head to the surface to poke my nose around Renewal.

If I'm going to do it, it's probably going to have to be now. As the wave goes on, the mana level continues to rise and stronger monsters pour out of the depths. It's probably gotten high enough that it can sustain me right now, for a while at least, and if I wait any longer then the Colony is going to have a hard time hanging on if something really nasty crawls out of the third strata... or even lower.

[Alright team!] I announce to my exhausted pets, [We are heading on up for a break. Let's go!]

So saying, I march right up to the general, announce my plans for a quick break, and get on out of there. As expected, Burke races up to me before I've gotten more than twenty minutes into my journey.

"Eldest! Where are you going!" she calls as I continue on my merry way.

"To the surface!" I announce cheerfully, "wanna come with?"

"Uhh, no? Are you sure this is a good time to go up to the surface, Eldest? What with the wave and all?"

"Is that supposed to be a joke? This is literally the only time I can go to the surface. Are you trying to deny me the sun? The warmth of the open air? Have you truly become so cold, Burke?"

"You know what I mean, Eldest," the large scout shakes her head with irritation, "it's hard work holding off the wave and without the support of you and your guardians it'll be that much harder. I would never accuse you of shirking your responsibilities, but do you really think you should be taking a break?"

If I could, I'd roll my eyes.

"You built five layers of defence down there and so far haven't had to use more than the second in the deepest parts of the territory. I think you'll be alright if I take a few hours off."

"That's only because you've been there, Eldest..."

"Bah! If you guys are so nervous about it, get in there yourselves. Put Leeroy on the job, I haven't seen her or her squad down there yet."

She looks to one side as she replies.

"We were worried if we sent Leeroy charging out that she'd never come back."

"Put a leash on her! Yeesh! I absolutely refuse to believe it's going to be that big a deal. Put Leeroy out there and tell her if she runs off into the Dungeon that I'll chase after her when I get back and she won't enjoy what happens after that. She won't die, but she might wish that she had!"

Endless tea time and grub tickling duty for you, Leeroy! Don't think I won't do it!

Somewhat placated, Burke leaves me in peace to go report back to the rest of the council about my day trip, no doubt they'd worked themselves into a tizzy the moment they heard about me leaving the front. Chumps. Do I need to train them again and instil a little more backbone?! The proud soldiers of the Colony are going to be fine for a little while as I head out, if I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be going anywhere in the first place!

The trip from the ground to the surface is irritating, as all travel is during a wave, but takes far less time than I would have thought. The Colony has been diligent in remodelling their territory and the 'express tunnel' they constructed connecting the main nest to the surface ant-hill is an incredible piece of work that I hadn't even realised was being done. It's very steep, but that doesn't prove to be much of a challenge to the thousands of ants that run this connection every day, delivering Biomass, cores and other resources from the depths to the surface, not to mention the hatchlings making the journey with their tenders to the academy.

As expected for such an important tunnel, there is a heavy presence of soldiers on deployment here, savaging any monster with the poor fortune to spawn within the walls. Using this tunnel, it's a matter of mere hours before we arrive back in the first strata close to the surface. My old stomping grounds! For nostalgia's sake, I take a slight detour off the main travel tunnel to nose about in the Dungeon proper. It's somewhat amusing, but also a little saddening, to see that I can no longer fit into the smaller tunnels that I once used to hide from the main thoroughfares. The monsters I used to be so afraid of still proliferate here, the wolves, thorn lizards and even the centipedes abound. A definitive lack of Croca-beasts however. It seems Gandalf, or the Dungeon, has no interest in spawning those creatures, and without their parent, there are probably very few of the monsters left.

Bullying around the monsters I used to fear is fun for a little while, but quickly grows boring as my core is already starting to leak out a little mana. I task all sub-brains with drawing in as much energy as possible

and I ensure that my legs remain in contact with the ground as much as possible, sucking up mana from the rock. It's enough, barely. It's a different story when we finally crest the top of the anthill and expose ourselves to the sky once more.

The surface nest has undergone significant modifications since last I was here. It's expanded greatly, for one thing, the academy and training grounds taking up the majority of the room. There are still many foundries and crafting areas for tier three carvers to utilise, though I suspect the main industrial centres of the Colony have all been shifted deeper into the nest. Our passing through is noticed by the many hatchlings and brood tenders who congregate here, the little ones stopping their activities to goggle at us as their minders scold them to keep their minds on task. It's amusing in a way and I wave my antennae this way and that, saying hi to all of the members of my family I see.

Standing atop the hill I'm treated to a panoramic view of the surrounding area, which is vastly changed from what I last saw. The land has been heavily developed, for one, with wide, irrigated and tilled fields stretching in the distance, small farmsteads dotting the landscape here and there, chimneys wafting white smoke into the air. The town itself has undergone staggering growth, multiple double-story buildings popping up alongside what was now a clear, wide street running through the centre of what had become a thriving community. It was nice to stand there and take it all in, less nice when the pointing and kneeling started.

Something was very wrong with these people.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 749: Visitation pt 2

That damned priest has continued to infect these people with his nonsense, I see, judging by the reaction from the townsfolk. Although, there is a faint chance that they think I'm the Queen, given that they've never seen an ant of my size before. As nice as it is to think that these people might be paying homage to Mother, the thought is only faint, deep down I know exactly what these people are thinking. Should I strike a pose? No, too tasteless.

I walk down the side of the anthill, taking notice of the *severe* drain on my mana as I do so. Despite my best efforts, and the well above average mana in the air, I just can't bring in anywhere near enough energy to satisfy the demands of my core. The mana bleeds out of me with every step that I take and it rapidly becomes clear that I won't be able to stay above ground for long. Having evolved to tier six, the surface really is barred to me from this point on.

Which raises an interesting point. According to what I've learned of the history of this place, the ancients are the biggest and baddest monsters Pangera has ever seen, what tier they are, goodness knows, but somehow they were out and about on the surface during what was effectively the very first 'wave'. Exactly how much mana was there flooding out of the Dungeon to produce the conditions for tier ten or above monsters (I imagine) to survive up here?! The mere thought of it is enough to make me shudder.

Regardless, I do my best to power my core as I continue toward the town of Renewal.

Word of my appearance atop the hill must have spread quickly, since I find Enid leading a delegation towards me as I approach the first buildings. I don't recognise most of them, though there are a few faces that tickle my memory. That guard guy is here, along with a scattering of others I recognise from

the siege. Of course Beyn is here. Goodness gracious this guy has nothing better to do than hound me, does he? Casting my eyes about, I can see a gaggle of antmancers sprinting toward us at full speed, their antennae flopping wildly in the breeze. I'll never be free of these idiots.

Sighing internally, I weave together a quick mindbridge and extend it toward Enid.

[Here, as requested,] I announce.

She smiles broadly at my pronouncement.

[I'm glad you were able to make it,] she says, [I appreciate you coming even though I'm sure it isn't comfortable for you.]

She's got that right.

[You aren't wrong. I'm leaking mana all over the place and it is far from a good feeling, if I do say so myself. As much as I'm looking forward to the tour, we're going to have to keep it relatively quick I'm afraid.]

[Of course,] she nods, [let's not waste any more time then. This way, please Anthony.]

With a sweeping gesture she indicates the direction we are to travel and then falls in beside me as we start to wander through the town.

[It's kind of bizarre to walk next to you like this,] I observe, [back when I first met you, I was what, tier three? Four? You were taller than me back then!]

She laughs.

[I have to agree, you monsters sure do grow up quickly compared to a human, how long have you been alive? A year? Already tier six! It's a dizzying speed by normal standards, at least as I understand these things. I suppose the repeated waves and all the trials you've been through have at least had the welcome side effect of helping you grow to your current size.]

I'm certainly a heck of a lot bigger than I was back then. In my previous evolution, I was roughly the size of a van, with my head positioned around chest height on an average human if my legs were set at a natural angle. Now though, I'm at least fifty percent larger, bigger than a minibus, smaller than an actual bus, my weight must be pushing into multiple tons. It's certainly a bit of a change from a human body! Even if my head is only slightly above Enid's at this point, my sheer size and mass when moving around make me feel truly large, to the point I take up a good portion of the roads as we walk.

As we make a slow tour, Enid is a talkative guide, filling me in on the work that's been done in the town, telling me stories of the many new residents and their circumstances and the ever expanding plans for new development. It's clear she's immensely proud of the people, praising their tireless work ethic and indomitable optimism in the face of disaster.

[I keep having to warn you, Enid,] I say, [you can't just start praising people's work ethic in front of an ant!]

[Oh, pish,] she grimaces with good humour, [these are good people and they've worked day and night. Just because we need sleep doesn't mean you should look down on us.]

[You know very well that we need to rest. You've been down there long enough to see.... *Them...* at work.]

[Oh, yes,] she shivers, [creepiest thing I ever saw. Ironically, I couldn't sleep a wink that night.]

[As long as they don't find out about it, you should be good...]

She freezes.

[They don't come for *people* do they?]

[As of yet I've made no comment to the Colony about how much humans should sleep, so I think you're safe.]

She breathes an obvious sigh of relief at my words and we continue our walking tour. Everywhere I look there are humans working and cooperating alongside the many ants that observe and assist them in their labour. There are members of the Colony everywhere, in the fields tending to crops, anywhere something is being built or crafted or traded, an ant is there. It's remarkable how comfortable the people have become around us, there isn't any sign of discomfort or antagonism that I can detect. It's honestly impressive.

[I really didn't expect the Colony to integrate so well with your people,] I observe to Enid.

[I didn't expect the people to integrate so well with the Colony,] she smiles, [in times of crises people may be more amenable to a change of attitude. After their homes were destroyed by Garralosh and her horde, these people fled here and then relied on another group of monsters to put their lives back together. Did you know that small groups have broken off to establish new villages alongside the Colony's new surface nests? These people are determined to follow your family no matter where they will go.]

[Isn't that mainly the priest's fault?] I grumble, flicking an antennae toward the one-armed man bouncing along in my wake like a puppy who needs attention.

[In part. But do you really think these people would have been so willing to accept what it was that he had to say if not for aid and assistance they've received on a daily basis from the Colony?]

[Probably not,] I admit.

Looking around, I can see humans of all ages gathering to watch me and my pets as we walk past. There's no fear, or nervousness in their faces, only joy and excitement. It's a nice feeling, I suppose, to be able to help people and have them be happy to see you when you come back. It's the kneeling and praying that I have issue with... because they are there as well, groups here and there, hands clasped to their chest as they whisper prayers under their breath and in their hearts. This one wants me to bless them with children, this one is wishing for me to harden their determination to work hard. Yet another is earnestly praying within their soul to be reincarnated as an ant in their next life. Sorry chief, I'm not sure it works that way for people in this world...

Although, who knows? I'm certainly not the authority on Gandalf's rules. Tell you what mate, I'll put in a good word for you next time I see the bearded one, alright?

Chrysalis

Chapter 750: The return

I highly enjoyed my time on the surface with Enid, taking a look about the place, enjoying the sun on my diamond carapace and taking in the open air. It's amazing how quickly you get used to the narrow tunnels of the nest and Dungeon, although that may just be due to me being an ant monster. It reminded me of how resilient people (and ants) really are. It wasn't long ago that the Colony and every person living in Renewal was knocked down onto their knees, their backs against the wall as we fended off certain annihilation. Now look at us, thriving and surviving no matter what gets thrown our way.

The peace between the two people really has blossomed and had wonderful benefits to both sides. The booming antdustrial revolution would have taken much longer to get going without the help of the human craftspeople being so willing to share their knowledge and techniques. In return, the Colony provided the bulk of the labour required to establish the town as it exists today, clearing the fields, sourcing the wood and stone for construction. It's a partnership that continues to strengthen, with volunteers coming into the Dungeon and risking their lives to fight alongside us.

I kind of got the feeling that Enid would have liked a speech or something from me to the townsfolk whilst I was up there, something to commemorate what would likely be my last visit to the surface, but I dodged her requests. I'm not comfortable being in the spotlight at the best of times, and I have a strange feeling that no matter what I said it would be twisted into some unimaginable meaning by the fanatics listening in. Instead, I was content to roam about the place and stick my nose into everyone's business, chatting with Enid and saying hi to my many siblings on the surface.

It was a great time, and a pleasant break, but the constantly leaking energy from my core meant that it couldn't last, and after a few hours I was forced to retreat to the Dungeon. With a final wave of the antennae, I pointedly ignored the weeping antmancers who appeared to be praising the sun with their hands extended, floods of tears and snot running down their faces as I dove back into the nest.

Once inside I raced to go deeper and the moment I was back below surface level I felt the rush of mana in the air and greedily pulled it into my core, drinking it like a thirsty person in the desert handed a cool glass of water. Phew!

[That was a bit rough, eh Invidia?] I commented to the gently flapping eyeball.

[It wassssss mosssst unpleassssant] he replies.

[The next time you and me evolve we won't be able to make it to the surface even during a wave most likely,] I observe to him. [Actually, that was your first ever trip to the surface wasn't it?]

[Yesssss...]

[What did you think?]

[It wasss too bright.]

[You've spent most of your life in the second strata. A candle is probably too bright for you. Ah well, let's keep on going, I won't be able to feel comfortable until we get to the bottom of the first layer at least. Once we've recharged our cores, it'll be back to the frontlines and back into the fight. You ready Tiny? Crinis?]

[Ready, Master!]

[Hurrurr!]

[Good replies! Let's get to it!]

The trip back into the depths is uneventful, the super highway constructed by the colony facilitating the journey wonderfully. I have to say, it's a little intimidating rushing down this wide tunnel into the darkness. They didn't muck around when they dug this thing. It's probably at least fifteen metres across, the sheer amount of rock they'd have to move to get it done boggles the mind, and the slope is probably close to seventy-five degrees. If I wasn't an ant, this would be tricky as hell. In fact, given my drastically increased size, my grip skill is having more than a little trouble holding my weight even on this slope. I'll have to make sure I put in a ton of training in order to make sure I can hold up my tons. Heh.

Once more embraced by the shadow sea, the inky black slick of dark mana that infuses the second strata, we continue our descent until we find our way back to the nest. Unsurprisingly, I find Wills waiting at the end of the highway, her antennae twitching anxiously.

"Are you kidding me Wills? I wasn't even gone half a day!" I exclaim, exasperated.

"They've already been made to retreat to the third defensive line down there," she tells me in a rush, "Sloan encouraged me to wait here so I could persuade you to go back out there the moment you got back."

"Where is Sloan, is she on the frontline?"

"Yes!"

Ah.

"Alright, fine. They aren't seriously in danger of breaking through are they?"

I really didn't think the Colony would be pressed to this extent just to hold off the wave. They've faced down greater challenges than this, surely. I knew it would be difficult, sure, but unable to cope without me there, that's not what I expected.

The scout hesitated.

"I don't ... think so," she said, "but they are worried that the cost of holding out the wave will grow once ants start to fall in greater numbers. The further they get pushed back, the more desperately they are forced to fight for every inch of ground, and the more casualties there are. I think they are nervous that things will start to escalate out of control if you don't return to relieve the pressure."

So they're panicking a little.

"No problem then," I sigh, "we were going to go straight back anyway."

[Let's keep moving.]

Once again embraced by the surging mana of the wave, my core is back in top condition before too long and we make our way through the farms to the deepest point of the Colony's territory. The sound of furious battle rings from the stone and ants rush everywhere, doing a thousand different tasks. I find the

general still at her post from when I left, watching over proceedings with a stern eye as she ensures her checkpoint is performing at maximum efficiency.

"Reporting for duty once more, general!" I salute.

"Nice to see you again, Eldest. We've given some ground in the last few hours as the demon concentration continues to rise. We'll be happy if you can lead the charge to retake the outer defences, we'd lose good soldiers if we had to do it without your help."

"Not a problem general, it'll be done in a jiffy."