

## Chrysalis 781

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#### Chapter 781: Emerging talents

*Universal education. It's a desirable principle, but how many times has it been achieved on Pangera in any meaningful way? The only large society to apply this idea on a wide scale, to my knowledge anyway, is the Colony. Though it might not last long, the education every hatchling receives is certainly intensive, covering almost all aspects of operations within the Colony. The curriculum is focused on the breadth of knowledge an ant will need to fit into their society, how to work and function as independent members of the greater community. Each member receives a primer and introduction to the purpose and Skills required for every caste, ensuring that every individual understands on a surface level the purpose and work undertaken by every other. It may be possible that this is just as large a reason for the incredible cohesion the Colony demonstrates as their shared Monster species.*

*Witnesses to the process have never failed to be impressed with the robust methods and particular care taken with each graduating 'class'. Taking a fresh hatchling at the beginning, and turning out a fully capable member of the Colony in a matter of weeks. It's remarkable in every way.*

*-Excerpt from 'Teaching the teachers: The education of the Colony' by J Hattsie.*

The cocoon shakes a little, then a rustling starts from within. This goes on for a few minutes as the creature inside tries to take control of new limbs, to stretch an unfamiliar body. I can understand the feeling, I've been there once before myself after all. The next sound to emerge is a light scraping, close to the top and I can immediately tell that the tiny mandibles within have begun to flex, to try and grapple with the fibre of the cocoon itself.

A soul is yearning for freedom! To stretch and run free amongst the Colony!

I can feel the mind with the folds of silken strands bubbling into wakefulness as the sleep falls away from her. The fierce curiosity is starting to burn once more, the impatience also and the attacks on the cocoon grow stronger every second. It takes a little while. It'll take a little more time before her carapace will harden fully so for the time being she's forced to work with blunt tools, so to speak. Even so, a few minutes later and the first strands part under her relentless pressure. Once the first few go, the next break shortly after and the progress becomes more rapid.

Normally at this point of a new ant eclosing from the cocoon, other ants would step forward to help them break out. I know this is something that the brood tenders usually do, assisting the new arrivals and making sure they don't hurt themselves in the process of freeing themselves. I don't bother. This isn't any ordinary ant we're talking about here, this is a champion! If she can't do something as simple as break out of her cocoon on her own, then what hope will she have of matching up to her senior champion sister Vibrant? So I sit and watch, with my pets arrayed around me, as the little silken pillow wobbles this way and that as the hatchling inside struggles to break free.

When it finally breaks, it all comes in a rush, with chunks falling away to the ground until at last an antenna pokes through the gap, followed by the other, and then, finally, the full head.

"I'm free! My life for the Colony! MY DEATH FOR THE COLONY!"

Ah heck, not this again...

She's so focused on gaining her freedom that she doesn't even appear to notice the four tier six monsters looming over her from behind. Instead, she frees the rest of her body, stretching her legs one by one and finally kicking away the last remnant of her pupal form, swishing her antennae through the air triumphantly.

"Where is everyone?" she wonders out loud, "I'll go find them!"

YOINK!

Her legs start to motor but before she can get any traction I lunge forward and pick her up, holding her off the ground with my mandibles.

"Oh no you don't, young one. You're going to stay right here for a little longer while we have a chat."

It's lucky we were all here for this moment. If it had just been Tiny, she might have run off before he realised he was supposed to catch her. The hatchling wobbles in the air a little, her antennae wagging about as she finally lays eyes on us. Not enough peripheral vision with such un-upgraded eyes.

"Ah! Senior! Hello there, it's nice to meet you," she dips her antennae in a polite greeting and I feel myself warm up to her a little.

"Hello little hatchling," I say, "welcome to the greatest and most magnificent Colony in the world!"

"Of course it is! I'm in it!" she boasts.

Oi.

"Out of curiosity, how much do you remember from your time as a grub?" I ask her.

She thinks for a moment, which looks a little comical as she's hanging from my jaws.

"Not much," she confesses, "just impressions and flashes."

At my prompting, Invidia reveals his wide grin and opens his mouth, putting the fleshy inside of his maw on display.

"Ring any bells?"

A shiver runs through her form.

"I-I'm not sure but I think I don't like it? Why would that be?"

"No reason, I'm sure," I tell her smoothly.

I look at the eager hatchling and can't help but feel cheered by the enthusiasm and boundless energy I feel welling up inside her and filtering into my Vestibule. I lean forward to put her down on the ground and the moment one leg hits the tunnel floor, she tries to run away.

"Not so fast, little one," I lift her back up.

"Hey!" she protests. "What's the big deal, senior? Shouldn't we go and be with the Colony or something? There's only two ants in this tunnel and I'm one of them! I'm ready to work, let me get to it! I'm sure there's plenty I could be doing right now other than dangling here!"

[Is everything alright, Master?] Crinis asks, concerned.

[She's got a fair bit of energy, going to have to slow her roll a little,] I tell the horror glomped onto my carapace.

"You need to listen to your senior a little before you go running off, hatchling. You don't know how things work in this Colony, but I do. Give me a chance to explain things, then you will too. For instance, before you can work, you need to learn. That's how it works here. And the good news for you, is that you've got me as your personal instructor! How lucky!"

She looks at me with a suspicious gleam in her eye.

"I... can't work?" she asks sceptically. "I'm an ant. The need to work is baked into my carapace. How long is this education going to take?"

"Couple weeks," I say.

She sags in my grip, going limp. She paints a very sorry picture, all six legs and her antennae drooping down to the floor.

"All right then," she sighs, "put me down and we might as well get started."

I lower her back to the ground and she shakes out her limbs as she takes stock of our surroundings.

"So... what are you going to teach me fir- BYE!"

Aaaand she's off.

[Crinis...]

[Right away, Master.]

Before the hatchling gets even ten metres down the tunnel she is confronted by a forest of tentacles erupting from the floor. One snakes around the middle of her carapace and lifts her off the ground before carrying her back. Hanging in front of me upside down, I confront the cheeky little thing.

"I'm a calm and benevolent instructor, luckily for you. Settle down and be a little patient would you? You'll get answers, these things can't be rushed, alright? Now, I'm going to get Crinis to put you down and then we can - aaaand she's off."

[Tiny...]

A few moments later the hatchling is presented to me on the palm of Tiny's hand.

"Time for you to meet your second instructor," I clack my mandibles with glee as I look down at the still defiant newborn. "Sadly for you, it won't be quite as pleasant a learning experience as what I had in mind..."

[Invidia. Open up.]

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### Chapter 782: Receding waters, rising tides

While the hatchling enjoyed a little solitary education, we moved back out beyond the defensive lines of the territory to drive back the swarming monsters for possibly the final time. The mana levels continued their slow draw down and with every hour that passed the spawn rate of monsters began to gradually recede. I was hugely relieved that we had managed to get through this wave without having to confront any monsters of too high a tier. My last evolution had really driven home to me the exponential rate of growth in evolutions. Since the energy doubles each time, it's reasonable to expect that a tier seven monster with a perfect core is going to be literally twice as strong as me. Wild monsters in the Dungeon with perfect evolutions all the way down the line are hard as heck to come across, so it's unlikely we would run into one, but I was quite worried that we would.

After an hour or so of throwing back the tide, we retreat back behind the checkpoint to catch our breath and plot our next moves. At this moment, I get a surprise visit, although I suppose it's not really a visit due to her more or less constant presence, from Protectant. Thanks to the addition of the Nave, I have a much clearer idea of the whereabouts of my twenty bodyguards, generally speaking, although whatever high tech stealth organ they have still manages to interfere sometimes. Looking slightly larger than before, she appears above me, clinging to the ceiling at the same moment I detect her scent.

"Eldest, I have come to report."

"Hey there Protectant! How're things going? Been a little while since we last spoke!"

It had been. I knew they'd been busy, since I'd detected them running this way and that rather than just hanging over my head all day, but I hadn't actually interacted with any of them for some time, too focused on my pets and now the hatchling. I guess I *had* given them a task to complete, so I felt it would be best if I just left them to it.

"You're looking a little larger up there Protectant! Is it safe to assume that you've managed to evolve to the fifth tier?"

She shifts a little from side to side, clearly uncomfortable with being exposed to plain view but, to her credit, she stands firm long enough to answer my questions.

"I have. And I'm happy to report that all twenty of us have completed our evolution, as you requested."

"Really?! All twenty of you have made it to the fifth tier? That's amazing!" I peer at her a little more closely. "You didn't get all that much larger considering the shift from tier four to five. What on Pangera did you spend your energy on? If your stats are too low you're going to suffer in the future, you know?"

I don't really want to pry too deeply, but I am a little concerned. I know that in their evolution from tier three to four, the species they chose granted them their powerful stealth capability, but in choosing that they threw away the chance to gain anything more combat related. Being able to hide from view is only one aspect of their role, after all, the other is that they actually need to be able to fight.

"Not to worry, Eldest," she replies defensively, "we have made the necessary investments to ensure we will be able to complete our function. We decided as a group that it would be for the best if we tried to

keep ourselves at a smaller size in order to make it easier to remain discreet. Rest assured that we are up to the task of ensuring your security."

I allow my mana sense to wash over her and I can tell that she has already reinforced her core post evolution, possibly even maxed it out already. Looks like they've been serious about getting themselves ready for the delve to come. That's quite a relief and a massive weight off my mind. I was worried they wouldn't be able to handle it and there was little chance I'd ever be able to convince them to stay behind.

"Great job, all of you up there. Make sure you do the right thing and get your cores maxed out as soon as possible. Mutations also! Get as close as you can to a complete tier five over the last few days of the wave. Once it's finished, we'll be delving to dangerous new places! The third stratum and beyond!"

No other ants reveal themselves, but Protectant gives a short nod before she once again vanishes from my sight. Gah! That's creepy! Honestly speaking, without the Vestibule and Nave I'd have never found these damn bodyguards. At least now I know they're strong enough to handle their job going forward. For the time being anyway. I want all of them to be tier six by the time I'm ready to evolve to tier seven, which is quite a ways into the future. With that taken care of though, it's time to get back to other matters.

[Alright Invidia, let her out.]

The air beneath the fluttering eyeball splits open in that truly disturbing way as his teeth reveal themselves. Opening wide, he uses his tongue to push out the hatchling, dripping with his saliva before snapping his mouth shut whereupon it vanishes from view once more. I look down on the rather damp hatchling who takes a moment to push her shaky legs under herself.

"Hello again, little one. Did you enjoy your time with your other teacher?"

"I did not!" she flares up.

I scratch my head with an antenna, as if confused.

"But I wonder... have you learned the valuable lesson that your second teacher was trying to impart? Otherwise, there is a strong chance that you'll receive further instruction..."

The little ant stares up at me defiantly.

"I won't run away," she grates out.

"Good job!" I pat her on the head, "I knew you'd listen to your educators eventually!"

I didn't expect to be doing as much teaching in this life as I've ended up having to do, but as expected, using the methods that were used on me when I was young has worked out alright. I turned out fine didn't I? And I certainly learned fast!

"Now then, if you aren't going to attempt to sneak away every few seconds, we can finally sit down and begin your education. First thing we need to talk about, the value of a life!"

We settle down in the tunnel, giving the hatchling something to eat as she listens to me explain the foundational principle that I have laid down on the Colony that differentiates them from every other ant

in existence: they are to value their own existence and try hard to preserve it. Not such a radical idea in my mind, but to an ant... it takes a little convincing.

"So... if I'm fighting an enemy, I'm supposed to... not die?"

"Right."

"What if I can cripple the enemy severely in exchange for my life."

"Settle for crippling them a little, and staying alive."

"What if I can defeat them outright in exchange for my life?"

"Settle for almost defeating them and staying alive."

"What if there's a critical task that needs to be completed and only by working myself to death will it be done?"

"We stay organised so that doesn't happen. And, honestly, if you tried to do that, you'll likely be stopped by other ants."

"What?" she's genuinely shocked, "why would they stop me?"

"They take their work very seriously," I advise her, "I'm sure you'll be meeting them quite a bit in the future..."

If she's anything like Vibrant, there will be a mutual grudge there before long.

"The fundamental fact that you must keep in mind at all times is this: you can't work when you're dead." I emphasise my words with a poke of an antenna. "You might live for a hundred years or more, working hard for the Colony and achieving great things every day, or you could be dead in two weeks trying to choke a monster to death with your remains," I still remember when Leeroy tried that, "which do you think is better for the Colony?"

She's quicker on the uptake than most hatchlings. After only a brief pause to think, she responds, saying "living." I can tell she doesn't like the idea, but can't deny the logic of it.

"Quite right," I agree with her. "That isn't to say there aren't circumstances where we need to lay down our life for the Colony. Many have died already in the service of our family, but that doesn't mean we seek it out. Indeed, the longer you live in the Dungeon, the stronger you become, which means you are even more valuable to keep alive. Before I'm done teaching you, you'll be a tier four monster, with hundreds of cores and Biomass invested by the Colony in you. To throw away that investment without giving back to the family? Ridiculous notion!"

She nods along, agreeing with what I've said.

"What's a tier four monster?" she asks.

Ah. I might have gotten ahead of myself there. For the next ten minutes I explain the basics of this world. The Dungeon, the surface, the waves, the fundamentals of being a monster. All good stuff. The hatchling listens with rapt attention, soaking up the knowledge that I offer her and eagerly asking for more. By the time we're done, I feel like I'm getting a cramp from standing still for so long.

"Okay then," I sigh as I stretch out my legs, "enough yammering. If you aren't going to run away on us, I suppose it must be time for a tour of the Colony. How about it?"

I don't think I've ever seen an ant so excited.

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### **Chapter 783: Introducing the new blood**

"You must be kind of a big deal, huh?" the hatchling observes, staring up at a giant statue of me carved from glittering stone.

"Ahem! You can ignore that. Come on, we have more interesting things to see."

"This is amazing to look at," she says as I drag her away, "I wonder who made it?"

"So do I," I grumble.

One of these days I'm going to catch that blasted artist and give them a piece of my mind. Of all the things they could have devoted themselves to, making statues of me seems like a tremendous waste of time! I don't even mind that they decided to become an artist, the carvings are all breathtaking, I just resent being the subject of so much of the work! There's tons of other amazing ants in this Colony! Every damn one of them is a hero in my book! Carve them for a change!

Alas, my plea goes unanswered and the number of carvings featuring my visage seems to have only increased within the nest over the duration of the wave. Clearly the artist has been locked in here with nothing else to do...

"Now, something for you to think about," I say in an effort to distract the young one in my care, "is what sort of work you might like to do for the Colony. A worker? A soldier? A crafter? There are nine different castes that you could evolve into and each have their own specialities and jobs that they perform best at. Workers become brood tenders, healers or Queens. Soldiers become majors, scouts or generals, though we usually just call the majors soldiers and crafters become carvers, mages and core shapers."

Eyes full of wonder as we navigate through the tunnels of the nest, the hatchling listens intently to every word I say, nodding to show she understood what I'd said.

"The brood tenders care for the young, the next generation of the family. It's their responsibility to care for the eggs, keeping them at the right temperature, keeping them clean, right up until they hatch. Then they tend the larvae, feeding them, cleaning them, tickling them and playing with them until they become pupae. Once they hatch, the tenders educate them, much as I'm doing for you now, up until they join the Colony as fully grown members. It's the most important task within the Colony and one they take very seriously."

"Why aren't I being taught by them then?" the hatchling asks curiously, "aren't they supposed to educate new ants?"

"Yes they are," I confirm, "you're something of a different case, and I'll get into why that is later. Ah, here we are."

The brood chambers are as warm and cosy as I remember, filled with the motherly love of the brood tenders as they care for their flock of grubs and eggs. I spy Florence beaver away on one side of the chamber and wave her over.

"Hey Florence. Recognise this little one?"

The council member leans closer before leaping back in shock.

"Is it? It can't be?! Not this soon!"

"Accelerated feeding program," I proudly declare. "Although, we could probably describe this particular grub as being somewhat impatient. Honestly speaking, I was surprised myself when she went into her cocoon."

"Do I know you?" the former grub in question peers up at Florence.

"Let's just say you were a little difficult to take care of," I pat her on the head. "Just thought I'd drop in as we give the little one a tour," I say to Florence. "How are things looking here?"

"Busy as always," she says, keeping one wary eye on the hatchling as though she might disappear at any second. "We are always ramping up to meet future growth. No matter how much we plan and expand, we never seem to get ahead."

"The hunger to grow and expand is a natural thing for all species I think," I tell her, "it's just that we can do it about nine hundred times faster since we're monster ants. How long does it take to get a fresh egg to academy graduate right now? I'm curious."

She thinks for a moment.

"From egg to hatching takes a day or so, depending on temperature. Just about all of our incubating rooms are fully enchanted now, so temperature hasn't been an issue that we've needed to deal with for some time, *such* a time saver. After that, a little over a week as a larva in optimum conditions, then a week as a pupa, and roughly twelve hours to fully emerge from the cocoon and harden. Then off to the academy where our current program takes them to tier four in three weeks."

So from literally nothing to a tier four monster in just over a month. And not just any run of the mill monster, nonono. These ants have perfect mutations for every evolution. They form their cores at tier one. They benefit from an array of mutations that provide bonus stats to them on birth. They gain bonuses to skill level gain and growth speed thanks to the loving care and education provided by the tenders. Despite being one of the weakest species in the Dungeon in terms of individual strength, and the fact that hatchlings in the Colony are even further physically weakened thanks to me putting all of that potential into their brains, our graduates are powerful, intelligent and fearless.

It's a damn impressive result for a single month.

"I'm impressed as heck, Florence. A month? Holy moly. And that's thousands of ants graduating every single day isn't it? I've no idea how you did it."

Florence wiggles her antennae, happy to receive the compliment.



"It's been difficult," she admits, "working out the logistics has been the hardest thing. The food supply, transport, maximising our harvest of cores. It's all worth it in the end though," she clacks her mandibles with joy as she watches the grubs roll about and play with their carers in the dim light of the brood chamber.

"Pretty damn impressive, eh?" I give the hatchling a nudge as she stares curiously at all the goings on in the chamber.

"It is," she agrees, eyes drinking in the sight of the tenders at work. "How many eggs are being lain per day right now?"

Florence doesn't pause for a moment.

"Six thousand."

"Wait, WHAT?!" I exclaim.

Without batting an antenna, she starts to tick off the numbers on one foreleg.

"In total there are fifteen Queens operating in the Colony right now. Three in this main nest, two each in the two satellite nests, and the next eight have been prepped and are distributed amongst the territory in safe holds. As of last week, every one of those Queens has reached tier five, with the Queen being tier six. For the tier five evolution, the Queens didn't go the same path as mother, for obvious reasons, and instead have chosen to increase their egg output, Biomass efficiency and stat gain for their offspring. Currently they are each outputting four hundred eggs a day. We estimate that may climb to one thousand eggs per day at tier six."

Holy moly! So that's..

"Forty two thousand eggs a week!"

"That's right," Florence nods.

The hatchling look suitably impressed at hearing the raw numbers, beholding the vast amount of work the tenders do. Then she tries to escape...

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### **Chapter 784: Forge World**

[Alright Invidia, you can spit her out now.]

With a wet splat the hatchling is deposited onto the tunnel floor in front of me still dripping with demon saliva. With a shiver she begins to shake her legs and abdomen in an attempt to cleanse herself of the goo. She has a little success before furiously cleaning her antennae, dragging them through the elbow joints of her front legs over and over again to clean the delicate hairs that line the appendage.

"I really thought we were getting past that whole thing," I point out to her. "You're getting your answers aren't you? Just be patient."

She keeps cleaning but gives me a look that I can only interpret as "Patience? What even *is* that?".

"Well, keep trying if you want," I shrug my antennae, "it just means more time with your second instructor and lets me rest. Now, are you ready to see this next part of the nest?"

Finally finished getting the worst of the mess off, the hatchling immediately looks around excitedly, only to be disappointed to find we are in a plain tunnel without anything remarkable about it.

"It doesn't seem that exciting," she says dejectedly.

WHACK! I bring my antenna down on her head with a sharp crack.

"This is just a tunnel! Obviously we haven't entered it yet!" I take a breath. "Where we are headed is the industrial heartland of the Colony. This is where all the raw resources that we collect are gathered to be processed. The ores, the wood, the gems and other precious materials that we might find in the Dungeon. Smelting, carving, crafting, enchanting, smithing. All of it goes on here. Hundreds of tons of raw ore is shipped here every day by a vast network of workers and tools. Look, here comes one now."

We can hear the rattling long before anything appears out of the darkness of the tunnel, but when it does it makes a suitably impressive sight. Metal wheels grind along the tracks embedded neatly into the tunnel floor, filling the air with that metal on metal discordant whine that only grows louder as it draws closer. It resembles a mining cart, except far larger, the box made from solid wooden planks reinforced with metal banding welded together by the finest of fire mages. The base of the cart glows with flowing light that is emitted from runes that run the entire base of the cart forming an intricate pattern that loses my focus the harder I look as my eyes are drawn down into ever finer details.

At the front of the cart, a mighty soldier is strapped in with a harness, pulling the immense weight of the cart behind her in a display of incredible strength. When she draws closer we shift to the side in order to make way and the soldier gives a nod of gratitude as she focuses on her work of hauling. Only when she starts to go past do I realise that there is more than one cart. Three in total make up the train, attached together by a locking mechanism. At the rear of the third another soldier is found, pushing with all her might as the train continues.

What the heck?! This is uphill?! Are these super ants?! Each of those carts is packed to the brim with ore, I can see it from here! Maybe ten cubic metres worth in each. That has to be multiple tons of material being hauled here!

The hatchling watches them go past respectfully, her eyes immediately drawn to the glowing runes around the base of the cart which causes me to look more closely also. Which leads me to another discovery. As the wheels shift forward the track lights up just before they touch, matched by a glow from the wheel itself. The moment the track has passed under the wheel, that segment grows dim. It appears as if the track is enchanted to react with the wheels in some way? Or the wheels are enchanted to react to the track?

Or both?

Holy moly, I had no idea how much development had gone on up here... If I had to guess, the carts themselves are enchanted to lighten themselves and their load and the tracks are somehow enchanted to reduce friction as the wheels pass over, perhaps with some variant of water or ice magic? I've no idea. Whatever the case, it's incredible work since it allows such a huge amount of rock to be hauled by just two soldiers.

"So this is where the raw ore is brought in to be processed," I tell the still staring hatchling, "let's move in a little deeper and take a gander at the next stage."

She nods mutely and we follow along behind the cart as it continues its journey into the heart of the antdustrial empire. Two things become readily apparent as we walk, the temperature is gradually rising and the noise is continually building. The ringing of metal, the crack and crash of hard stone and the continual waft of warm air blowing against our antennae are all signs we are drawing near.

When we come upon the site, it still almost comes as a shock. One moment we are in a tunnel, the next the ground drops away beneath us and we all freeze in surprise. What the heck have these ants been doing whilst I've been busy!? Someone needs to get these girls a hobby or something! Unperturbed by the sight of it, the soldiers continue hauling their carts, unaware that we've fallen behind.

The tunnel floor is gone, replaced with a girded steel railing that puts me in mind of train tracks having replaced it, the two guiding lines for the cart wheels still prominent. Through the gaps in the struts and falling away to my left side, I can see we are standing close to the top of a vast cone which falls away perhaps as much as a kilometre beneath us. Wider at the top and narrower at the bottom, the cone is lined with tracks just like this one for almost the entirety of its height. Before I can even begin to wonder what on earth is going on, a rumble starts above me and I jerk at the unexpected sound.

Overhead and to my right, hugging the wall as it widens, another train of carts has gone still and the soldiers have triggered some sort of mechanism. Through the gaps in the struts I can see the steel bottom of the carts drop away, the ore within dropping through the gaps with a low roar. With a sharp crack and hiss the rock hits the side of the cone and begins to slide down, tumbling and falling end over end. After a few seconds it reaches our level, tumbling through the gap between our track and the edge of the cone as it continues on its way. As I watch, the two soldiers we were following prepare to do the same thing. The two of them grip a lever at the two ends of the train with their mandibles and pull simultaneously. Just as before, the bottom of the cart drops away and the ore rumbles out, joining the previous rockslide as it rolls its way down to the bottom of the cone and dropping out of sight through the narrow opening at the bottom.

All around me this scene is repeated as carts appear out of tunnels and onto the rail bridges, whereupon they dump their ore and then continue on their way, vanishing out of sight as their bridge turns back out of sight. With their carts empty, the two soldiers in front of us pull on the levers once more and the bottom of the carts rises and locks into place before they resume their journey, one pushing, one pulling as they return to where they came to load up another train full of ore.

I hesitate to follow, drinking in the scene that I had heard of but never before witnessed. It never seems to end. As carts unload and then vanish, another takes their place, up and down the cone. The rumble of stone being unloaded is a constant roar and my mind boggles at the amount of material being processed. This is just the ore drop off point... It must be at least two hundred and fifty metres across at this point! It's freakin' huge! Exactly how much mining is the Colony doing around here?!

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#### **Chapter 785: the hammer of the future**

The hatchling is practically vibrating with excitement as she watches all the action and I can already sense the thought of running off to explore further forming in her mind. This little thing! She needs to

chill out, yeesh! Rather than toss her to Invidia for time out, I head off her burgeoning escape attempt by offering to take her deeper into the nest so we can watch the process bear out further, an offer she readily agrees to.

It takes a little while to follow the looping tunnels, but eventually we make our way down to the area just beneath the bottom of the ore drop off point. I'm not sure what I expected to see, but the work room here is just as vast and oversized as the area above it. A blast of hot air smacks us in the face as we reach the end of the tunnel and find ourselves in the massive furnace room. Carvers are *everywhere* in here, running around, operating the many enormous blast furnaces and processing the slag and metal that comes out. It's bedlam filled with the roar of flame, the grind of metal and the crack of stone.

Trying not to let her get distracted, I herd the hatchling toward the bottom of the cone so we can watch the process from start to finish. I have to admit that I'm super curious to see it for myself, not just to show it to the new champion in the Colony. What my siblings have achieved just blows me away and I feel great pride at the incredible things my family has accomplished. It's not just killing monsters and growing more hatchlings, we build and create, design and develop! It's exciting and interesting just what we've become capable of and I'm eager to see more.

To my shock, I find that the ants have invented something else I never expected to see in this world without me knowing anything about or having any input. The opening of the cone is still several metres across and from it pours a constant flow of raw ore. This rock drops a short distance onto a rounded slope that kills the momentum and gathers the ore together before its deposited onto, of all things, a conveyor belt.

Have they invented rubber? Nope, that'd be way too out of their league, we haven't gone quite far enough as oil processing. Come to think of it, would oil even exist? Biomass gets absorbed by the Dungeon if it's left lying about for too long... and this world isn't exactly solid all the way to the middle, far from it... Forget it!

No, the belt they have made is actually stone. How does that work, you might ask? Magic. As in, literally, earth magic. A team of dozens of carvers work above and below the belt, using their earth magic to constantly keep the thin layer of stone moving until it reaches the end of the line, where the individual blocks drop down and rotate back the other way. Close inspection reveals that guide rails for the blocks have been carved on the other side, glowing brightly with powerful rune magic. Of course something like this wouldn't be possible without extensive enchanting. The belt itself is formed of very thin but highly condensed blocks of stone that slot together seamlessly, each one only thirty centimetres or so wide but several metres in length. The other shocking thing is the length of the belt itself, perhaps as much as a hundred metres long it extends out, carrying the ore in a straight line past numerous stations, each manned by dozens of ants.

In fact, the entire thing is positively bristling with carvers, quite a few of them on the belt itself, picking through the rock and using their nimble front claws to pick and shift bits and pieces as they continuously run forward to avoid being pulled back as if they were on a treadmill.

Close to the belt I can hear a constant rumble that ripples through the air and sends shivers through my antennae. It's pretty darn intense and gets the heart pounding. I nudge the hatchling and we shift over

to the stations further down the belt, curious to see what they are about. At each one I can smell the carvers talking to one another as they work.

"There, there! Get it!"

"That's granite, no, no, that one! Send it back, we want iron ore!"

"Is that infused tin? Let it roll down the line, we just process the regular stuff. Read the mana signature already!"

Quite a few of them turn to speak to me as I stroll over and I'm forced to wave off the usual accusations of slacking and loafing as we watch them work. It appears each station is part of a furiously paced sorting process as the ants use their mana sense, eyes and highly developed stone magic to pick out the minerals and ores they want at their station, dragging the rocks in magically and depositing them into huge iron 'bins' that rest beneath them. I don't know nearly enough about geology to know which rocks are which, but the carvers appear to have no trouble discerning what they want, sweeping the ore they desire off the belt with minimal trouble, leaving behind that which they don't need. If by chance they do end up snagging the wrong thing, there are carvers running the lip of the bin itself, inspecting every single stone that falls in to ensure the contents remain pure.

As we watch, the iron ore bin, definitely one of the more busy stations, in fact I think there are two of them, fills up and we get to see the next stage. After a final check, something is done to release the bin and a team of carvers use magic to direct it along a predetermined path. Further down the line, it enters an all new processing line, where huge numbers of carvers operate all sorts of gear. I decide to take the hatchling down the iron line to ask a few questions and run into one carver who's happy enough to answer them.

"We learned most of this process from the humans on the surface," she happily admits, waving one of her claws at the vast setup, "but we've taken many steps to refine it further, obviously."

She points to the bin that just arrived.

"The new ore is a mix of rock containing iron at various purities and we need to do a ton of work in order to get something usable out of it. Crush it, wash it, filter it, heat it and after that -"

"You get iron?" I ask.

She laughs.

"No! Then you have ore that's ready to smelt!"

Holy smokes.

"Sounds like a lot of effort!"

"It is!"

As I watch, teams of carvers work to tip the bin, which only now do I realise sits on hinges attached to a base so it can rotate without being tipped all the way over. The ore is dumped out into a basin whereupon the carvers operate huge steel 'hammers' that drop from overhead before being winched back up as other carvers 'stir' the jumbled rocks using their stone magic.

"After crushing them here, we'll wash them down to remove sand, then bake them to eliminate impurities, only then will they go into the blast furnace over there along with limestone to turn into pig iron. After that it gets refined further into steel. After *that* we imbue it to churn out charged steel."

"Charged steel?" I ask, confused. I don't think I've heard of anything like that.

The carver nods, excited.

"It's the latest process we've been working on. Normally to produce the truly good stuff, you need to find ore that contains magic already, right? We call that imbued ore and it's really rare! The carvers and mages got to thinking though, what if we could produce steel, regular, plain old steel, and *then* imbue it with magic!"

"Isn't that just enchanting?"

"No! This is putting mana and bonding it directly to the steel itself! When you take imbued steel and enchant it, you get double the effect of enchanting normal metal!"

Wow!

"That's crazy! So how's the process working?"

She loses a bit of her enthusiasm.

"Not... perfectly. We're still in the test and development phase. But we're getting closer to refining our methods! So far, our best has only been about a third of the mana level found in naturally occurring ore, but it's a heck of a lot better than normal steel."

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 786: Measurements**

"Explain to me please, why you would *ever* think that sticking your head into a blast furnace would be a good idea?" I demanded of the hatchling, still dangling from one of Crinis' tentacles.

"I wanted to see what it looked like inside!" she protests.

"Inside? Inside is nothing but fire, superheated gas and *liquid* metal!"

"REALLY?!" she goggles at me. "Sounds *awesome*!"

"Yes," I nod sagely, "it *IS* awesome. It will also melt your face off and you will be dead."

"And that's.... Bad?" she asks.

My mandibles clack together slowly.

"Do you need more time out?"

"... I do not."

"Then tell me that it would be bad if you died."

"It would be bad if I died."

"Good."

[Put her down Crinis.]

The blast furnace had indeed been amazing. Six mage ants had surrounded the base of the huge metal construction, lined with bricks, reinforced stone and enchanted on the inside to resist the insane temperatures. When it came time to heat it, the mages had poured great torrents of blue flame into openings designed to seal shut whenever the mage drew their head back.

Out one side of the base had poured the slag, a molten slurry of impurities that had bonded to the limestone, and out the other had poured the liquid iron which would be carted away to mould into ingots. It was then that I caught the hatchling trying to get a closer look.

"Alright, enough hanging around here, time to go meet a particular carver and say hello."

With a careful eye on the young, I make my way out of the huge furnace area, picking my way between the many rows of smelters, furnaces and tracks for bins laden with ore as we walk into the tunnels and then beyond to the crafting area.

The ring of hammers and the tang of metal vibrate through my antennae as we enter, the tunnels around us alive with the reverberations of steel on steel. Nestled throughout these tunnels are the many workshops of the Colony, producing the various goods required by the ants and our allies. There's delicate work being done, fine wires of various metals intertwined and experimented on to see how well they handle delicate enchantments, as well as more massive projects, like gates for the new nests or armour suits for new Immortals.

The hatchling stares at it all with wide eyes, rushing this way and that to inspect every ant at work and see what they might be up to, asking questions and generally being a pest. I tolerate it for a little while, but we have a schedule to keep and there's someone I really need to meet.

"Come on then, we need to move a little faster."

With a bit of needling I manage to drag the little one away in order to find the workshop of a particular carver who I'd promised I'd come and meet at some point after I'd evolved. I find the insane ant hard at work at her forge, heating metal with more a slightly crazed cast to her compound eyes.

"Smithant! How are you doing, you metal head?" I say.

She turns to see my massive frame looming over her workstation and clacks her mandibles happily.

"If it isn't the Eldest! I've been looking forward to your visit for a long time! And Tiny! Welcome back, my most successful customer! How did you like that armour I made for you, eh? I heard it worked out perfectly! Are you looking to get it reforged now that you've evolved into a new form?"

The smith is practically bouncing with excitement but I'm getting massive waves of 'meh' energy from Tiny once I explain what she wants. Just looking at the bland expression on his face, I can tell he's not that interested in getting his armour back.

"He's super excited for you to remake it for him," I tell her, giving the ape a glare.

[That armour kept you alive. As in, you know, not dead?! Would you rather be dead, or wear armour?]

He ponders for a moment. Then another moment. Then a longer moment.

[You shouldn't have to think this long, moron!] I screech at him. [Just how low did you take your intelligence on this evolution? You kept it where I ordered you to right?]

He nods and gives me a thumbs up, a wide, confident grin splitting his face.

I stare at him carefully.

[So how high is it then?]

He raises two fingers.

[If that's supposed to mean twenty, then you reduced lower than I left you with... but still kept it above the minimum I set... If it means two, we are going to have issues.]

I turn back to Smithant.

"He would love to have even more elaborate and protective armour than before. Layer it on him until he looks like the elderly on a snow day. I want him *round*, like a dumpling."

"I don't know what those things are," Smithant flicks an antenna in dismissal, "but it hardly matters. Time for measurements!"

As the hatchling starts to pick her way through the workshop, inspecting every tool and surface with the curiosity of a newborn child (which she is), Smithant rushes about, crawling over Tiny and measuring him for fit.

"Quite a bit larger than before," she clacks, "I'm not sure that we'll have enough captured Legion armour to fashion the suit like we did before. I'll have a look at the stockpile, but we might need to look for a different solution."

She turns herself toward me.

"And what about you then, Eldest? Finally ready to accept your place in the glorious ranks of the armoured?"

Her eyes are practically sparkling. Settle down a bit there.

"I'm still not sure how comfortable I am with armour," I say hesitantly. "Not for any reason to do with the armour itself," I assure the suddenly crestfallen smith, "just because my carapace is... I mean look at it!"

Indeed, my diamond carapace is picking up the flickering light of the forge beautifully. So damn shiny.

"Well, we don't necessarily need to go with fully fledged armour. There are a number of options after all. We could make leg coverings, plating for the joints, segments for the head which protect your eyes, though they do limit visibility. The more metal we put on you, the more surface we have to work with for enchantments. Though, if I'm making something for you, I highly doubt anyone will object to me requisitioning the finest cores and materials from the stores."



The mad smith is almost drooling at the thought of getting her mandibles on such precious metals and cores. The passion she has for her craft is infectious and I can't help but feel I'd like to see what she could make.

"I'll say no to any helmets or anything that obstructs my vision. But, I think I could be persuaded with some leg guards or something along those lines."

"Perfect!" Smithant declares. "Time to get measured!"

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 787: Mad Mages**

Having a smaller ant crawl all over my carapace is kind of ticklish and I was frankly a little glad when Smithant was finally finished with her work. I could tell she was pumped up, she was practically radiating the same level of energy as the hatchling by the time she was done. Without so much as a 'thanks for dropping in' she rushed about, starting gathering ingots and scratching designs into the ground with her claw before we'd even left the room.

We took our leave and now find ourselves just outside the mana research section of the mage quarters. Here it is that teams of mages along with distinguished members of the other castes put their minds to the great problems of the age, such as how the hell does one unlock spatial magic? How do those frickin' gates work? What is the most effective magic for a fully trained team of ants to use to annihilate their foes? Among others. The other key area for research is enchanting, the Colony having made massive strides in this department since the early days. The proof of that is in the incredible pudding that I've witnessed on this tour. The sheer amount and variety of enchantments that have been employed is stunning to me.

Clearly those ants who are dedicated to this area of study have been raising the rank of their Skills like crazy. I wonder what on earth Smithant is going to be able to make for me in the end? My hopes are getting higher the more I consider it.

"What's this place?" the hatchling asks as we approach the new section, the spicy tang of fire, ice and other elements brushing against my antennae the closer we come.

"This is where the smartest and most insane ants of the Colony come to unlock the secrets of mana!"

"Smarter than me?" she appears doubtful.

THWACK!

"Of course they're smarter than you," I scold the hatchling as she rubs the top of her head with one claw, "you just hatched. Tiny is probably smarter than you."

"He is not!" she flares up.

"He's smart enough to listen, now shush. This section of the nest is for magic related research. Mostly mage ants and carvers in here, though there are plenty of others mixed in when there's a need. Healers are frequent visitors, for example. Nobody has more expertise with healing and restorative magic than they do, obviously, and their services are often required to help repair damage from experiments that... don't quite work."

"Does that happen often?"

"Daily, or so I'm told. Let's go!"

"I can't wait!"

Rushing down the last section of tunnel, the hatchling draws still the moment she fully enters the first chamber. A central chamber with many smaller workrooms splintering off like the spokes of a wheel, the arcane energy swirling through the air is so thick you can almost taste it. Sparks fly from one room, belching flames from another, ice cold winds with shards of ice from yet another. The glow of runes emanates from everywhere around us, producing barriers, light, heat, channeling mana and all sorts of things.

To my mana sense, this chamber is a chaotic dance of energy that dips and twirls everywhere in tiny eddies and massive currents. The sheer amount of mana moving through this space is staggering, taking in all that the dregs of the wave has to offer. Looking closely, it's almost as if some of these enchanted arrays are actually *assisting* the flow of mana, bringing more into this chamber from above and below in order to power the many experiments going on. Is that something we can do now? We can gather mana from the surrounding area using enchantments? Stack them together to produce a flow of mana?

In a round... I'll say desk in the centre of the chamber sits a rather important looking ant busily scanning through what I recognise as records that have been imprinted with scent. She appears to be... filing? Have we invented ant secretaries now?

"Oh! Eldest!" she starts when she sees us approach and hurriedly slides all the documents to one side before turning back to us. "Welcome to the research hub! I don't think you've visited before. Is there anything in particular that you're looking for?"

She's not the only one to notice our presence, quite a few ants are sticking their heads out of the many chambers around the room watching my entrance with rapt attention. It's strange, I can feel their eyes on me in quite a literal sense through the Vestibule, giving me access to their impressions even as I watch them react to my being here. Quite a few are hoping I'm here to help them with their project, or admire the work that they've already done. I don't think I can be of much help, considering that when it comes to actual meta-knowledge of the mana system in this world, I'm sure they are far more advanced than I am, even if my magic Skills and stats are higher than theirs.

"I'm just here to have a sticky-mandible. Stick my antennae in and have a look at what's going on. I'm showing the hatchling here what the Colony has been doin- wait... where did she go?!"

Dammit, I was distracted by all the attention I was getting and wasn't paying attention for a split second. How the hell did she manage to identify that moment and take advantage of it so precisely? I hope she doesn't become an unnamed one, she'd have godly skills of catching people off guard. I quick scan and I identify her thoughts coming from one of the side chambers.

"Found her," I tell the flustered receptionant and rush off to one of the openings.

Inside I find a large team of possibly a hundred ants working furiously around one of the captured gates, reassembled in all of its glory here for the Colony to work on. Where the heck is she? I know she's in here somewhere...

"Ah, the gate project," the receptionant says from behind me after having followed in my wake, "this continues to stump the finest minds we have in the Colony, I'm afraid. Despite having found the correct matrix to draw mana into the gate mechanism itself, without any understanding of how to properly apply said mana, it simply dissipates over time, no matter what we try."

"You know about this?" I ask her, a little surprised.

"I know about all the projects," she confirms, clacking her mandibles with pride, "I have to in order to properly manage this research division."

Not a receptionist... a mage, who's probably the most knowledgeable of all of them in here. I really shouldn't pre-judge my insect brethren.

"Can you tell me a little more about this project?" I ask as I scan the room with multiple senses for the little runaway.

"As I'm sure you know, Eldest, the gate project remains a high priority for the Colony. There are three teams this size working on a gate, but progress has been painfully slow. Part of the problem being we simply don't know how spatial constructs work. As you can imagine, creating constructs from scratch, without any guidance from the System, is practically impossible."

I nod. The mana constructs are like works of art smashed into intricate architecture. I can't even be sure if there's a series of logical laws that underpin their construction or if they are just randomly assembled and work via... magic.

"Has an attempt been made to construct a spatial array from nothing?"

She nods.

"Of course, those efforts continue. Extensive study of every known construct is a major focus of ours."

I should probably drop by and produce an image of some kind of the omni-elemental construct, if that's at all possible. I'm sure they'd love a gander at that.

"Well, it's important that we - THERE YOU ARE!"

Atop the gate standing proudly is the tiny hatchling.

"This looks so cool!" she yells.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 788: Spatial Senses**

"Get down from there you little varmint!" I yell.

"What even is this thing?" she yells back, still scurrying about on top of the gate as she pokes and prods with her antennae inspecting every nook and cranny.

"It's some sort of spatial gateway that allows instantaneous travel across vast distances and we are trying to learn how it works so we can link our nests together. Now get your butt off of there before you break something!"

Reluctantly, she starts to climb down, still excitedly examining whatever she can.

"You can practically feel the power rolling off of that thing," she exclaims when she finally reaches where I'm waiting at the bottom. "It's incredible! Why doesn't it work?"

Her question catches me mid-thwack and I pause before regretfully retracting my antennae.

"A big part of the reason is that no ant has managed to unlock the Spatial Mana specialisation Skill. Upon learning that skill, and then on ranking it up, knowledge of how to create and utilise spatial mana constructs will be granted by the System and by studying those we are far more likely to be able to understand how these things work and then build our own."

She looks confused.

"We didn't build this?" she points at the gate with one claw.

"Of course not. If we could already build them, how would we not know how to get them working? Obviously this gate was made by others and we are trying to unlock its secrets. It isn't enough to learn how to operate it. We need to learn how to construct our own and operate those. Only then will we be able to establish a gate network throughout our territory and connect our nests."

"Why is it so important to connect the nests?" the hatchling asks.

It's the manager who answers, stepping forward from beside me to address the hatchling directly.

"If we can connect all the nests using one gate network, then we will be able to spread much further, much faster without running the risk of being unable to support each other. It will be like every nest, no matter how far, will be no more than a few steps away from every other nest. We can never be trapped, never be sieged, not by normal methods. If we can unlock this secret, the future of the Colony will be infinitely safer and brighter."

"And nobody can work out how they work?"

"Nope," I chip in, "not yet."

"I will," she announces, "I bet it's not that hard."

This hatchling...

"Right then, if you have that much confidence, let's see you do it. I don't want to hear boasting without results to back it up," I poke her with an antenna. "There's a hundred ants in here, all of them older and stronger than you, and they haven't worked it out yet."

And most of them are pretty annoyed at this annoying hatchling running around telling them she can do their jobs better.

"It'll be fine, you'll see," she brushes my antenna off angrily. "I'll be able to do it because I'm me."

"If you like, we can start powering up the gate and you can take a look at it Eldest," the manager says.

"Oh? That'll be cool, let's have a look."

It takes a couple of minutes to set up, the manager letting the team know and all of them rushing this way and that to get things ready. When it's all done, they trigger the array matrix that they've constructed, monitoring and taking measurements as it slowly powers up. Slowly at first, and then with gathering speed, the matrix starts to draw in mana at a prodigious rate, pulling in the energy from the air until the entire gateway is shining brightly to my mana sense. The more energy that gets packed in, the gateway seems to hum as it gradually lights up from within, illuminated by the sheer power of the mana coursing through it.

Eventually the matrix turns off and the gate continues to release that sub-harmonic hum that rattles my mandibles but without anywhere for the energy to go, it simply leaks it back out into the air at a slow pace until nothing remains within. When all is said and done, the gateway sits as it did before, devoid of energy or activity, a ring of intricately carved stone.

"Well, that was quite something, I'm amazed at how much mana it can hold," I say.

"Indeed. We estimate that spatial spells may take a prodigious amount of energy to cast. One of the current hypothesis is that the reason no ant has been offered the Skill is because none have a sufficient mana pool to access it, regardless of the ranks of their other magic skills."

That's not a bad theory actually, it would make sense...

"I'll make sure I max out my core as soon as possible and see what happens," I assure her. "Who knows? I might get lucky."

After all, my quest for the mythical Gravity mana specialisation continues and perhaps I've been denied that Skill for the same reason. Only time will tell. Once I've mastered Mind Magic to the point I need it, I'll be able to go shopping for the next level of magic to grind. If I keep pushing my way to more advanced forms of mana, I should reach Gravity eventually. Surely Gandalf won't continue to hold out on me for too long!

"That was awesome!" the hatchling declares hopping up and down with excitement. "Did you feel it? The power! The energy! How does it work? How did it happen? Why did it fail?!"

I can see she wants answers to her questions, but tough luck for her, she isn't going to get them.

"None of your business and nobody knows. Now.."

YOINK!

"Hey! Put me down!"

"Nope! Time to go visit another place."

Wiggling and struggling as she dangles from my mandibles, I carry the hatchling out, waving goodbye to the team with an antenna as I go. I can tell that the little one is quite enraptured of the research work going on here, but there are still places to be and things to see. I get the feeling that the idea of being able to answer the questions that nobody else can tickles her sense of pride, as well as the mystery of unanswered questions tugging away at that bottomless curiosity she has on her hands.

Perhaps a little mage has been born here today? We'll have to wait and see...

It doesn't take long for us to make our way to mage training section where, as usual, I find Propellant monitoring the mages hard at work practicing and honing their Skills in one of the many practice ranges for the mage ants. Fireballs, ice, wind, stone, lava and all the other basic elements fill the air around us, being flung back and forth as ants practice dismantling and casting spells as quickly as possible.

Sure enough, Propellant is quick to notice us come in and rushes to see us, filled with boisterous energy as always.

"Eldest! Wonderful to see you as usual! How've things been around the nest? Everyone looking after themselves?"

"As best they can," I say as I look around, "it appears as though the mages are working as hard as ever."

An explosion rocks the chamber and we get covered in dust which I quickly have to clean from my antennae. For her part, Propellant doesn't even seem to notice. Apparently she's gotten used to it through her posting here.

"Mind if we watch your mages at practice for a bit? I'm giving the little one a tour."

"Sure thing!" Propellant laughs. "There's always something to see going on around here."

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 789: Advanced Tactics**

It does seem as though the mage ants have evolved slightly in terms of their practice regimen. In some larger areas we find something I hadn't seen them do before: squad based competition. Ten mages per side, twenty in total battling against each other in a dazzling display of coordinated spellcraft. Defence and offense on both sides operates at a furious pace as both sets of ants do their best to break down the other. The contest of Will is so fierce I can practically feel their minds arm wrestling in the air between them as they tussle for control of the mana.

"What brought this on?" I ask Propellant.

"Ah, this. This was inspired by a couple of things. One of the things we learned from Torrina and Corun when they arrived was the way that golgari shapers train, as well as golgari in general."

"You mean, in groups of three?"

"Right," she nods. "The number three is sacred to the golgari for a few reasons, but the group training is also important. Mages being able to mesh their minds together in order to better coordinate is one of the fundamental Skills that the shapers, and other mages around the world employ."

"Huh... I wonder if the kaarmodo we ran into did a similar thing with the slaves that they kept."

"Most likely they did. Once our mages have reached tier four, as well as trained their basic magic Skills to the rank that we need, this becomes their primary mode of training. Group combat. Their job is to mesh their thoughts with the rest of their squad and overcome the enemy. It's highly competitive and the squads work extremely hard at it."

"Do they always train with the same members?"

She shakes her head.

"No. This is somewhere that we differ from the golgari. They like to keep their groups the same in order to deepen their level of cooperation and fellowship, but we decided that the mages should be ready to team up with any other group of mages in the Colony. We don't even always keep the group size the same, forcing them to mix it up and adjust on the fly."

"Is there a Skill associated with this 'thought mesh' that you keep referring to?"

"There is a couple actually. Sense Thought and Harmonic Thinking."

A quick scan of my available Skills list reveals that they haven't been offered to me.

"I'm guessing you need to engage in some group spell casting or some such in order to unlock the Skill?" I ask.

"That's right," Propellant confirms, "so I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't have it in your list."

I've always preferred to go solo, I suppose. At least in terms of my offense. As we chat the two teams in front of us continue their contest, wrestling at the mana around them as they fling ice, fire and whatever else they can manage as other members of the group focus on breaking down the incoming spells or utilising their mana manipulation to break down their forms before they can land. It's high speed, high octane training and it's a heck of a lot of fun to watch.

Especially for the hatchling.

"What's this!? It's so cool!" she cries as she hops back and forth watching the dazzling display of magic.

"This is training for ant mages," I tell her, "they're practicing to work better in groups and coordinate their thoughts with each other."

"That sounds fun!" she cheers. "I bet I can do it the best!"

"No words without proof," I scold her. "Alright, come on then, it's time to get going."

"Already?" she complains, but I drag her away from the ongoing training exercise as Propellant waves us off with one antenna.

Looks like the mages are still working hard, though I'm a little bothered that they're sticking to the basic magic forms. I might have to have a word with Coolant if I run into her. Raising your rank in the basic elements is fine, but unless you plan to rely on them for a while, it's better for the mages to move onto more advanced constructs. I suppose they might have stayed with basic elements when the majority were tier three. They just wouldn't have had the needed stats to throw into harder spells, but now that the majority are tier four, they should be able to take it up to the next level. I want to see lightning ants dammit! That'll be awesome!

Our next visit is the research and training domicile of the core shapers, and surprise, surprise they are hard at work when we arrive. With the wave dying down, the thousands of core shapers that they sent out to harvest resources have started to return and apparently the records are indicating it was a massive haul. Naturally the ants aren't actually returning with anything, all the cores and Biomass that

they harvested went straight into their pets, but when we consider the fighting strength that the Colony has gained, with resources gathered outside our territory, it's a massive windfall for the Colony over all.

"I'm impressed as hell," I congratulate the two core shaper council members, Bella and Ellie. "What your caste has managed to achieve is nothing short of amazing. We'll have need of your people in the future, I'm sure."

"We'll be ready, Eldest!" the two of them are greatly cheered by my words.

"I believe that the core shapers are going to really show what they can do in the near future," I tell them, "you've been working with pets that are too low tier and without reinforced cores and insufficient mutations. Now that you have those things in abundance, you're going to shock the other castes, I guarantee it!"

The two of them are greatly cheered by my encouragement and we leave their area on a high note. I truly believe what I told them. My pets are living proof of how effective reconstituting monsters can be, the primary issue that needs to be overcome is that of Biomass and cores. Even for myself, the requirements of getting to tier seven are enough to make me spit blood, but in reality I'm going to have to pay that price *four times* in order to get my full squad up to that level of strength. It's exorbitant to say the least. The core shapers have been experiencing this problem as well, but on a far grander scale. Even if they only wanted to raise their pets up to tier four, the Colony would be forking out cores and Biomass for thousands and thousands of tier four monsters, taking food away from the mandibles of the young.

By seizing the moment, shouldering the risk and sending their people out, the core shapers have braved the dangers of the wave and come back stronger for it. By sticking to the lower areas of the first strata, they managed to avoid the worst of the danger as well. It'll be a laugh when I see that demon city overrun by an army of ten thousand monsters, not a single one of them ants!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 790: Heading Out**

After visiting the core shapers, there isn't too much left to do. I don't want to take the hatchling in to visit mother, since she's likely to declare something rude like "I could be a way better Queen" and get her head thwacked in. By me. So I abandon that idea and instead decide that it's time to begin doing the real work of the hatchlings' education. Combat!

Not to mention, I need to stuff her full of Biomass and cores in order to assure the best possible evolutions! Gweheheheh.

"All right then hatchling, no more slacking around. Are you ready to be the best ant that you can be!"

"Of course!" she retorts. "I'm ready to be the best ant out of them all!"

"Oh ho! I'm happy to hear that, because it's time for full on, no holds barred combat in the tunnels!"

"Yeah!" she punches the air in excitement.

"... For me and the others. All you get to do is eat."

"What?!" she sulks.



"Come on now. You are a tiny little hatchling, whereas we are mighty tier six monsters, literally the highest tier of any monster in the Colony. You need to work your way up to this level if you want to match us someday, and this is the start of that process. We need to get Biomass and cores into you so that you can start to evolve and get stronger, as part of that, we'll teach you the basics of how to fight like an ant!"

The difference in power is hard to ignore, I'm so much larger than she is that she could walk underneath my carapace without me even having to raise myself up from my normal standing height. At tier one, she's just food for whatever monster happens to look her way, and she's smart enough to realise it.

[All right then, which one of you is going to be on hatchling babysitting duty?] I ask my pets.

[I'm happy to do it, Master!] Crinis, unsurprisingly volunteers, eagerly waving a tentacle in air.

[Hrrr,] surprisingly, Tiny also puts a hand up, offering to care for the little one.

Invidia is totally silent.

[Tiny,] I turn to the big ape, [are you sick or something? You're telling me you want to help look after the little one and *not* fight?]

He gives an almost offended look.

[Don't give me that rubbish!] I wave my front legs at him. [You ALWAYS want to fight! You don't get to look offended when I get shocked that you are actually *asking* to do something else!]

At least he has the good grace to look a little embarrassed. I immediately feel bad for being so shocked.

[Hey, being honest? Good for you, big guy. You can guard the hatchling, all right? We need to secure Biomass, cores, and experience for her, so make sure she gets those last hits in and stays safe.]

The giant ape nods and takes a protective position over the little ant, keeping a keen eye on her every move. In this formation, we exit the nest and leave the Colony's territory all together, making our way into the Dungeon proper, beyond the defensive line. The wave has all but sputtered out now, no longer are monsters leaping from the walls and floor every few seconds, claws desperately reaching for anything they can find to devour. Spawn rates are still high though, so there's plenty of prey to find in the tunnels.

Back to grinding my mind magic! Not far away now!

With three tier six monsters in the fight, the second strata just doesn't pose the level of threat that it once did. The shadow monsters are far too easy to take down and the death monsters, though harder, aren't that much of a challenge either. Only in overwhelming numbers were they a threat and those numbers just aren't there anymore. And the experience and Biomass we gain is negligible to say the least. Stupid tier penalty...

If we want to keep progressing, we need to go deeper and find higher tier monsters to fight! It's the only way...

This of course, doesn't apply to the hatchling. The tier one rubbish we just blow up and move on, but tier three monsters we nab and get Tiny to beat them within an inch of their life before pinning them

down in front of the tiny ant. It's rough treatment and I'm sorry for it, monsters, but your sacrifice is to a worthy cause. An ant cause!

Predictably, getting experience from monsters two tiers above her own lands the hatchling at level five after just a few kills.

"So, what do I do now? Do I evolve?" she asks, excitement clear in her voice.

All the new things to learn, to see and experience... I can understand that excitement.

"Afraid not little one. First you need to condense your core. It's super important to do and you'll be a lot weaker if you evolve without one. This is the difference between monsters that will be stuck low tier forever and those who can advance and grow strong. The core will mean you have far more evolutionary energy to spend when you do evolve, and by improving and growing your core, you'll get more and more energy to spend on each evolution."

Even though she hasn't been alive for long, the heightened mana levels of the wave and the depth that we've been living in are more than enough for her to have passively absorbed all the mana that she needs, no mana infused water necessary. Listening to my explanation, the hatchling is quickly convinced.

"So what happens when I condense my core?" she asks.

"Basically, you'll pass out and wake up with a weird feeling of heat inside your carapace. It's been ages for me since I did it, but I can still remember that weird sensation. From what I gather, your core forms while you are unconscious, but you can feel the residual energy when you wake up. After that, we need to reinforce your core until it's as large as a tier one monster can have and then level you back up to five."

"Wait. My level resets?"

"Yep, and every time you evolve it does as well. Also, the level requirement for evolving doubles with each evolution."

"Doubles huh? So how many levels do you need to evolve?"

"... a hundred and sixty."

"Oof."

"Big time. I'll be stuck like this for the near future."

As the little ant prepares herself and sinks down into the dreamless sleep that accompanies all major changes for a monster, Tiny hovering protectively over her the entire time, I reminisce about my own time as a hatchling. Those were desperate days, with nobody to talk to but the automated System messages from Gandalf. Every day had been a battle to survive. I can still remember how hungry I was before I managed to defeat my first enemy: a tiny thorn lizard. Things have certainly changed a little since those days...