

Chrysalis 761

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Chapter 761: A horrific evolution

By the time her master returned, her perfect, wonderful master, Crinis was practically vibrating in excitement. What a wonderful day! What a precious opportunity! To have her dearest master devote his care and attention to her evolution on a personal level, it was far more than she, a mere servant, deserved! But she would happily accept, in fact, she wouldn't dream of saying no! Such a chance wasn't to be squandered.

Her master walked toward her, his carapace shining so beautifully as the darkness mana washed across that perfect form that she nearly didn't realise when he spoke to her.

[-ready to go Crinis.]

[Ah! Yes, Master!] She squeaked.

[Great. I'm a lot less worried about your evolution than I am about Tiny's. I trust you to not make any dumb decisions.]

I trust you. I trust you. I trust you.

The words rattled around in Crinis' head, drowning out anything else that was said until she finally snapped back to reality a minute later and they were already inside the room. Crinis shook herself and tried to drive away any distractions. She had to focus and not let the master down in her evolution! She slapped herself on the side of her little ball form with two tentacles, the little impacts sending waves through her jelly-like shadow flesh. Her master looked at her curiously for a moment before turning back to the conversation and she herself began to listen more attentively.

[Shadow creatures can be a little tricky, particularly at this level of evolution,] the golgari shaper, Granin, was saying.

[You mentioned something like that with Tiny as well,] the master noted with perfect intuition, [what is it about shadow monsters?]

Granin frowned and Crinis huffed. How dare he show such a displeased expression when faced with perfection?! Did he need educating!? Her blades extended ever so slightly before she retracted them. Now wasn't the time.

[The trick is that shadow monsters are such different beasts compared to first or third strata monsters. Shadow Flesh is in a category of its own in terms of core body components. It can be hardened into an almost chitinous material, or be as spongy as your pet Crinis here has made it. When it comes time to reset, it's hard to get something that will perform remotely the same function.]

[Hmmm,] her master didn't sound pleased, so she released her claws again, [so... Crinis could reset her shadow flesh into ... I don't know... demon flesh or some other third strata equivalent, but it wouldn't be able to serve the same function?]

[Right,] Granin nodded, [there's no reset available from the third strata that would allow Crinis to remain as malleable as she currently is. If she were to reset, she wouldn't be able to compact herself

down to her current size,) the shaper gestured toward her current, cute ball sized shape, [or glomp onto your carapace the way she does.]

[Rejected!] Crinis declared before thinking.

[... uh... what was that Crinis?] the master asked.

[Um. I like my current shape, is all I meant... master,] she stammered out.

[Which is fine,] Granin said, [the issue is that the flesh is both the strength and the weakness of the shadow monsters. It's malleable and flexible, compressible and easily regenerated, but it is not very tough, no matter how many mutations you pile onto it. As you go deeper, it'll become harder and harder to avoid taking significant damage, or inflict damage, because everything you run into will be able to carve through your tentacles with ease.]

[Is there a solution?] master asked and Crinis felt a warm glow at the clear concern in their mind.

[There are plenty, just none that are guaranteed at this stage of evolution,] Granin appeared frustrated. [That's the issue with shadow creatures. Demon stuff from the third strata doesn't really suit, you really need stuff from the fourth, which are rare for tier six. Which is why I bring this up. If Crinis gets a choice to reforge her shadow flesh into something from that low in the Dungeon, she absolutely has to take it.]

[How exactly will she know?]

[It usually isn't hard to tell from the name. If it's not demonic or poisonous it's probably fourth strata. Just keep in mind that getting such an option would be exceptionally lucky. The system is fickle with things like this. In the much more likely event that she *doesn't* get an option like that, I recommend we focus on these areas...]

The discussion went on for some time after that and Crinis was diligent as she listened to every point that was made and every option that was discussed, asking a few questions herself when she needed clarification. She was determined to do her best and make her master proud! Later, when the talking was done and she had attached herself to the master's carapace once more, she received the best advice.

[When you evolve, just make sure it's something *you'll* be happy with,] the master said, [you don't need to worry about being useful, or looking after me or anything like that. As long as you're happy, that's all I want, alright?]

She felt warm and fuzzy at the care her master gave and pat him on the back with a few tentacles.

[Yes, Master] she said.

When they arrived in the evolution chamber, the ape was already there, fast asleep. She assumed his evolution had begun and he hadn't just gotten bored reading through the menus. Eager to begin, she parted from her master and made a comfortable home for herself in a dark corner, nestling her body half into the shadows and half out as she prepared to undergo the greatest change of her life to this point.

[Good luck, Crinis!] the master encouraged her.

She wouldn't let the master down! She engaged the menu, her attention riveted on the details.

[Would you like to use the evolution menu?]

[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:

- Jelly of the Inbetween
- Floating Orb of Madness
- Shadeshifter (special)
- Shadow Ghost of Darken Realm (special)
- Immaterial Mind Breaker (rare)
- Beholder of the Ineffable Truth (rare)
- Endless Maw (rare)

Acting with extreme care, she read through each option, taking careful tally of the bonus stats, estimating the value of each of the included organs and resets in order to try and glean the best value. She also tried to read the intentions of the System by the choices given, what it was thinking for her future, something that Granin had discussed at length with the master, though it had appeared master was thinking about other, no doubt more important things and hadn't listened.

The two key foci of the System appeared to be her mobility, and her mind affecting abilities in this evolution. Her mastery over shadow magic had grown quickly in the second strata and her ability to move through darkness had likewise improved. All that time practicing with the order had done her some good. These Skills were rewarded with options like the Jelly of the Inbetween, the Shadeshifter and Shadow Ghost, each of which improved her ability to slip from one place to another through various means. The Orb of Madness and Mind Breaker evolutions were tips to her growing repertoire of ways to affect the mind of her foes, something she didn't mind admitting she delighted in. Those that slighted her master deserved nothing less than the most twisted torments, after all!

Finally, the Endless Maw evolution was more slanted toward consumption and biting, turning her into an amorphous blob filled with endless mouths. It was tempting, but not quite what she was after.

Naturally the rare evolutions provided the best value and so it was to these that she was drawn.

[Rare Evolution: Beholder of the Ineffable Truth (rare). +60 bonus to Cunning, +60 bonus to Will, +60 bonus to Might, +60 bonus to Toughness. The Beholder is a knower of things and a perceiver of that which others would like to remain hidden. Blinded to light, it sees through, and into the between. Shadow Eye will be reformed into a Dimension Eye (warning, this will refund all mutations), allowing the Beholder to pierce the Veil.]

This evolution would focus on her perception, pushing her general, all-rounder build further along and helping seek out that which would harm the master. She liked it, but was drawn to the other.

[Rare Evolution: Immaterial Mind Breaker (rare). + 70 bonus to Cunning, +70 bonus to Will, +50 bonus to Might, +50 bonus to Toughness. The Mind Breaker is a creature not satisfied with shattering only the flesh, but seeks to destroy also the mind. Opponents will be left reeling as they attempt to fend off attacks that will crush bones and sanity alike. Reforges Shadow Flesh into Immaterial Flesh (warning, this will refund all mutations) a substance that can move through solid matter at will, with an expenditure of mana. In addition, Soul Seeker Cilia will be placed on the ends of the limbs, allowing for strikes directly into the mind to occur.]

This one... she *liked*.

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Chapter 762: Hanging with the eyeball

With Tiny and Crinis asleep in the evolution chamber, I feel as if something of a weight has been lifted off me. Not in the sense that I don't have to worry about them anymore, I'll always be worrying about them, but it's nice that they're going to be as strong as I am now. With a group of potent, maxed out tier six monsters running around together, we'll be able to fight off the depredations of the wave far better than before, and even the threat of a tier seven rising to challenge the Colony isn't as threatening as it was only a moment ago.

The two of them are now surrounded by the soft glow that heralds the beginning of their change. From this point they will undergo the metamorphic process of growing and becoming something entirely new. For this evolution, it's likely to take a day, perhaps more, so the question is, what do I get up to in the meantime? With the ape and the murder-ball out of action, it's just me and Invidia.

[Well then, it's just you and me chief,] I say to the hovering eyeball, [I think these two are going to be just fine here on their own, considering all the guards the Colony has in place. Why don't you and I head into the Dungeon and cut loose for a while. You can finally get some experience for yourself!]

That massive eye flashes with green.

[That would be pleassssant. I have yearned for my sssssshare.]

[I bet you have.]

Come to think of it, isn't it sort of nasty to force a Envy Demon to sit around watching others get something that he's forbidden? I've made him float about healing and shielding as he watched myself, then Tiny and Crinis soak up all of the experience right in front of him. In hindsight, it seems a bit rough. I say a silent apology to my loyal pet as we make our way through the tunnels and out into the open spaces outside the nest. The farming of the wave continues at a furious pace out here, thousands of workers rushing this way and that, carrying loads of cores or piles of biomass for distribution or storage. The sheer volume of resources being pulled in is boggling to the mind, making our first farming effort seem like child's play. With any luck, this spree will fuel the Colony for months after the wave has ended, providing the raw materials necessary to raise the next generation even better than the one before.

I should check in with the core shapers at some point also. I know that they sent out hundreds of teams to farm outside the boundaries of the Colony in the upper second and lower first strata. Hopefully they manage to stay safe out there. Raising pets is an expensive and trying ordeal, so I know what they're going through.

Eventually we reach the front and after a short wait, we get ready to push our way through the outer wall and into the Dungeon to face the wave. Before that, I decide to chat to Invidia about strategy.

[Well, this is your moment to do as you please really,] I tell the demon, [we can start funnelling experience into the two of us, so I guess it doesn't really matter who's doing the most damage. You can just cut loose and let the enemy feel your wrath.]

[*I have no wrath,*] he corrects me, [*only envy.*]

[Wait... so you don't feel wrathful ever? How does that work?]

[*It'ssss a demon thing.*]

[Fair enough then,] I shrug, [feel free to go crazy, just don't bring the tunnel down or anything like that. Use your eye laser if you want to, just, again, don't collapse the tunnel on our heads.]

[*Isss there anything elsssse?*]

I think for a moment.

[Not really. Let's get to it! Unleash the magic!]

[*I ssssshall!*]

I whip together the omni-elemental mana construct and start churning out some varied mana for my brains to practice with, ice for one, blue fire for the other. It's hard for them, but whipping together two separate spells with two different types of mana just makes me feel giddy inside. My dream of ultimate magical power is nearly achieved! Soon I'll be throwing out dozens of spells at once, using four or five different mana types! How do you defend against that? Gweheheheh.

For his part, Invidia looks just as excited as I am, his eye practically glowing with eagerness as he pushes forward, pelting the first monsters in front of us with a magical barrage of ice, fire and explosions that practically dissolves them on the spot. Then it turns out it wasn't my imagination that his eye was glowing, as the light grows more and more intense before a beam of pure energy lances forth, cutting through the dark tunnel and detonating every monster it touches.

BOOM!

[Holy smokes, Invidia! You aren't holding back!]

[*I havessss no need to.*]

[True!] I laugh. [Go for it little buddy!]

I can feel his prodigious mind at work, weaving mana together at an unbelievable pace to form detonation after detonation that rock the air and send shards of stone flying everywhere. It's like an artillery barrage has landed around us, the noise, light and devastation are savage. Into the mix I throw

my own shards of ice and jets of flame, roasting or spearing everything that manages to survive the ongoing explosions. At long last allowed to revel in his full and complete power, Invidia does not let the opportunity slip by and rains hell down on his opponents until even demons are shattered by the power he unleashes.

After ten minutes, the tunnel in front of us is a pockmarked warzone, covered in Biomass, shards of ice and superheated rock. Invidia chuckles to himself, an eerie 'ssssshhh sssssh shhh' sound, before his teeth unveil themselves from thin air and he flaps his way over to the Biomass and starts chomping. Not far away, we can hear the tide of monsters swelling again, it won't be long before we are forced back into the fray. But, for now, the two of us are content to recharge our mana, chow down on some biomass and reflect on the joys of magic.

[Feel good to go full force for a change?] I ask the demon.

[Yesssss,] he almost purrs, *[I have been waiting to takessss what they had for myself, for sssso long.]*

[You mean their experience?]

[It belongssss to me.]

[I mean, it does when you finish them off, I suppose. Or are you saying that *all* experience in the Dungeon belongs to you?]

[*Not all,*] he corrects me.

Oh? That's a little surprising.

[That's not what I expected to here from an Envy demon,] I tease him a little.

[I cannot take from the masssster. Or that which belongssss to the masssster.]

[Ah. So you mean, all experience in the Dungeon belongs to you, *except* for me, Tiny and Crinis.]

[Yesssssss,] he purrs as he chomps down some more Biomass. *[Alllll for meeee.]*

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Chapter 763: While you were sleeping

The wave ground on as Tiny and Crinis continued their evolution, the ants of the Colony working industriously as they always did. The never ending spawns of monsters were a blessing and curse, disrupting all usual business, but flooding the nests with Biomass and cores that were in turn used to fuel the further expansion and growth of the Colony. Queens toiled, eating and laying eggs that were taken by the brood tenders and nursed in their protected chambers. Once hatched, each larvae was cared for as if they were royalty. Fed and groomed near constantly, played with and tickled on an hourly basis. Each grub was tended by the same ant from the moment it hatched until the happy day they graduated the academy. This allowed them to maximise the utility and bonuses gained from their mentoring Skills.

It was a well-oiled machine, but one that was constantly in the process of being reinvented. The world of Pangera was ever changing and it was up to the Colony to adapt to stay ahead of it, lest they fall and

become extinct. And it was exactly this worry that kept the two brood tender council members on their claws.

Theresant and Florence worked tirelessly to ensure that the next generation of the Colony were reared in the best way that they knew how, and when that knowledge changed, so too must their methods. Nothing but the most effective, most efficient methods would be acceptable for such an important task, but even these tried and true practices weren't always up to the task. Sometimes, they were forced to think outside the box, because, as strange as it might sound, not every larva, or pupa, or hatchling, was the same.

Particularly this one.

"Where has she gone this time?!" an unusually flustered Florence groaned when Theresant gave her the bad news.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't have come to you," her fellow council member grumbled to her, clearly suffering from a lack of rest.

"This is the third time she's escaped today! If I hadn't seen it for myself, I wouldn't have even believed a grub could move that fast! What did her caretakers say?"

"They're bordering on hysterical. The idea of a larva going *missing* is unheard of. The whole group are bordering on panic! They think they've failed in their duty to the next generation!"

The two dipped their antennae, such a feeling was beyond pain to the tenders. This could not be borne!

"Make sure they are comforted, they have not failed the Colony, but rather this grub is beyond anything I've seen before. What possible reason would a larva have to abandon the brood chambers?! And how the heck could they even do it!?"

"Calm yourself, sister," Theresant said, "we must take this situation in hand. No grub will be lost on our watch, no matter what."

"You're right, of course. Thank you Theresant," Florence collected herself and found her calm. "Do you have any thoughts as to where we should look first?"

"There must be tracks, it's a grub after all. Let's gather a team of tenders and see if we can requisition some scouts. We'll have that larva back in our care before they know it."

Having thus firmed their resolve, the two ants moved quickly. In a matter of minutes a search party was gathered, a passing group of scouts press-ganged into service. It made a strange sight, one rarely seen in the nest, when the brood tenders sallied forth from their chambers in search of a wayward larva. What they expected to be a quick search, soon took a turn for the worse as the scent they followed ranged high and low through the tunnels.

Much business was thrown into disorder as the increasingly desperate party of brood tenders raced from place to place, bursting into the blacksmith's forges and turning them upside down before turning and racing out again. Many an antennae was set to wiggling anxiously when they raided the resting chambers, disturbing the torpor of many workers and unknowingly throwing the Unnamed One's into despair by throwing their counts off. But there was nothing to be done about it, there was not a single

ant in the Colony who would stand before the brood tenders and impede their work. There was no hierarchy amongst the castes, no pecking order or chain of command, but all knew that the work of caring for the young was the most important work of all. When the tenders burst into their workplaces, all the ants could do was get out of the way until they were gone.

So it was that Theresant and Florence grew increasingly frantic as they followed the trail of this impossible grub all through the nest until finally the scent led outside the nest itself.

"HOW?!" Florence burst out, "it can't possibly be *this* quick! It doesn't have *legs*!"

Theresant pondered for a moment.

"Do you think it might have latched onto other ants using its mandibles? That might explain the quick pace and the lack of tracks."

Florence stared at her.

"You don't think they'd notice?" she asked.

"It's a larva! They are small and light. If it latched onto a leg, or underneath the carapace..."

"Dammit!" Florence swore. "That means it could drop off anywhere in the tunnels and crawl off. We need to move quickly! What if a monster spawns next to it!"

"We won't let it happen," Theresant promised her sister before turning to the search party behind them. "Bring your sisters," she ordered them, "we need more antennae for the search."

Five minutes later, the single largest gathering of brood tenders outside their chambers ever witnessed descended on the Biomass farms like a storm, scattering all before them in their hunt for the grub. Chaos reigned wherever they went as more and more ants were forced to join the hunt until thousands upon thousands of ants flooded the tunnels, searching high and low, tracing the faint scent of a single grub that seemed to criss-cross everywhere throughout the territory until none could be sure where the trail began or where it ended.

As the tenders grew more distressed, more ants abandoned their work to assist them, which quickly grew out of control and all industry in the Colony ground to a halt. Even soldiers were dragged into the mess, pulling the generals with them. Before she had even realised what was happening, Sloan found herself organising the central command post for the search, directing no less than fifty different search parties as they tore the territory apart in search of the grub.

Advant herself lead a charge to the very edge of the Colony defences, following a faint trace that led right to the outer wall before doubling back, somehow toward the farms. Eventually the pattern began to emerge as Sloan pieced together the movement of the grub and organised the searchers into a wide net, cast out to surround and constrict the territory in which the elusive larva could move. With hearts pounding in chests, the ants slowly converged, turning over every rock and leaf so as not to let their prey slip past. Creeping step by step they advanced, drawing close the strings around the target and blocking off escape routes.

Emergency walls were constructed, an army of carvers working without pause, walled off tunnels and built emergency watch stations. Every ant passing in and out was inspected head to toe, lest they unknowingly smuggle the grub through a check point.

Florence and Theresant felt joy surging in their hearts as the web drew ever more taut. They would not lose the larva and their sisters would know joy when this lost lamb had been returned to the fold. They placed themselves at the forefront of the search and none were more diligent than they. The two siblings checked every rock, every fold in the stone and left no shadow seaweed uninspected as they advanced.

Eventually, the multitude of search parties gathered around a single point, an intersection of tunnels close to the edge of the Colony's territory. Hearts were in mouths all around as the thousands of ants gathered within sight of each other. Somewhere ahead, in this innocuous looking patch of rock, the grub was hiding, they had made sure of it. All trails led to this point, escape was impossible!

"Ahh! What a nap! I'm feeling good! Oh. Ah. Hello everyone?"

At that moment, the Eldest stood up, right in the middle of the multitude of spectators, stretching after a period of torpor.

"Eldest? What are you doing here?" Theresant asked.

The giant ant turned to cast their eyes over the tense antennae of the gathered crowd.

"I was resting here. What the heck has been going on while I was resting? Actually. Don't worry, I think I have it."

The brood tender tilted her head, unsure as to what the Eldest meant when they moved forward, ducked down and seemingly from nowhere plucked a grub from the ground with their mandibles, holding it up for all to see.

"This what you're after?"

There was perfect stillness for a moment, then, the gathered throng burst into wild applause, clacking their mandibles as waves of pheromones rolled through the tunnels. The brood tenders were almost overcome with emotion as the long search finally came to an end. Theresant and Florence walked forward on shaking legs to approach the Eldest and inspect the larva for themselves.

"Finally we've found her!" they cried. "We can take her back to the chambers and tend to her needs properly."

The little grub wriggled viciously in the Eldest's grip but the mighty ant had no problem maintaining their grip without hurting the little one.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," the Eldest shocked the two of them, "this one reminds me of Vibrant. She's the only other grub I've seen with this much energy. If you take her back, she's only going to escape again. You might as well leave her with me. I'll bring her up personally."

The two tenders felt a chill run down their carapace.

"You? T-teach her personally? A-are you s-sure that's... safe?" Florence stammered.

The Eldest eyed the two of them, an aura of irritation rising from them.

"What are you implying?"

So quickly they almost missed it, the hovering demon guardian of the Eldest appeared, a giant mouth splitting the air beneath it and opening wide. Quick as a flash, the Eldest turned and flung the grub straight into the waiting maw, which quickly closed and vanished from sight.

"ELDEST!?" Theresant shrieked.

"Calm down," the Eldest grouched. "He's not going to eat her. If she's going to be a pain and send the entire Colony into a tizzy, she can have a little time-out. In this case, time-out means being held in a demon's inter-dimensional mouth."

Then they laughed. Oh how they laughed.

Scarred and frightened, the two tenders retreated back to the brood chambers, to reassure their sisters and comfort each other from memories they would rather forget. An hour later, the Colony was back to its normal industrious self, as if nothing had ever happened.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 764: A brand new pain in the neck

The first time I met Anthony, I honestly didn't think much of them. Insect type monsters were weak, such was common knowledge. In fact, that knowledge was so common, that it was some time before I realised I didn't actually know much about that branch of monsters, I had simply dismissed them out of hand based on the collective poor disposition toward them. After working with him and sensing his potential, I spent a considerable amount of time digging through the archives and studying the material we had on the subject, which was pathetically little. There were many records of ants, but mainly of the historical sort, detailing this outbreak or that, the types of individuals encountered and how they had been exterminated. Extraordinarily little work had been done exploring the branching evolution trees, common mutation types, or any of the rigorous research that the Cult of the Worm was renowned for.

Why? Why was this branch of monster, more than any other, disregarded in such a total manner? It was baffling to me, but I had little choice but to admit that I myself had done the same. Despite garnering a reputation for delving deep into monster archetypes that were typically looked down upon by my contemporaries, I had never considered looking into ants in any sort of depth. I suppose I can understand the bias, ants are a despised monster archetype. General Dungeon dwellers hate them for the damage they cause and the rather terrifying manner they attack, tunnelling through walls and bursting into vulnerable areas with a flood of chitinous bodies, whereas my fellow scholars had little use for such individually weak monsters when trying to craft the apex predator that is an Ancient.

So I set out to gather together all of the knowledge I could to rectify this mistake. By pulling together and cross-referencing studies on every hive-type insect monster I could find, I began to build a profile of what may be possible, not only at the lower tiers, but also at the higher. What emerged was a picture quite unlike what I had expected. High tier insect monsters are very rarely seen, but without exception, they are powerful. High tier ants, other than Queens, are never seen, but it stood to reason that they too would be just as strong.

My expectations in this regard were borne out, though not in the manner I had foreseen.

- *Excerpt from 'Reflections on the Insectoid evolutionary chain in the New World' by Granin Lazus*

Champion monsters aren't exactly unknown to me, seeing as Vibrant is one. I spoke to Granin about it, as a passing topic and given that he knows just about everything on the topic of monsters, he had plenty to say. Generally rare, but especially so amongst communal monsters, champions are a distinct threat when encountered by delvers. Smarter, stronger and capable of rallying other monsters around them, these creatures have apparently always been a known quantity in the Dungeon that were better left alone and avoided than confronted head on. I have already experienced the *joy* of taking care of one ant champion and I'm not particularly enamoured of the idea of taking care of a second.

[Whatever you do, make sure you don't eat her, Invidia. Just, be careful, you know?]

[*I sssshall. The young isss sssafe with me.*]

[Good to know.]

The absolute mess that this larva caused was beyond the pale. Not even Vibrant was *that* much of a pain in the neck before hatching. To think that this potential champion is already capable of this level of disaster causing... only my finest and strictest training will be able to mitigate the catastrophes to come. Still, she hasn't even gone into the pupal state yet... what exactly are we going to do with her when we're supposed to be out fighting the wave?

Invidia will do his absolute best, I'm sure, but I don't really expect him to fight whilst cradling a grub in his mouth. We need a more permanent solution...

As I ponder what to do with the little thing, I drift my thoughts down to the Vestibule and the flow of Will that is contained therein. The grub is there also, its barely conscious mind is providing energy to me, just as any other member of the Colony would. I can feel her thoughts, ever so softly, and only when I concentrate. There is immense curiosity there, as well as a burning impatience. I can tell she's in a hurry to grow up and hatch, to join the workforce and take her place amongst her siblings.

It's not time yet, little grub! You've got a bit of growing to do before you're ready to do that! Having said that, may as well go and secure some food for her. The three of us wander off and find a creature spawning in the tunnels which I put down with a quick chomp before asking Invidia to release the little one so she can get fed.

The grub emerges almost tentatively from the nightmare zone that is the demon's pocket dimension, wiggling out onto the ground with obvious relief. They have little in the way of senses, the larvae, blind and with very little by way of smell, but I'm sure it wasn't all that pleasant in there, which is nothing less than what she deserved after the panic she caused. Smelling the food, she wiggles her way toward it with that strength and energy which reminds me so much of Vibrant as a larva.

Soon the sound of chomping and chewing rings throughout the tunnel and I watch the little grub go at it, eating far more than one would think possible for a creature of her size. Even then, she tries to crawl away, nipping behind a rock and attempting to roll away from my clutches whilst I'm not paying attention. Sadly for her I was well aware of her intentions the moment they formed in her little head. Back into the mouth with you! You'll learn eventually.

Chrysalis

Chapter 765: A harmonious cycle

The society of the Colony was alien to me at first, as one may well expect. The differences in origin between I, a surface born sapient of the Iron Sands, and the ants who made up the insect empire (as I like to call them. They dismiss the title and refer to themselves exclusively as 'the Colony' or 'family'), are obvious at a glance, and so it was difficult for me to make heads or tails of their dealings for a goodly while.

An example would be the lack of a clear chain of command. An absurd amount of industry and labour is done inside the many nests of the Colony each and every day, but who decides which work is to be done? Who decides who does what work? Where are the decision makers and enforcers that ensure the necessary work is completed? It was to my shock that I learned that no such roles exist. Imagine a warehouse with no roster, a mine with no foreman or a ship with no captain. How could it possibly function? How would anything get done?

My mind rebelled against the feasibility of such an arrangement when I heard it, certainly I had no parallels to draw within my sphere of experience. It was only from this point forward, that I truly began to understand the differences between our peoples.

The division of labour within the Colony is surprisingly democratic. The ants organise themselves into groups with similar Skills and capabilities, then decide what it is that they are going to do. Central to this structure is the detailed information that is disseminated throughout the Colony of their activities. There are many ants tasked with simply collecting information as to what goes on within the territory. How much ore was smelted today? Will there be a shortfall? Is there a dearth of cores? Exactly how much Biomass has been gathered? All of this is known, collated, and spread throughout the workforce. If there is a shortage, teams of ants will go and fill it. If there is a surplus, they will find other things to do to not clog the pipeline.

When more complex tasks arise, research projects, large scale construction, a large shipment of goods to be transported and protected, a call is put out for capable family members to join the team, which they will do voluntarily. Once they feel they have enough ants for the job, they'll get to work, feverishly and industriously racing to complete the task. When it's finished, the team will either move onto another similar task, or dissolve, the individuals joining other groups and finding more work to do.

It's a system that only functions thanks to the unique nature of the ants. They are without ego, always stepping aside if another more capable individual presents for the work, without greed, always prepared to sacrifice for the collective, and without sloth, for nothing is more absurd than a lazy ant. I found it fascinating to observe in action, growing bewildered at the sheer speed they could assemble a specialised group, complete a task, then move to the next. If ever there was need, there were workers to meet that need. The pace of it all was enough to make my head spin, the incredible number of individuals involved, the density in which they lived with each other.

It was as if they collectively formed one organism. A giant, living and breathing creature formed of millions of parts, with one will and one vision. It was beautiful.

Excerpt from 'The Insect Economy: Macro and Micro perspectives' by H.R.R. Slyth.

Invidia and I fall into a regular pattern that sees us out crushing the wave for a while and then returning to feed the grub and trap it back into its inescapable cage. Some might say that putting the larva into a prison carved from solid metal is inhumane, but she chewed her way through the rock so we didn't have much choice. Luckily, if we force feed her a ton of Biomass until she basically passes out from a food coma then we get a good hour of stress-free fighting in before she becomes mobile again and the escape attempts commence.

It's especially frustrating because I can't really sense any malicious intention from her, she's just curious and wants to roll about the place, free and uninhibited, quite apart from most of the grubs in the Colony who are perfectly content to go with the flow. The only downside is that she's a completely defenceless larva with almost no sensory apparatus or ability to defend herself. Considering her almost uncanny ability to wriggle out of sight and hitch a ride with passing ants, locking her up is necessary for her protection...

It was that or she stayed in the mouth, alright?! I think I'm doing well!

While Crinis and Tiny are continuing to evolve, Invidia and I bond over our mutual love of explosions, magic and lasers. This has also been a wonderful opportunity to start grinding my mind-magic. I only need to push it up a rank or two and then I'll have the ability to create mind constructs just like the envy demon! Of course, I don't expect that I'll be able to maintain nearly as many as he does, but it should help multiply the amount of magic I can do.

I went into depth with my triad of advisors in regard to this technique before I evolved. As they said, the normal method, for a monster, is to go the same route that Invidia has. Pile up one huge, omnipotent brain, and then use advanced mind magic to spin off constructs that essentially allow for parallel thinking. Each construct isn't nearly as powerful as the original mind, but with increasing expertise in mind magic, and with a more potent 'host' brain, the constructs become stronger and able to handle more workload. Going even more advanced than that, the constructs can cooperate with each other much like my own sub-minds do, working together to handle spell-weaving that they couldn't do on their own.

I took the time to speak to Invidia about it and it turns out he needs two mind constructs working together to weave each instance of his explosion magic, something that surprised me a little. As he explained it, since his go to detonation spell required two different elements, namely gas and fire, it was far easier to create them with two separate minds carrying the load rather than the one. So, during our spell barrages I manage to work hard on my mind magic, reaching out with bridges and connecting to monsters, twisting their minds and throwing false thoughts at them as they attempted to dodge Invidia's spell barrage. It was familiar casting that I'd spent a lot of time on before but hadn't been using lately as training other skills had taken priority. Now it was finally time for the mental warfare to make its triumphant return! All in the name of mind constructs!

We spent over a day in this pattern, force feeding the larva and fighting to our heart's content, driving back the ever-surgin' monsters and helping provide breathing room to my siblings. Invidia continues to gleefully detonate every monster he can, vacuuming up experience at a phenomenal rate as I content myself with training my skills and picking up kills where I can. After enough time has passed, we gather up the iron cage and cart it back to the evolution chamber where we find Crinis and Tiny emerging from their sleep, newly forged and ready for battle.

Chrysalis

Chapter 766: The new kids

The soft glow of evolution is gradually fading and the two of them are looking significantly different. Well, Tiny is, at any rate. Crinis remains blobbed up in a small ball, wobbling slightly as whatever internal changes that are taking place complete themselves. My first pet and friend in this Dungeon, the giant bat-faced ape, has continued his trend of getting more absurdly muscular as time goes by. Another increase in size has him looming over the room, his considerable bulk taking up almost half the available space. I can see that he's made sure to put back on all the muscle mass that I took from him, times about five. His shoulders have levelled up, as well as the rest of his upper body, but surprisingly even his legs are looking beefier. Clearly he wanted an all over power increase without targeting any particular area.

He remains largely dark in colour, the influence of the shadow mana that he took into his body is still there, though traces of flickering silver are starting to return to his back. Still somewhat shaggier than a gorilla would normally be, his fur crackles with faint electrical energy that discharges into the air and leaves an acrid tang on my antennae.

I waddle over to Crinis to more closely inspect her condition and I'm intrigued by the slight changes I can detect around her. Although she appears dark and wibbly-wobbly as always there's something new that I can see dancing on the edges of her body. It's an almost ephemeral, ghost-like outline that hovers around her form. I'm super curious to know what it is, but I don't want to peek at her core while she's still evolving. Also, it'd feel a bit rude to look at someone's core whilst they were sleeping. It's just not on.

So I set down the cage with the still sleeping grub inside it and settle in to wait with Invidia. We idly engage in mind magic warfare to pass the time but it doesn't take long before the glow around the two monsters fades completely and they begin to stir. Crinis is the first to shake off the sleep, of course, the greedy ape will cling to every ounce of rest he can get his meaty hands on. The little blob shivers a little and I feel her consciousness stirring to wakefulness as a collection of small tendrils extend and she starts to almost unconsciously feel out her surroundings.

[Hey there Crinis! How does it feel to be tier six?]

The little ball wiggles a bit.

[Ah! Master! You were waiting for us?]

[We haven't been here long. Invidia and I have been out fighting the waves while you evolved, for the most part. You didn't answer my question though. You're now a member of the exclusive tier! The biggest and baddest creatures in the Colony! Are you excited?]

[Um, no? I-I'm happy I'll be able to serve you better, Master!]

I slump a little. Ah well. I suppose it's fine like this. I'd sort of hoped she might be a little pleased with the increase in her own power for her sake, rather than mine, but it appears there's some distance to go before I can remove the 'pet to master' relationship we have. I won't rest until my pets are free of all compulsion and able to make their own way in the world! This is my vow!

[Get any juicy options?] I follow up. [I'm genuinely curious to hear what sort of things you were offered. Given your species and ... specialties, there must have been some odd ones.]

Crinis is only too happy to explain to me what her choices were, extending a few small tentacles to wave about the air as she excitedly describes the various dimensional mind horrors that she could have turned into. Naturally she picked the most terrifying one. She's one step away from being able to *flay* minds. I look slightly askance at her as I ask: [And you're happy with your choice?]

[Yes!] she confirms joyfully.

Well... I suppose it's to be expected. She's happy, that's what matters.

[Actually, since you've got new... mind... invasion... stuff, you should check the Skills available to purchase. You might have unlocked something to do with your new capabilities. In fact, I'd be shocked if you didn't. You should also make sure that you test out your phasing ability as much as you can before we go out to fight again. I get the feeling it might take a little while to get the hang of, so practicing early will pay off.]

Only too happy to take my advice, Crinis tentacles her way over to a corner so she can start perusing the lists and I see her already trying to pass a tentacle into the wall, shifting the flesh to become insubstantial. There really is going to be nowhere to hide from her much longer. I feel a chill.

Thankfully, Tiny manages to distract me from my grim future by sitting up and yawning with an unexpected amount of energy. His thick, packed arms and shoulders shift and bulge beneath his fur as he moves and as he becomes more aware I see him glance down at himself, a mighty grin breaking out on his face as he beholds his new mass.

[Yeah, yeah. You're huge. Did you get anything else in this evolution, or did you just pour it all into Might?]

He gives me a thumbs up that I could interpret in several ways but I decide that he is probably indicating that he did actually diversify in some way.

[And you remembered to make sure that your Cunning score stayed over twenty?]

The thumb droops a bit, but he does keep it up from which I take it to mean that he did do as I said, but he'd much rather have sacked more of his brain matter if he could.

[Good! Well done Tiny! Why don't you run me through what your choices were and what you picked? I'd love to know all about it.]

Even with his increased intelligence, Tiny isn't much of a talker, but with a mixture of words, gestures and interpretative dance (which he's surprisingly skilled at) I manage to get the gist of what he's saying.

[Sounds like you got some hella impressive bones there big guy,] I congratulate him. [Not as amazing or shiny as my carapace, but still, not bad.]

I have a thought.

[By the by. The two of you ought to finish up any new Skill purchases and do some mutating! Pour some Biomass into those fancy new duds you're carrying around now, then we'll go out and get to combat practice! Sound good?]

I get a resounding cheer from all my pets, even Invidia for some reason, and all of us settle into perusing menus.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 767: The gang mutates

It's not only the pets that need to get some mutating done, I'm in the same boat myself! Whilst I haven't been packing on the Biomass at the moment, I've been making sure I keep a steady intake in order to continue accumulating points and there's plenty that I can do with them. I'm not planning on pushing anything to +30 just yet, not even my precious carapace, since there's still much lower hanging fruit that I can reach up and grab with almost no effort. Upgrading my stomach would be good, but still too expensive at this stage. It's a whopping 140 Biomass to take a single organ from +25 to +30 and when I still have parts of my body without any upgrades at all, it just isn't going to happen.

That's right! I'm talking about my brains!

All four of them, to be precise. The main mind, main sub-brain and the two lackeys, the regular sub-brains. I actually spoke fairly at length with Torrina about mutations for brains, at Granin's suggestion, since he thought that she might have more expertise than he did as she specialised in 'spell-casting wimp monsters', in his words. I quickly learned that when it comes to brains there is *way* too much to know and very quickly had to ask the enthusiastic shaper to tone things down for me.

In the end, despite the plethora of possible options, combinations and builds that can be done with brains, there are only a few that are particularly relevant for me. In the end, what exactly do I want my brains to do? The focus is fairly narrow when it was put to me in those terms, and Torrina was only too happy to spell out the strengths and weaknesses of each choice at a level that I could comprehend it.

Still, I wistfully look down the list at the many intriguing options that I'll never get the chance to pick.

Rapid brain for faster processing of information. Very useful for speed type monsters like Vibrant. A mutation like this, as well as a nervous system upgraded similar to mine are almost a necessity for her as she gets faster and faster. Moving at that kind of speed without being able to think fast enough to keep up with it, or react fast enough when something jumps out at you, is a short cut to getting yourself splatted on a wall somewhere. I was sure to sit Vibrant down and press this point upon her as soon as I got the chance, which took a little doing. Gravity mana is a great leveller when it comes to catching her.

Motion Prediction brain? Another handy one. Develops and improves the section of the brain dedicated to motion tracking and prediction. I remember hearing that jugglers on Earth were found to have larger examples of this sector. It might seem like not much, but when you think about the amount of motion tracking that goes on in combat, you'd begin to realise just how important it can be to be able to accurately trace and predict the path of things in motion. I'd love to take this as a defensive option... but my heart is set on another path... Maybe if I get another brain...

Hormone control brain? Turns out even monsters have hormones that help regulate their body. Being able to exercise some level of control over them would be more than a little handy... Need an adrenaline kick at just the right moment? POW! Delivered right into the system when you want it.

Emotion regulator? This one seems a little weirder to me... The meditation skill does something similar once ranked up, but I can see there would be some synergies. If you were a rage monster like Sarah then you could use something like this to make you angry all the time. Apparently she isn't able to purchase this mutation due to a restriction of her species, which is something I've not yet run into. Though I suppose if you literally turn yourself into an unstoppable avatar of berserk rage then the System isn't likely to just let you turn it off whenever you want to. It'd be like allowing Vibrant to purchase a 'calm' organ. It's just wrong.

But it's in the magical options that the real juice of the brain mutations can be found. Better mana manipulation, or perception, or handling, or sensitivity, or even absorption are here. You can improve the brain's capacity to handle specific types of mana, or utilise particular types of constructs.

It's even possible to select mutation that will, after enough upgrades, permanently engrave a construct into the structure of the brain itself. Wild, I know. The advantage of not having to make and then maintain the construct are nice and all, but you could just get the mana organ if you wanted to. Of course, taking this option only takes up a mutation slot, rather than a new organ, essentially passing the cost onto Biomass rather than precious evolutionary energy. The drawback being that the brain you purchase this mutation for won't be able to utilise any other form of mana, which is a problem, obviously. I suppose if you were a specialist, it would be fine, but I have other plans.

When looking at it logically, what am I going to be using my sub-brains for? Creating mind constructs! It'll be the constructs themselves that go on to do the actual spell-casting, and I can't mutate those, they aren't physically part of my body. There's no point making my sub-brains better at casting any spell other than mind constructs, it's simply a waste of resources.

This is the point that Torrina was most determined to press upon me, not to be distracted by the shiny offerings but focus on the boring truth. The future of my sub brains is a grim one, they will be mind construct batteries and little else! The better they are at making mind constructs, the more spells I can sling! There simply isn't any way to overcome the difference by going down any other path!

So naturally, the option I choose for them is the Mind Mana Specialisation.

All three sub-brains are to be upgraded to +15, taking the mind mana mutation both times, then reinforcing it. With this, all three of them will become much more adept at handling mind mana, as well as using the mind mana construct. This will help my training speed as well as improving my ability to form new minds. Which leaves me with my main brain. Obviously, there's a few ways that I could go with this one. I could leave all the spell casting to the sub-brains and have my main mind be set aside just for processing combat information and moving the body, but that's boring! I didn't pump so many stats into this brain to have it handle all the simplest tasks! No! I pumped all the stats into this brain so that it could handle the biggest, most awesome magic of all!

Whipping through the menu, I find what I want and grin to myself.

Gravity Mana specialisation. I take this mutation at +5, then I scroll through and find the other mutation I want: Condensing Mana handling. Take that mutation at +10, then fuse the two together at +15. Gweheheheh. That's right, my main mind is for dropping bombs, literally. Of course, the sub-brains *can* cast the gravity bomb now, but that doesn't mean that's what I want them to do most of the time. Nope, they're reserved for creating mind constructs that will focus on elemental casting. When it comes to gravity magic, the main mind is going to be my go to and I'll continue pouring evolutionary energy into it until it can throw around gravity spells with contemptuous ease.

With these two mutations, my main mind has grown better at condensing mana and handling gravity mana. I can't wait to see how they work together!

With everything selected, I confirm my choices and almost gleefully allow the rising itch to take over, throwing my body to the ground and spasming my legs in the air like a poisoned spider. Just wait, Dungeon! My power will never stop growing!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 768: Out to fight in the new digs

Travelling the lands of the Colony was not something I was too eager to undertake. My decision to pursue this venture was only made after repeated, and passionate, requests from you, my dear readers. I was as intrigued as all of you, I'm sure, when word of this strange new place reached my ears in Derinon. A land of people cooperating with monsters from the Dungeon? It was scandalous! The old biddies and I were all too happy to titter over tea and imagine what such a place would be like. For my part, I was content to leave it to the imagination and dedicate myself to my cross-stitching, but you wouldn't have it, would you, reader?

My publisher all but broke down my door one morning, a barrel full of letters under one arm and his face as red as a baboon's rear. For a man with such pitiful physical stats, it was rather an impressive sight. After I sat the man down and got a stiff drink into him, he explained that demands for a travelogue detailing this wondrous new place had been pouring in. The people had spoken, he declared to me, and urged that I make preparations for the journey as soon as possible.

What am I if not your humble servant, dear reader? So it was that not a week later I had packed my bags and begun the long trek to the wild frontier! It was enough to make my bonnet spin, let me tell you. Naturally, my assistant and companion Riligent has joined me, along with several suitably strapping lads and lasses who have assured us they are up to the task of ensuring our safety.

So fear not, dear reader! As safely as possible, I, your beloved Tolly, will step foot where others fear to tread and bring you the vivid stories of faraway lands that you so crave! Await my next missive with bated breath, for we are only a few days away from the borders. What will we see? Find out next time!

Freshly mutated and ready to go, my team of all-powerful, world-beating tier six monsters makes its way out of the evolution chamber in the heart of the nest and out toward the borders. We've got new wheels, time to take 'em for a spin. We don't get far before Tiny is already swinging his fists, a broad grin on his face. It's a shame we have to leave his armour behind since it no longer fits him. Even his noggin grew larger to the point his helmet wouldn't go on again.

Another visit to Smithant will be required, I think. I probably need to get measured up as well, since I kind of promised her that I would look at getting some armour organised once I'd evolved. At least I can say to this point that I've genuinely been busy helping defend the Colony during the wave. Hopefully that mad ant won't give me too much grief over it...

Regardless of insane blacksmiths, by the time we reach the front there's a tangible excitement in the air as both Tiny and Crinis are excited to test out their new selves.

"Greetings Eldest, back again already?" the general on duty at this checkpoint asks.

"Hey there!" I greet her. "Yep, the crew has evolved and we are ready to unleash some pain on the wave. How've things been here?"

She shrugs with her antennae even as she keeps her eyes laser focused on the never ending warfare around the chokepoint ahead of us.

"The pressure continues to build. We received a new wave of reinforcements a few hours ago, which certainly helps. I've increased the active garrison size by twenty percent and added a new shift to the rotation. Hopefully it's enough."

"It'll be fine!" I try to instil some confidence. "We've held on this far, haven't we? We're likely more than half way through it by this time."

The general doesn't seem as uplifted as I would have hoped.

"We'll see," is all she says, "it's a general's job to stay pessimistic. I'll keep expecting the worst and hope it pans out better than that."

"Probably a good play," I say. "If it's all the same to you, mind if we poke through the chokepoint and fight?"

"Go for it," she says, "just make sure you coordinate with the garrison."

Having gotten permission, we sidle forward and arrange with the ants in the thick of the action to allow us through the next time they pull back, which gives us a minute or so of waiting time.

[Alright then,] I say to my two newly minted pets, [who's going to go in first?]

Tiny looks at me like I'm insane and Crinis just sighs.

[Alright then Tiny. You're the first cab off the rank,] I laugh and the big gorilla slaps his bare chest with glee. [Just remember you don't have any armour on. Your bones might have hardened up, but the rest of you hasn't, alright? Be careful.]

He nods, but I can tell he isn't really listening, his eyes already fixated beyond the chokepoint as his fingers curl into fists, electricity sparking across his body. I can only roll my eyes (metaphorically) and ask Invidia to take care of the big idiot. A moment later and the ants pull back from the chokepoint, giving us the space to charge forward. Not wasting a second, Tiny unleashes a shattering war cry before he slams his massive fists into the ground, cracking the stone beneath our feet and sending himself barrelling forward into the teeth of the wave.

I can already feel the mana spinning in Invidia's grasp as he weaves numerous barriers and healing spells, but Tiny is oblivious to all of it. As the claws and fangs of the innumerable monsters reach for him, he rears back with one fist wreathed in pulsing light and launches it forward, his eyes ablaze with joy.

BOOM!

Like a cannon had gone off or an artillery shell had just landed, a loud roar rattles my head just as a dazzling light blinds my eyes. What the heck was that?! Unwilling to hesitate, I rush forward right behind the big ape and prepare myself to fight, only to find that with that one punch Tiny has managed to vaporize a dozen shadow monsters, clearing space around the opening.

What in the name of the great googly-moogly...

"Roar!"

Tiny bellows again with rage and joy as his fists begin to spark with lightning, the chittering crackle of electricity grows louder and louder until he reaches back and throws out his fists in a sharp one two combo, smacking directly into a hulking shadow slug that reared up in front of him.

BOOM! BOOM!

This time, two near simultaneous detonations ring out and despite being blinded by the flash once more, I get a better view of what is going on. The moment his fist lands, the energy contained in his fists is unleashed in a calamitous burst, striking out like a burst of lightning and decimating whatever is in front of him. It's almost as if he's throwing a bolt of lightning with each punch! This must be the work of the Lightning Ignition gland, allowing him to unleash more of the mana in a shorter time frame, letting him charge his fists in record time. It'll drain away his lightning mana at a rapid pace, but what does that matter in the face of this devastating amount of damage? There can't be much that would be able to stand in front of him long enough for him to deplete both of his lightning glands.

The massive, bat-faced ape roars once more, throwing his head back and smashing his fists into his chest in a display of primal dominance. I can practically feel the glee radiating off of my oldest pet as his fists begin to chitter once more with sparking lightning and he steps forward looking for more challengers as I watch over him from behind. Well, it looks like he's pretty darn pleased with his evolution. When he finally runs out of juice, we'll see how Crinis feels about hers.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 769: I wish I hadn't seen that

What follows is an hour in which Tiny goes completely berserk on every monster unfortunate enough to poke its nose into the tunnel in which we stood. So quickly was he mowing down the lower tier shadow creatures that he ended up pushing forward several hundred metres trying to find a challenger. He did eventually come across a lithe demon with scythe-like arms and a menacing aura. I almost stepped forward to take it on myself, but the moment he saw it, Tiny was off like a shot, bellowing his challenge as his wings spread out to build his speed even further.

My heart leapt into my mouth and I was genuinely concerned for the moron for a heartbeat. Despite being a tier lower than he was, demons have all sorts of in-built advantages over a first stratum monster like Tiny. Would he be alright?

As it turns out, my worries were somewhat warranted, despite how short the fight turned out to be. The demon, unimpressed with the gigantic monkey bearing down on it, slid neatly to one side as it slashed out with one arm. A powerful blade of light manifested along with the strike, homing in on Tiny's neck as he descended on the monster. For a brief moment, I thought his head was going to get sliced clean off, but without missing a beat, Tiny raised his left arm to block the strike as his right swung down, his own fist wreathed in light as a giant fist of light manifested to mirror his own.

At first, it appeared as though the Demon would win the day as its blade sunk deep into the ape's flesh, blood spurting out from the cut. But then, the attack just... stopped. As if it had run into a brick wall. Tiny's hand however, did not stop, and the poor demon was flattened into the ground by the brutal power behind that swing. Disoriented from the blow, there was little the third stratum monster could do to retaliate as Tiny stood over it and delivered a devastating combo, literally burying it in the stone floor of the tunnel.

When it was done, Tiny walked back toward us with a broad grin on his face, even as he continued to lose a copious amount of blood from the wound on his arm.

[Don't smile at me like that, you moron! Your arm is half cut off! Come over here quickly and get healed!]

When he came closer, it was clear to see what happened. The blade had indeed sliced through his muscle and tissue like it was paper, but when it came to the bone... no such luck. Tiny's new skeleton was harder than stone, harder perhaps than my own diamond carapace. When the scythe had struck the bones in his forearm it had been stopped cold, completely unable to cut through.

[Those new bones of yours are the real deal, Tiny!] I tell him, impressed.

He grins wide and brings both his arms up to flex, showing off his gains.

[Yeah, yeah,] I tell him. [You did well. Let's get out of here and head to another checkpoint since you've flattened everything out here. I don't want to range too far from the Colony on this trip, this is just a test run.]

We make our way back to the chokepoint, clearing up the still spawning monsters on the way and squeezing back behind the safety of the defensive lines. The general waves goodbye to us as we head off, stop for a quick meal, and then make our way to a neighbouring checkpoint. After finding things much the same here as at the last one, we wait just behind the garrison as they contend with the wave, watching for the moment they pull back and we can drive ourselves forward.

[Alright Crinis, it's time for you to shine. Are you ready?]

[I am!] the little ball sitting on my back extends a few tentacles and makes a miniature 'guts' pose, pumping herself up for the battle to come.

[Okay. You're going through first, so make sure you're completely prepared. The rest of us will follow behind. Tiny, you bring up the rear, no fighting for you, it's Crinis' turn.]

He nods unhappily and droops his shoulders as the rest of us ignore him, focusing on the intense battle in front of us. With a short hop, Crinis launches from my back onto the ground in front of me where she splats into a puddle that rapidly unfurls and grows, sprouting tentacle after tentacle until one great

yawning maw after another opens wide, the black depths within an unknowable void from which nothing can escape.

Gradually, the light fades away until even in this sea of shadows there is a deep darkness that causes me to switch over to mana sensing to get a better sense of what is going on. This is Crinis working her shadow magic, which she has been practicing diligently I can see. To have this level of mastery of the darkness, she must have raised it to rank five or six, which is impressive. When the area around her has been submerged in total shadow, I can sense some of her tentacles reaching out and slipping into the ground beneath her, plunging into the realm between. I almost feel sorry for the creatures on the other side of the chokepoint, not even they deserve what is about to descend on them.

When the garrison pulled back, it wasn't with a mighty roar or valiant charge like Tiny that Crinis advanced, that wasn't her style, instead, she glided forwards on a rolling carpet of limbs, perfectly silent, nothing to announce her presence to the monsters beyond. The first the maddened creatures of the wave knew of her, was when all light faded from their eyes and the tentacles latched onto them, slithering around their bodies and winding between their limbs. By that time, it was, of course, far too late.

Somewhat reluctantly, I followed behind her, ready to assist in any way should it prove necessary, but instead I witness a one sided and sickening affair. Crinis' ability to independently control her tentacles had clearly risen, as a forest of dark, bladed limbs writhed before me, each one perfectly controlled as they batter aside claws, curl around and snap shut mouths before extending their barbs. The buzzing sound of her blades at work is enough to set my mandibles to chattering as the unspeakable takes place, the segmented body parts of slain monsters begin to fill the air as Crinis brings them back to her main body before they are stuffed into one of the waiting maws.

Sometimes the monsters have not even completed the transition from living threat to Biomass before they are dragged, struggling and clawing back to her, but it matters not, into the bottomless void they go, the gnashing teeth disintegrating them with every bite.

Holy moly! My eyes! My precious eyes! I can't even close them! I swear by the shining white beard of he with the pointiest hat that I'm giving myself eyelids the next time I evolve. It's not right that someone should be made to see this!

Even the monsters have had enough, overcome with terror they turn to flee, which is when Crinis unleashes the true horror of her new existence. From the shadows in front of them emerge a wall of limbs, blocking their escape. The creatures try to fight their way out, swinging with claws, biting with fangs and unleashing every other ability they have managed to gain since spawning, but it's all for naught.

Rather than block, rather than dodge, Crinis simply allows the limbs to phase out of reality. Fiendish claws slide straight through, teeth snap shut on nothing, acid and poison find no purchase. Before the monsters can recover, the ghostly limbs snap down, extending something new from their tips. This isn't anything I've seen before and I find myself curious despite everything, leaning forward and sharpening my mind to better catch a glimpse of what she's doing.

I soon wish I hadn't.

Glistening, ghostly tendrils hang from the tips of Crinis' limbs which she quickly drives down, straight onto the monsters' heads. If I hadn't been paying such close attention, I might not have noticed how those root-like, ethereal appendages drilled down into the monsters, slipping straight through whatever hide, skeleton or mucous covered them and penetrating their brains. I held my breath as they grew still for a moment, each of the beasts frozen in place like a nightmare painting.

Then they screamed.

The monsters of the Dungeon, filled with rage and drunk on mana, screamed in fear and terror before they set upon each other, tearing their fellow victims apart as whatever sanity they had fled to the furthest recess of their minds.

[Hee, hee, hee, hee!] Crinis giggled.

I could only bring my forelegs up to clutch at my head in despair. What have I created here?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 770: Pupal Stage

Much like Tiny, Crinis wasn't satisfied with her initial rampage and pursued her opponents deeper into the tunnels. I use the word pursued in the literal sense since they were actively running away from her at that stage. On some level, it was fascinating to watch, since there didn't seem to be much defence against the ghost tendril attack that she used to directly attack the minds of her foes. Once she managed to drill those tentacles into their heads, the opponents would go slack before they inevitably turned into raving mad-things that lashed out at everything around them.

The obvious solution would be to make sure that the limbs never touched you, but that wasn't exactly an easy thing to do, since she could manifest them from every shadow within her range, which was almost a hundred metres at this point. They could pop out at our feet, creep out of the wall behind your back, even drop down from the ceiling above. If you were somehow able to keep track of all of that, she could simply phase them out of reality, slipping straight through your body, moving through weapons and armour before driving toward the brain.

It posed an impossible problem and even tier four and five monsters did little better. They might be able to slice a few of her tentacles off, perhaps even many of them, but it didn't seem to matter as Crinis produced more flesh at a ridiculous rate, fuelled by her constant eating. Eventually even these stronger monsters were overwhelmed as their minds were invaded.

Once things reached this point, only one monster had been able to resist to any significant degree that I saw. A demon of the spell casting variety, it used its magic to fend her off as long as it could, but it too was eventually overcome. Once Crinis managed to drive her tendrils into its mind, the creature stilled, but not completely. Moving its thin arms desperately, it tried to claw at her tentacles and I could sense the vague shifting of mana around it as it attempted to form another spell. With a flick, Crinis sent a dozen more limbs toward the creature, each of them driving their tendrils into its mind which eventually overwhelmed its defences and it succumbed like the others.

When it was all said and done, we made our way back to the nest with a rather smug Crinis riding on my back.

[What happened with that demon, Crinis?] I ask her, [it seemed to put up more of a fight than anything else when it came to those tendrils.]

She huffed.

[That filth thought it could intrude on the domain of the master's family, it deserved worse than it got!]

[Yeah,] I ignore that part, [but how was it able to resist your new... thing?]

[Oh! What I attack with the Soul Seeker Cilia isn't actually the brain, but the mind, or I suppose you could say the spirit?] she tells me. [Creatures with stronger Wills and stronger spirits are harder to drive over the edge, so I had to use a multi-pronged attack.]

I'm a little nervous.

[When you say drive over the edge... what do you mean... exactly?]

She wiggles with glee on my carapace.

[The edge of sanity, of course, Master,] she giggles.

Ahhh heck. This evolution has only driven her further over the edge to a creature of pure horror. As long as she's happy, I suppose it's fine. I'll just have to make sure I find a way to avert my eyes from this point forward.

With the flexing of their newly evolved muscles out of the way, I take the group back to the evolution chamber to formally introduce them to the new temporary member of the group. I'm sure they both noticed the grub locked away in her cage when they woke up, but neither bothered to comment at the time, preoccupied with other things. However, when we arrive, I'm a little surprised to see that the larva has undergone a shocking transformation.

No longer a grub, she has busily spun herself a cocoon in the time we were gone and is now fully encased, undergoing her transformation within its silken confines. Larva has successfully evolved into pupa! Actually, that reminds me. I quickly snoop around for the cores I left behind, remembering what happened when Vibrant moved to this stage. Sure enough, they're gone. Now I have the skills to actually recognise the stronger mana signature coming from the former grub in front of me. How did she do it?! Is it something to do with champions?

[Is this what you were referring to, Master?] Crinis asks, extending a tentacle to poke the pupa gently.

[Yeah, this is her. This little grub has way too much energy, managed to escape out of the nest on her own. Was quite the sight, let me tell you.]

I frown as I look down on her. This is probably a little too quick for her to become a pupa, if my numbers are right. I get the feeling the little trouble-maker got impatient and decided to advance ahead of schedule... although the accelerated feeding program we had her on might have contributed to the problem. She would have reached the required Biomass far ahead of most of her siblings.

It's an interesting stage of life for an ant, the pupal stage. The larva that existed before doesn't remain for long, the entire body turning into a liquid goop that is reformed into the new body. Once she's ready,

she'll eclose, and after allowing for a brief period of time so the carapace can harden, she'll be a fully formed hatchling! Ready for my personal brand of education!

The question is, what do we do now? Monsters can't spawn in this section of the nest, thanks to the removal of the Dungeon veins, so she'd be perfectly safe if we left her here. My only worry is what would happen if she woke up and broke out before I returned? Considering the amount of chaos she caused as a grub, what could she achieve as a hatchling? I shudder to think of it. No, can't leave her here on her own. That means she has to come with us.

[Tiny, can I get you to break open that cage and carry the pupa along with us. Whatever you do, don't damage her, alright? That's the next generation there in front of us.]

With unusual respect and gentleness, Tiny reaches down his tree trunk arms and shatters the metal cage with ease, grasping hold of the pupa with one hand and bringing it up to his chest where he cradles it with one arm.

[Nice work. Alright then, time to get back to it. We need to keep the pupa with us at all times, which means one of us is going to be on pupa watch every time we fight. I'll work out the rotation and I don't want to hear any complaining.]

I give Tiny the stink eye for a second and he looks at me with a wounded expression.

[The wave will peak and then subside soon, so we need to be careful of any new types of monsters that poke their noses up, or higher tier ones. We've been lucky so far that no tier sevens have shown up but I don't expect our luck to last. Any questions?]

They each shake their heads/tentacles and we make our way back to the front for another foray, helping to take the heat off the Colony's defenders. What I really want to do is push all the way down to the third strata again, strut our stuff down there now that the full group has evolved, but it's too risky. With all sorts of monsters spawning in the tunnels now, who knows what might pop up that the Colony can't handle without us?

No, we need to stick around and keep fighting. For the time being at least.