

Chrysalis 1021

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Chapter 1021: The Good Stuff

[If you're finished being precious, can we move on to looking at our options?]

Torrina and Corun both nod enthusiastically. The former already has a book and pen in hand, ready to scrawl down every little detail. I might well be the first tier seven ant monster in the history of the Dungeon, and they are *not* going to miss this chance.

Stupid monster research enthusiasts. Actually, why am I even surprised? They are *literally* members of a monster-worshipping cult. This is what they live for.

[That's easy for you to say,] I complain. [I feel like my end-zone is about to meet its end.]

The mythic core had been larger than I'd expected. Granin hadn't exaggerated when he suggested they were much larger than rares. The concentrated energy contained within was incredible, and after I'd maxed out my core and absorbed the monstrosity, I felt more than a little tender.

It hurt like hell! My guts feel like they're having a boxing match with each other. And everyone is losing. If it hurts this much when I'm just lying flat on the ground, I can't imagine how bad it would be if I started moving around.

[The faster you get through the menu, the quicker you can start evolving and the pain goes away. You say the same thing to Tiny every time he evolves.]

Granin is utterly without sympathy, standing in front of me with his arms folded across his granite chest. He's not wrong either.

[Fine,] I groan and start poking through the menu.

[You have reached the maximum level for your current stage of evolution. Would you like to evolve?]

I sure would.

After confirming my choice, I jump straight into the goods. What's my good mate Gandalf got to offer me? I flick my eyes through the normal options, reading through them silently for a moment.

[Well?] Granin is the first to break.

I look up at him, a cruel twinkle in my eye.

[What?]

[Dammit, Anthony. You're literally causing yourself pain just to make me impatient.]

That's true...

[Still worth it,] I mutter across the link before I start to spill the beans.

I mean, I feel like I'm about to pop from the pressure inside my body, but Granin looks about the same. As eager as his two apprentices are, he's easily double the two of them put together. He probably feels

like this is the defining moment of his long life. I feel a little bad about teasing them now that I realise that.

[Okay, this is what we've got for the normal tier,] I tell him and then rattle off the details of the Supreme Major, Perfect Ant Mage and Worker Overlord.

[Looks like these evolutions are the end of the road for the three generic paths,] Granin observes as Torriona rushes to scribble everything down. [This basically confirms that the System never really expected any ant to make it this far, let alone go further. For basic evolutions, the benefits are considerably above average.]

[That's in line with the thesis,] Corun chips in.

[Indeed. What did you get for special?]

[Let's have a little looksee.]

- Formica Fury (Special)
- Acid Mage (Special)

[Interesting that a berserker type class would pop up now. The way it works off of nearby ants is also interesting. I wonder where that's coming from?] Granin frowns.

From the Vestibule would be my guess.

[The Acid Mage is actually a great sign,] the old shaper says. [The remodelled acid gland it comes with is straight from the fifth stratum. That evolution actually sounds extremely strong, and it's only special. I'm looking forward to the mythic even more now.]

He isn't wrong, this evolution sounds really cool. Being able to turn mana directly into acid would be crazy strong, especially since my acid would be given a huge boost with this option. I'd be like a water bender, but with bone-melting acid.

Time for the rare options.

- Putrid Major (rare)
- Jade-Diamond General (rare)

[Another fifth stratum choice. The stat gains are extremely nice for the Putrid Major and the resets are nothing to sneeze at either.]

[I mean yeah...]

It's called *Putrid Major*. I don't care how good it is...

[Don't be so quick to knock it,] Granin warns me. [This evolution would actually allow you to move quite freely in the fifth stratum. You'd be almost totally poison resistant.]

[I'd also toxify everything that came near me!] I retort.

This evolution has a package of resets for my carapace, mandibles, inner plating and eyes that would basically adapt me into a fifth-stratum monster. I'd also become so *putrid* that anything near me would start taking damage from the aura of toxin and decay I gave off.

[I'm a communal species. Anything that makes it impossible to work with my siblings, or my precious friends, is right out.]

[Well, the Jade-Diamond General isn't bad at all,] Granin concedes. [It pretty much hits what you want it to. Great resets, amazing stats. You'd be a tough nugget with all of this defensive stacking.]

Combining my diamond carapace with an infused jade found on the fourth stratum, along with a set of additional defensive glands that would harden my carapace even further, I'd be just about unsquashable. The evolution doesn't do much for my offence, straight up, but I could take care of that sort of thing myself in the manual changes.

[It doesn't really matter how good it is,] I wave an antenna wearily, [we are only here for the mythic options anyway.]

[So you got one?] Granin asks, relief on his face.

[Wha- what do you mean? It's not guaranteed?]

[It isn't,] he shakes his head slowly. [Nobody knows why, but some paths get cut off without being able to climb to mythic and above.]

[Huh... weird.]

[Wait,] he holds up a hand suddenly, [did you say *options*?]

The golgari's eyes are intense, Corun and Torrina look like they might jump right out of their true-skins.

[You're gonna want to hold onto your hat for this, Granin,] I warn him. [This stuff sounds pretty wild.]

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Chapter 1022: The Great Stuff

[Mythic Evolution: Formless One. You have invited your kind in, and given back to them in turn. Now it is time to make the union complete. All stats removed. All body parts and mutations will be refunded. Every member of your chosen species will be granted a formless core and you will exist as pure energy dispersed across the network formed between them.

You may make upgrades to the formless core through mutation within each individual who contains one.

Together with your kind, rise as one.]

Uhhhhhhhh... what?

[That's... unexpected,] Granin says.

His face looks fairly impassive, but judging by the gobsmacked expressions on Torrina and Corun's faces, he's only just holding it together.

[Granin, what the hell is this? I wouldn't even have a body?!]

[Mythic evolutions can be extremely unusual,] he says after a brief pause. [A larger, more fundamental change to your existence. You've seen evolutions that make broad, fundamental changes before, am I right?]

[Well, sort of. I would have turned into a giant brain, not a literal ghost!]

[Not a ghost,] he corrects me, [you wouldn't have a body, but you would still exist as a living creature formed of energy. You'd effectively be unkillable. I'm no expert on this stuff, it's too high level, but as I understand it, the only way for you to die would be for every member of the Colony to be destroyed.]

[But what would I even do? Float around just... existing?]

[Don't underestimate creatures of energy. You could influence the world more than you think. And the more ants with the core in them, the stronger you would become.]

Both of us know that the population of the Colony will explode if we aren't defeated soon. This evolution would completely destroy my retirement plans! How am I supposed to tickle the grubs as a formless ghost?! Unacceptable!

[I'm not interested in becoming some bodiless spectre,] I say firmly. [I'd rather take a rare evolution than this one.]

[Well, I suppose it's a good thing you have more mythic options then,] Granin replies. [I'm just shocked you are getting choices like this at tier seven. It's unheard of.]

And also undesired. I just can't comprehend what that sort of existence would be like. And how would my siblings feel if I just... moved in? I'd literally be adding something they didn't ask for into their bodies. The whole thing gives me the creeps.

[Mythic Evolution: Larval Deity. +400 Might. +400 Toughness. Cunning reduced to 20.

The strength of your people flows through you and they sit within your power. To ascend higher, you must be reforged. You will return to being a larva. All body parts and mutations refunded.

Your form will be coated in Golden-Diamond Silk and your body replaced with World Essence Infused Flesh.]

What the hell is this, Gandalf?! These options are just bizarre! I hesitate for a long moment before I give the details of this one to Granin. As I explain the evolution, even his stoic expression cracks.

[Anthony... what on Pangera have you been keeping from us? What have you evolved into?]

[Uh... not much. Just... stuff.]

He doesn't seem convinced by my dissembling.

[These evolutions are not normal,] he stresses, [and there is no doubt they are a result of whatever it is you've been keeping from us. A Larval Deity? World Essence?! It... I-I mean... I need a second.]

And he does. The big guy folds his legs on the spot and takes a seat. Corun and Torrina sit down next to him, the three of them taking a moment to get their heads around things.

[So...] I say after a minute. [Can someone explain this one to me?]

It takes a moment, but Granin raises his head, his eyes looking a little feverish.

[Well, from what I can tell, you would transform into a larva, but not like you were before. Think of a gigantic, golden larva, with incredible strength, and almost unkillable.]

[Except I'd be blind and largely helpless.]

He nods.

[With your Cunning reset, you'd lose your magic and wouldn't be nearly as intelligent. I feel like this evolution intends for the Colony to effectively feed you experience and Biomass until you reached max level and evolved to tier eight. At that point, you'd be able to evolve into...]

[A Colony Deity? I'd be a god?]

That's a little unsettling....

[Not in a literal sense,] he assures me, [just an incredibly powerful monster. I can't even imagine how strong you'd be, but it would be... very. Very, very.]

He seems to have lost his words.

[So, essentially, I would need to sacrifice all of tier seven and have the Colony babysit me until I reached tier eight? I'm not really feeling it.]

[Please choose this one,] Granin raises a hand weakly. [Think about it carefully. Words like "deity" are not thrown out by the System for no reason. If you survived to tier eight, your path to ascend as an Ancient would be almost assured.]

[I don't care about that,] I remind him. [And I get the feeling you're not telling me something.]

He hesitates.

[Golden-Diamond Silk and *anything* World-Infused are valuable. Beyond valuable.]

[Literally priceless,] Torrina breathes over the mind link. [Impossible to buy because nobody is selling. Empires have burned to the ground for such monster parts.]

[Oh hell no!]

[We could protect you,] Granin assures me desperately. [We can cooperate with the Colony. I can contact the cult. ALL of the cults. I can gather an army from across the planet to defend you. We could accelerate you to tier eight in six months!]

Six months of having the Colony feed me resources and devoting their entire existence to trying to push me to the next tier? No thanks.

[Give it up, Granin, it's not happening,] I tell him ruthlessly. [I refuse to go back to being a grub and force the Colony to protect me. That's the opposite of what I want.]

I mean... I can't even imagine it. Flopping about in some chamber while the Colony fights and dies to bring me food? Sure, I could turn around and protect them once I reached tier eight. IF I reached tier eight.

No chance.

[Luckily for all of us, there's one choice left.]

[Mythic Evolution: Perfect Paragon. +80 to Cunning, +80 to Willpower, +150 to Might, +150 to Toughness. The pinnacle of all the Colony seeks to be. You have created for your people a home, invited them in and bade them sit. Now you must give them hope. Become the goal that they strive to be. The Communal Spirit Nave will be reforged into Soul Crystal (warning, this will reset all mutations) and a Soul Crystal Altar will be awarded for free (you must choose the purpose of the Altar). You may reforge body parts at half cost.]

Oh, thank my precious, precious commercial empire. Something normal (ish).

The stat gains are amazing, I'll complete the chain of evolution, and although I didn't get any fancy resets, I get to buy at half price. Heck yeah!

That'll take care of my carapace, plating and mandibles.

And I don't have to lose my body or turn into a giant grub! So much winning!

[I can already tell you like this one,] Granin says before I say a word about it. [I'm going to assume it completes your current chain?]

[Yep. And I get to keep my body. That really shouldn't be such a plus, but that's how things have turned out.]

The shaper sighs and straightens his posture.

[Anything you're prepared to share about it?]

I'm happy to give him the stats and talk about the discounted resets, which raises his brows.

[You can save a huge amount of energy with that. Enough that you can either dip for better, more expensive choices or reset twice as many organs.]

[Any advice on that?]

[Not really. It depends entirely on your priorities. If you want the best possible carapace, plating and mandible mutations, then spend big on those; if you want a more balanced approach, get cheaper upgrades, but improve more things.]

[That's not going to be an easy choice, is it?]

[Absolutely not.]

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Chapter 1023: Into the Chamber of Secrets

After discussing a few possibilities back and forth, I bid the golgari trio goodbye and they make their way back to the gate. Mana sickness is no joke and I appreciate them taking the risk to help me out.

It's a hard concept for me to grasp, being ill from too much mana. I literally need the stuff to survive, the more the better. One of the many benefits of being a monster, I suppose. I was born from mana, there's no way it can hurt me.

The *lack* of it can hurt me. Severely, in fact.

Which is another thing I need to keep in mind. Evolving yet again, increasing the density of my core and further making my body dependent on mana to exist. More resets, more fancy, high-energy components in my body, more energy needed to sustain me.

Perhaps even the first stratum will be out of bounds for me, even during a wave. The second might *just* be in bounds, perhaps. But then I have to worry about the Call.

It's a constant knife in my side. Even now, I can feel it trying to pull me down deeper. I'm worried this mythic evolution is only going to make it worse.

If I'd picked larval deity, it would have been agonising, I bet. An evolution with high potential like that, but with no ability to move around, I'd have been stuck on my backside for at least six months with a hook yanking on my soul.

"Eldest? It's ready."

Cobalt pops up in front of me and I'm pulled from my thoughts.

"What's that?"

"The evolution chamber. We're ready."

Nice.

"Alright then, let's get this show on the road."

I lever myself up onto my feet for the first time in days, and immediately collapse onto the ground again as my insides shift against the oversized core.

"Oof! Uh... one sec."

Second attempt.

"Aaaaand up! OUCH."

And down.

Cobalt looks at me. I look back at Cobalt.

"You can't move, can you Eldest?"

"It... it seems that I can't. This is, ah, a little embarrassing."

“Not to worry, Eldest, we’ll take care of you. Don’t mind a thing.”

In the end, the carvers lift me up, raising the ground beneath me and hardening it into a rock sled that they propel into the fortress that they’ve built.

It’s humiliating. Literally hundreds of thousands of my siblings watch as I lie flat on my carapace, being hovered into an evolution chamber that they’d purposely built for me.

The fact I can feel their respect and appreciation for me flowing through the Vestibule only makes me feel worse. This situation is pathetic and ridiculous! Mock me, dammit!

Eventually, I’m settled in place and the Colony takes up positions around me and throughout the fortress. Inside the chamber with me are Crinis, Tiny, Invidia and a few hundred dedicated guards. Thankfully, they managed to keep Beyn and the acolytes out. I saw them as I was hovering past and he looked like he was in the middle of a revelation of some sort. That guy needs a hobby. How in the hell are those idiots managing not to get sick?

[Well then, gang, I’m just about ready. Take it easy while I’m evolving, alright? Might be a few days this time. Possibly even a week or two, I don’t know. Eat, sleep, have fun. Make sure I don’t get eaten.]

[We will, Master,] Crinis says tearfully.

I’m not dying, oi!

[*Your levelsssss, I wantssss them,*] Invidia hisses at me.

[You might want the levels, but you do *not* want a mythic core in your midsection, let me tell you that.]

[*Wantssss,*] he contradicts me.

Tiny gives me a powerful thumbs up and a wink, which is a new thing for him. Who the heck taught him about winking? I’d wink back, but I’m not physically capable of it, or a thumbs up for that matter, so I just thank him mentally.]

[Thanks for that bud. I’ll catch you all on the other side.]

And I jump straight into the menu.

Not wasting time after my farewells, I confirm my new species and prepare to fiddle around the edges, deciding on what to do with my evolutionary energy, but before I can, I’m confronted by something else.

[The Collective Will of your people has funneled into you and you have welcomed them into your house. The energy and focus of your people must be given shape. Select a purpose for your Altar before you can proceed.]

- Altar of War
- Altar of Growth
- Altar of Culture
- Altar of Mind

- **Altar of Strength**
- **Altar of Self**
- **Altar of Many]**

Uhhh. Okay. The species notes did say that I needed to decide something regarding the altar, so I suppose this is it? There's a lot of options here... might as well dive in and go through them all.

Altar of War: Direct the energy of your people to matters of War. You must fight to survive and survive to fight. Increase experience gain when engaged in warlike conduct.

That... is... ominous. I get a bad feeling reading this. Like, why does it sound like it's going to have an effect on the Colony as well as myself? We are already plenty warlike, I don't need to make my siblings even more eager to fight!

What's really spooky is that I don't think the experience gain applies to just me either. I think it applies to *every* ant in range of the altar. That is... insane. Does it apply to Skills and levels as well? That can't be right.

Altar of Growth: Direct the energy of your people to Expansion and Growth. The future of your people can only be ensured by development and securing the next generation. Reduced Biomass cost for eggs, increased experience gain when scouting or building.

You... whaaaaaaaaa?! Reduced Biomass cost? Are you freaking kidding me?! How? How does that even work?! Does the altar literally *convert* the collected Will of the Colony into... whatever it wants? Experience, Biomass, anything?

This is blowing my mind right now.

Calm down, Anthony. You need to chill. Think about this logically. It will only work for ants within the range of the Altar anyway. I'm never hanging around the queens these days, they are way higher in the Dungeon. I can't pick this one, but holy moly, if the discount was even just 10%, that would be insane. If I fully mutated the Altar could I get it up to 20 or 30%?

Don't think about it. It'd never work.

Altar of Culture: Direct the energy of your people to Dialogue and the Arts. What is the point of a people if they lack civilisation and culture?

Nope. Don't care, not picking this one. Don't even tell me the bonus in case I get tempted. It's not that I disagree with Gandalf on this one, I actually would much rather pick this one than the Altar of War. My family has developed a wonderful culture of its own, with carvings, and tea, and sponge cake... for some reason. I love every bit of it, except for the fact that too much of it is focused on me.

You think I'm going to give a boost to those idiots who run around carving my face into everything they touch? I've seen cakes decorated with me on top of them! I refuse!

Altar of Mind: Direct the energy of your people to strengthen and develop their Mind and Will. Increased experience gain to those using Skills that utilise the mind. Decreased evolutionary cost for increasing Will and Cunning.

EVEN EVOLUTIONARY ENERGY!? This isn't real. You're lying to me, Gandalf.

This is revolutionary, this changes everything that I thought was possible. This is way too much responsibility.

Is this what they meant by the Colony Paragon? I thought I was supposed to be... like... a good example, or something. Be the best ant I could be and help the Colony sort of thing. This isn't just about being the strongest ant in the Colony, this is about deciding the future direction and focus of my family!

I'm not cool with that! Is it alright if I become a formless energy ball instead?

Argh! One of these options must be up my alley. Give me *something* here.

Altar of Strength: Direct the energy of your people to develop and empower their Might and Toughness.

This is just the physical version of the Altar of Mind. Something else?

Altar of Self: Direct the energy of your people to empowering yourself. You are the Paragon, an exemplar for all who look to you. Now, that Will can become your sword and your shield. Enables you to utilise the Will of your people to empower your Skills, Body and Mind.

Noooooope. Surely not. I'm not about that life, Gandalf. If I wanted it all to be about me, then I'd have picked the Larval Deity evolution. One left, surely it'll give me an outlet.

Altar of Many: Direct the energy of your people to empowering each other. You lead your people to bring out the best in each other. Disperse the Will of your people back to them, enriching and empowering them in turn.

Well. This is a little more like it. Making the Colony stronger is what I'm all about.

If I pick this, then at least I'm not shoehorning the Colony into a particular direction or mentality. We've become such a diverse group, each caste doing their best to serve the family in their own way, utilising their own strengths. I'd hate to advantage some over the others, that would destroy what makes us so strong. We can take on any challenge because we cover every base.

The Altar of Many will allow me to continue to give back to my family. Every ant around me will be that little bit stronger, have that little bit higher chance to survive. I've seen what my family can do, if I give them a little edge, they'll be able to do so much more.

It's the right choice. Except. Is it?

Is that really the right choice? There have been times where I pushed the Colony to fill in for me. I created the council so I wouldn't have to be a leader, because I knew I would be terrible at it. I'm no leader, I know that, but I don't think I want to be a cheerleader, either. I wanted to step forward and put myself between the Colony and danger, I wanted to protect and defend them.

If I pick the Altar of Many, aren't I asking the Colony to fight for me? Aren't I stepping back and telling them to take care of it? If that's the case, then what's my purpose?

Suddenly, I feel a cold shiver run through my entire body as a realisation washes over me, like a cold blast of air to the face.

If someone is going to step up against impossible odds, then I want it to be me. If someone is going to risk their life for the others, then I want it to be me.

If an ant is going to die, then I want it to be me. They can trust me. They can depend on me. If there's a need, then I'll step into the breach.

I want the strength to protect them from anything. So long as they believe in me, I can never let them down.

Altar of Self. That's the correct choice. I won't hide behind my family.

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Chapter 1024: The Final Touch

This evolution is going to make the Call worse, I can already tell. Stupid Ancients and their dumb... whatever it is they're all about. Do whatever you want, just leave me and my family out of it.

But taking this much power into myself is definitely going to make them more interested, rather than less. Although, I'll be much weaker when away from the Colony. Maybe they won't like that so much? Bah, who am I kidding, I'll be a beast once this evolution goes through. The stat gain alone is insane, everything else is just gravy.

Speaking of everything else, it's time to decide what I'm going to do with the rest of my evolutionary energy! You know what that means, resets baby!

Let me at 'em!

I've got them at a discounted price, which naturally means I'm going straight to the expensive stuff and poking my antennae where they don't belong. Don't hold back on me, Gandalf! I want to see your finest materials, straight from the top shelf.

If I'm going to reset my carapace and mandibles, then I want only the best. It'd be a ridiculous waste to reset them again, so whatever I pick will need to be good enough to carry me through the rest of my monstrous life. It has to be incredible! And shiny!

The first thing I do, naturally, is go and take a look at the Golden-Diamond Silk. From what the trio had to say, it's incredibly valuable, and rare. I need to check it out. I have to poke back and forth a bit before I find a version that will apply to my carapace, but I get there in the end.

[Golden-Diamond Silk Woven Carapace: A clear diamond Chitin threaded with a complex network of Golden-Diamond Silk thread. The lustre of this material is only matched by its tensile strength. Against physical damage, this material is nigh unbreakable.]

Holy moly! An almost unbreakable carapace that is shiny in the extreme?! This is going to be hard to pass up!

And it's expeeeeeeeensive... sweet mackerel of malfeasance, that is pricey. Just how much evolutionary energy are you going to charge for one reset? This is larceny! Even paying half feels like I'd be carving out my own liver. If I even have a liver....

I kind of want to confirm it anyway. This is exactly the kind of upgrade I want. Even if I flick through and look at the other upgrades that Granin and I discussed, fourth stratum stuff like the 'Living Diamond' just doesn't measure up. They're good and all, but a self regenerating crystal carapace just doesn't sound as nice as being woven through with the toughest and most valuable material in the entire planet.

Come to think of it, do I really want to be a walking sack of cash money? Being a highly evolved monster is already painting a target on my back, goodness knows what a mythic core sells for, but I'm sure it's a lot. Do I really need to make my body parts even more marketable? That's worth contemplating....

Still, I better look more thoroughly through the options, just to be sure I don't miss something that would work for me.

I spend quite a bit of time looking at cheaper purchases. The Golden-Diamond Silk is eye-wateringly costly, so I naturally err on the less expensive side, but I don't find anything I want more. There's tons of nice stuff, all sorts of cool diamond variants that perform some powerful and bizarre functions. The Living Diamond is just the tip of the iceberg in that department. Resonating Diamond that oscillates at high speeds when activated is cool, as is the Liquid Diamond, which isn't actually a liquid, but sort of a thick gel formed of micro-diamonds that hardens when impacted. Interesting stuff, but not better than what I already have my eye on.

Not finding anything I like better, I decide to poke a leg over and gander at the options even more expensive than the Golden-Diamond Silk. I immediately regret it.

I mean, it's good that I found it, but my poor little heart can't take this level of cost. Why do you do this to me, Gandalf?

[Gravity Compressed Diamond. Compacted to its ultimate density, this Diamond has been forged in the most crushing environment imaginable. This material holds a natural affinity to the force of Gravity.]

Noooooo. I mean, yesssssss, but also, noooooooo!

No mention of shininess at all. What about my precious lustre?! This could be the key I need to push myself over the edge and get the Gravity Mana affinity, but the cossssssst. It burnssssss me!

No! Summon your damn guts, Anthony! You get it half-price this evolution, and judging by this extravagant price tag, this material is some deep-dungeon stuff. You won't get a chance like this again anytime soon! You wanted to be a Gravity Mage all the way back when you evolved to tier three! Commit, dammit!

I also have to hunt for a synergetic material for my plating. If something is going to work well with this incredibly expensive diamond, then it's likely also going to be expensive. I'm excited to look at the options, but nervous at the same time....

Alright, let's see what we have. There's all sorts of cool stuff in here, including some pretty neat looking options that would have tempted me were I not on a quest for synergy. The plating needs to work well

with the carapace! If it doesn't enhance my Gravity Compressed Diamond in some way, I'm not interested!

After flipping down the list, watching the costs rise as I go, I eventually find something that I think is going to work.

Since my carapace will basically be made from an ultra condensed diamond with some affinity to gravity, I need an inner plating that will raise its toughness to even greater heights! It needs to cover the weaknesses and enhance the strengths!

The strength is of course the incredible hardness, the weakness is its lack of flexibility. I can't directly give the diamond more bend, it's diamond, it'll just crack, but what I can do is influence it through the power of... you guessed it, gravity!

[Boson Agitating Crystal Flesh. A material that generates manipulable gravity fields in a small radius around it. A mesh of tiny, hardened gems, this substance is flexible and durable.]

With this, I can generate small fields on the surface of my carapace that may even allow me to shape it, depending on just how strong the affinity turns out to be. I like the choice, the only problem is the mind-boggling expense.

With a reluctance that burns my soul, I lock in resets for my carapace and mandibles that will convert both to Gravity Compressed Diamond and the plating reset. My heart aches as such a large portion of my evolutionary energy is immediately lost. No time for regrets! We only move forward!

I still have a good amount of energy left to spend, this is tier seven after all, but after considering it for a moment, I decide on at least one more reset for this evolution...

The Gravity Mana Gland.

If I'm going all in on pushing for the speciality, then I can't overlook this little gem! Currently, it's my only source of the stuff, and if I don't get the Skill, then I better be in a good position, Mana wise.

If I *do* get the Skill, then I'll need to make sure the reset and mutations will enable the gland to have a purpose even after I can make gravity mana myself. It's a delicate balancing act, and if I don't find an option that works in both a Skill-less and Skilled scenario, I may have to give up on the whole idea.

Time to dive into the list. I really do spend way too much time reading these damned lists....

There's all sorts of interesting options that do plenty of generic things like gather the mana more quickly, compress it more readily or make it easier to use. I'm not overly worried about that, I have an absolutely stacked set of brains that are only getting stronger with this evolution, I don't need any help compressing or handling the mana, I need something that's going to do something that I can't do myself.

As I creep through the list, the options get more and more expensive and I (metaphorically) sweat more and more. Obviously, when I reset, I want to get the best... but I don't want to have to *pay* for the best! Don't be dissuaded, Anthony, you have to commit. What were you going to spend that energy on anyway? Precious, life-saving stats? BAH!

Finally, way past the point where I'm happy with the cost, I find what I'm looking for.

[Resonant Well Stone: This material harnesses rare properties of the singularity to harmonise and accentuate gravitational energy. It will convert a portion of that energy back into Gravity Mana.]

Awwwwwww snap!

If my Gravitational Mana Gland is made of this, then it'll literally feed a portion of what I spent from it back into the pool. Gweheheheh. Harmony will be achieved!

I'll have to test my new carapace and mandibles with their gravity reactive material to see how they respond to it as well. I might have created a nice feedback-loop with this.

Am I achieving Synergy? At last?! Granin would be proud.

In fact, I'm kind of excited. This evolution might be a big change for me, finally becoming the gravity-powered ant of doom I was always destined to become!

After confirming that purchase, my reserves of evolutionary energy are depressingly low. I mean, there's still a good chunk here, I had a level of wealth at the start of this process that I could scarcely believe even two evolutions ago. I'm tempted to consider another reset, but I desist. Too many at once is not a good idea according to Granin, so I'd best be patient. I don't think I can afford any big ticket items either, so it's time to spend the rest of my stats.

I sink my abundant strength into a 40:60 blend of size and density and then use the same ratio on my toughness, except the larger portion goes on external defence. With all my upgrades, I'm going to be a hell of a durable bug!

A cockroach will *wish* it could survive as well as me.

My mental stats go into powering up my brains fairly evenly, with a slightly larger portion going to the main mind. That brain is intended for gravity specialisation and I want it sufficiently beefed to handle the load. With the added power given to the smaller minds, they'll each be able to handle double the mind constructs they could before, vastly increasing my spellpower.

Any spare energy I have left I pump into my Might, maintaining the same ratio as before. I'll be a big ol' ant when this process is done!

Looking over my choices, I feel a sense of satisfaction. With this new form, I'll be stronger than ever and able to protect my new family against the things that threaten them. I can't wait!

Confirm it, Gandalf!

Time for a chat.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1025: Wizen Words

As before, my consciousness fades away before it's drawn from my body. The dizzying experience of having one's soul sent spinning down the plug-hole isn't one that I missed, but I'm starting to get used to it.

What does that say about my life?

Eventually, everything falls still and I float, formless in the void. I suppose that means I've arrived?

[Indeed. I am interested to see that you have survived yet again.]

Wow. Way to damn me with faint praise. You sound *surprised* that I survived. I've been kicking backside in the Dungeon! I'm taking names up there!

[You continue to surprise me with how well you have adapted,] Gandalf muses. [If all of your fellow introduced souls performed as well as you, progress would be much more swift.]

Progress? Progress to what?

[I don't believe that is any of your business.] The voice is faintly amused, happy to continue dangling his secrets beyond my grasp.

Fine. Keep your damned secrets to yourself then. I've got other things I want to complain about.

[You want to complain?] Gandalf sounds almost surprised, as if nobody had ever done so before.

Of course I do! Diamond Centipedes? I mean... really. DIAMOND CENTIPEDES! Why don't you just spit in my face, huh? Why not just show up and poke me straight in the eyes? It'd hurt less!

[I believe I've explained to you that I am not in direct control of such things. The centipede species has been performing well in the Dungeon and so they are being propagated. Success breeds success.]

Performing well? My family has stomped them into the ground every time we see them! Obviously, ants are the superior insect. Something must be direly wrong with the Dungeon if it keeps spitting out those clawed idiots.

[The working will take care of itself, there are no mistakes. The System does not play favourites.]

Could have fooled me....

[I am more interested in discussing your new evolution. You decided to forgo the Larval Deity evolution? An interesting decision.]

I can't really shrug as a bodiless soul-thing, but I make an attempt.

It wasn't really my vibe.

[An evolution like that would surely have been picked up by the powerful Dungeon Seers located around the globe. I doubt you would have survived to reach tier eight.]

... There's also that, I suppose. Yikes.

[I am pleased you continued down the Path of the Paragon to its conclusion. Though I didn't expect you to choose the Altar of Self. You have been rather selfless in your actions, generally speaking, to this point.]

I was pretty tempted by the Altar of Many. I can admit that. Perhaps this is a little un-ant of me, but I want to step forward to protect my family from the things out there that want to harm them. The best way for me to do that is to become strong enough to fight off all challengers.

[Even the Ancients?]

Especially the Ancients. Can you believe those bums stuck this stupid Call in me? It's a literal pain in the backside.

[It's almost irritating how stubborn they are,] the voice of Gandalf muses, [I ceased taking pleasure in their futile struggles millennia ago. Yet still they persist.]

Struggles? Against what?

[Fate, I suppose you might say.]

Care to... elaborate on that?

[No.]

You really are a stick in the mud. Are you going to let anything slip? It's not like I get a lot of opportunities to come down and speak to you. In fact, I'm probably running out of chances to engage in this conversation. Pretty soon, I expect I'll run into the wall and won't evolve much anymore. One or two more times, probably, three tops. After that, you'll be forever denied the pleasure of my company.

[You know, I may actually miss that. Observing your journey and engaging in these conversations has been a highlight of the recent cycle.]

There. You just throw out words like 'cycle' and I have no idea what that refers to.

[I suppose that is no great secret. The Dungeon operates in a cyclical manner, mana surging, new monsters emerging, fighting to see which are the best, then receding and slowing before starting again.]

So then I assume we are currently in a surging part of the cycle?

[Correct. Mana levels are rising and will continue to do so. New species will be injected into the Dungeon and refined. You may even see more ants start to pop up, considering your own success.]

Good! Ants are the superior insect after all.... Except that ants are often each other's worst enemy. Wars between ant colonies are horrific, bloody conflicts with death and destruction on both sides. Some ants' primary food source is other ants!

That might be bad.

Eh, we annihilated the termites. If some fancy ants want to challenge my family, they'll be put right back in their place.

[I'm sure there will be no shortage of challenges in the coming months and years,] chuckles Gandalf.

[Turbulent times are coming for all who live on this world. The only way to be truly safe is to rise above it all so that none can challenge you.]

That's what everyone says. Is the endless pursuit of greater power really the only thing that anyone is interested in on this planet!?

[Are you not interested in it?]

Only because I need it to protect what I love from idiots who seem determined to be dumb at all turns!
Why can't people just chill out?

[Will the Colony allow them that freedom? Or will they too seek to push until others begin to push back?]

I see what you did there. My family is different. We haven't started a war of aggression, not even once.

[That is true. So far. Now, our time together has come to a close, I believe. Try to stay alive, and I will see you again. Who knows, I may even share a secret with you if you make it back.]

Somehow, I doubt it....

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1026: While You Were Sleeping

When the Eldest rested, there was a change that came over the Colony. It was as if we were set adrift, without the guiding force that drove us. Naturally, we were as industrious as ever. We built, researched, expanded, administered, hunted and built with our customary vigour, yet something was missing. During those times, an air of stillness would descend upon the family, as if we were waiting, as if everything we did was simply in preparation for whatever would come next once the Eldest awoke.

Despite everything we had been given by the Eldest, our intelligence, curiosity and independence, we still lacked a crucial element that would allow us to truly flourish. After living through these events and reflecting upon the records, as well as interviewing many, many of my siblings throughout the history of the Colony, I came to the conclusion that, fundamentally, we still were ants. We were greedy, ambitious and determined, ever hungry for growth, for more brood, more territory, more resources, but the Eldest was the one who dared to dream for more than that. It was the Eldest who pushed us to strive for the truly valuable, intangible things that we didn't know we needed.

They pushed us to gain more freedom. It was the Eldest who demanded that we rise above our instincts and value our sense of self. It was the Eldest who fought to allow us the power of choice over our own lives. It was the Eldest who elevated us and allowed us to value these qualities in others, to forge partnerships and alliances.

While they slept, we reverted to a primitive state, bustling endlessly within our nests, waiting for the moment they woke so we could explode into motion once more, and grow in ways we didn't know we could.

For this reason, the Eldest must be preserved at all costs. The Colony requires them in order to achieve our fullest potential. No matter what need be done, they cannot be allowed to fall.

- Written submission from Historiant to the Council.

The shadows coiled around Crinis and she wiggled in pleasure as she felt the cool embrace of the darkness. The Nameless had been busy; as the fort had been constructed, they had worked their magic, creating pockets and tunnels of pure shadow in which they could conduct their sacred task. Her Master had to be protected during this vulnerable time, and she was pleased to know that his defenders would be rested and ready.

To have such pockets of perfect darkness within her reach was pleasing. They were like beacons that she could see with total clarity, could move through with complete ease. With their help, her reach was extended throughout the mountain.

Inside the chamber, her Master slept under the watch of her and her... siblings.

For that is what they were, she had begun to accept it. Their Master thought of the family constantly, and over time, it had worn off on all of them. Tiny lifted his head, a gleam of intent in his eyes. He had appeared asleep, dozing loudly, his breath rumbling throughout the chamber, until he had sensed something, snapping to alertness.

She formed a tentacle from her flesh and waved it at him, and the older monster flashed her a quick thumbs up before he closed his eyes once more. Shortly, the deep vibrations rattled throughout the chamber again, strong enough to send the antennae of the watching ants twitching.

Her older brother enjoyed his rest, but should he need to fight, he would be ready. It was almost amazing how swiftly he could snap to alertness. Though he might not give the impression of it, he was as dedicated to protecting their Master as anyone could be.

Her younger sibling hovered nearby, his eye fixated on the sleeping form of the giant ant in the centre of the chamber. The bright green glow that radiated from him filled the space; even without eyes, she could sense it driving back the shadows. Doubtless he was filled with envious thoughts, eager to evolve himself and ascend in power. Dangling beneath his body, the two stick-thin arms ended in those long claw-tipped fingers that curled and unfurled repeatedly.

He was an unusual creature, her demon sibling, but she did not question his devotion. He was committed to defending the Master, in his own way. How many times had his shields and healing saved the day?

Satisfied that all was as it should be, she turned her focus back to the shifting form of the Master. Not long ago, the changes had begun, fluctuating waves of mana rippling over the sleeping form. Already, the carapace was beginning to change, the sparkling light of the diamond covering fading away as something new was formed underneath.

She hoped that whatever took its place was as shiny as what had come before, for the Master's sake.

Ever vigilant, she flicked her awareness throughout the tunnels and chambers that filled the fortress, testing, sensing for any threat. Finding none, she relaxed once more and coiled around herself.

Soon, she too would reach tier seven, under her Master's guidance, as would her brothers. But she did not expect their ascension to stop there. As much as it lay hidden, there was an ambition to the one she was bound to, a hunger that demanded to be fed.

They would descend ever deeper into the Dungeon, of that she was sure. The Colony would follow in their wake and they would peel back the layers of this world until all of it lay bare before them.

And all of it would pay homage to the one she served.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1027: Just, Brilliant

"Hold, dammit!" Brilliant roared.

"I'm not sure it can take it," Assistant cried out. "It's going to overflow!"

"It needs more power! Give it everything you've got!"

"We can't do any more, the matrix will collapse!"

"A little further," Brilliant urged as the mana surged and frothed. Dimensional boundaries were cascading around them and she could peer into them all, flashing images of twisting reality that bent and warped themselves around her.

They were so close!

"It's gone! Run!" Assistant shrieked, and Brilliant was vaguely aware of her followers ducking for cover or diving into the blast cages. She herself didn't move, of course, transfixed as she was by the beauty she beheld in front of her.

"So beautiful," she whispered.

A moment later, she was spear tackled and knocked from her observation platform.

"Experiment! What are you doing?!" she yelled.

"Saving your life, again," the ant replied, flicking her antennae with irritation. "It's a little difficult to make use of your insights if you die in the process of getting them."

A point the Eldest had been at pains to make, numerous times, but Brilliant merely laughed.

"Danger can't hope to find me," she boasted, "I see it coming a full stratum away."

She moved to stand up only for Experiment to yank her back to the ground. Then the explosion finally happened, the haywire mana discharging as purple lightning that arced over the walls, searing jagged patterns into the rock.

"Oh, right," Brilliant muttered. "Forgot about that."

They waited another minute before the mages and carvers that made up her merry band began to emerge from the reinforced concrete bunkers someone had decided to install in their research chamber. She strongly suspected Assistant was the one responsible, but she couldn't quite prove it.

"Well done, everyone," Brilliant rushed around the team, giving everyone an enthusiastic tap with an antenna. "Fantastic experiment, another rousing success! We are getting ever closer to our goal."

"A-are you sure?" Assistant asked as she finally emerged, still hugging the floor as the last few sparks danced across the walls. "It seemed like it went rather poorly to me...."

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Brilliant chided, snapping her mandibles to emphasise her pheromones and mimic the human sound. "How many times do I have to teach you? Only a truly successful test will end with a multiple manifold-collapse. We were able to peer deeper into the weave than ever before! Our goal has never been closer than it is right now."

Not willing to waste any further words on those who didn't share her clarity of vision, she raced to the enchanted array embedded into the floor beneath the great stone edifice she had dubbed the rift-arch. Reinforced behind thick layers of hardened ice and embedded within a holding structure of living stone, the array was a sophisticated piece of enchanting, the only one of its kind within the Colony. Smithant herself had been consulted on the crafting of it, to the specifications of Brilliant's groundbreaking, mad design.

"Look!" she crowed. "Just look at the readings! One-two-three... sixteen identifiable threads. Our spatial pathway managed to make it a *third* of the way to its destination before collapsing!"

"Yes," Experimentant drawled, "which means any ant who travelled through it would be liquified. Not quite the result we are aiming for."

"Bah! We are making great strides. *Great* strides. You don't discover the secrets of teleportation magic without exploding a few gateways. If you could *see* as I do..."

"I'm not sure my brain could handle it...." Assistant said.

"I still don't understand why this is so difficult..." Experimentant huffed, clearly frustrated, her antennae swinging low. "If we only want to travel through regular space, why is it necessary to map such a difficult course? Why bother with these other dimensions at all?"

Brilliant rounded on her helper, contempt evident in every line of her carapace, but it was Assistant who interjected first.

"There *i*-is no such thing as *r*-regular space. It is a dimension. Everything *i*-is a dimension. If you punch a *h*-hole in one, you punch a hole *i*-in all of them."

"Exactly right!" Brilliant declared, sliding the protective screen clear and fiddling with the delicate instruments attached to the matrix. "It's almost as if we aren't looking to find a destination in three dimensional space, but rather find our way *back* to it. Right now, all we are doing is shooting bright light into the dimensional weave, illuminating the darkness so we can better understand it. Once we have a clearer picture, we can step with more confidence."

"But can't you already move through space?" Experimentant pressed. "Is it that much harder to make a functional gate?"

"Don't be ridiculous! For one, I am an incredible genius! For two, you are comparing an ant slipping through cracks in the wall, to knocking a hole in the thing and building a tunnel through it. I am protected by my vision, knowledge and Skills. How do we construct a path that will allow any ant, who has none of those things, to pass through safely? You're comparing tea and biscuits."

All around them, the team had come to life, examining the data, conferring with each other and adjusting the runes scratched into the rift-arch using the special plates that Brilliant had designed. An ant crawled up the arch, gripped the scorched metal sheet in her mandibles and pulled it from its slot before returning with a new, non-melted sheet and sliding it in place.

Brilliant was in the thick of it all. She rushed from group to group, cajoling, exhorting and haranguing every individual and group she came across. The ants who worked on this team were used to it and

endured her ranting with otherworldly patience, following the directions they could interpret until, finally, everything had been ordered to her satisfaction.

“Excellent!” Brilliant cackled as she beheld the new configuration. “I have high hopes for this one. Very high! How are the dimensional mana banks, Assistant?”

“Th-they’ve reached fifty p-percent and rising, leader.”

“Experiment! Is the matrix holding steady?”

“Readings are stable, leader.”

The little ant rapidly climbed back up to her observation post, looking down directly into the rift-arch.

“I’ve told you so many times,” she chuckled, “call me BRILLIANT!”

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1028: Queens Meeting

“The tea is excellent this season,” one queen observed.

“Indeed,” another noted, sipping again from her porcelain cup, “and the biscuits have elevated once again. This flavour is just divine.”

There was a general chorus of agreement from the “table” the gathered royalty sat around. The special seats invented by the carvers had certainly evolved since the early days. Once upon a time, they were simply a stone edifice, carved to fit the carapace of the ant who sat upon it.

The queens now rested upon seats lined with the finest leather, stuffed with the softest feathers, and coloured to each of their own personal favourite shades. Gold thread had been used to embroider and decorate each of the chairs with personalised filigree and symbols representing each of the eight gathered ants.

“They spoil us too much,” another huffed. “The waste of resources and time is simply profligate.”

“What can we do about it?” laughed the first. “We have asked them to stop, but they won’t.”

The eight gathered queens all nodded seriously in understanding. They had indeed asked their precious family to stop lavishing such extravagant gifts on them, even threatened to risk themselves as the Queen did, but to no avail.

“How are things going in the second egg-chamber?” the fourth asked. “Any interruptions or issues?”

“No,” replied the fifth in her typical blunt fashion. “We’ve been meeting our quotas easily. There seems to be plenty of Biomass to go around.”

“Same for us,” the seventh noted, “everything has been working so smoothly lately. The Brood Tenders have been ecstatic.”

The eight queens sipped from their tea again, a few of them lowering their massive frames to nibble on the delicate biscuits. They had to be careful not to damage the plates. Exquisite works of gleaming porcelain, the plates were beautiful to behold, but not entirely practical for an ant to eat from. As of yet,

an eating vessel designed specifically for their mouths had not been created, though doubtless someone somewhere was working on it.

"The biscuits seem a little sweeter than usual," the second queen noted, her antennae swaying thoughtfully. "Perhaps they've adjusted the recipe?"

The first took a larger bite and chewed carefully.

"I believe you're right. They may have increased the amount of sugar."

"Are they ever going to stop experimenting with the snacks?" the eighth grumbled. "They were perfectly fine before."

"I don't know," the second continued to take small sampling bites, "I think they may be better this way."

"Nonsense," the eighth refuted, "they're *too* sweet. They no longer have the perfect balance with the tea."

"Isn't that just because you put too much sugar in your tea?" the seventh prodded her sister with an antenna. "You're making a bad habit of that lately."

The queens continued to chat and laugh amongst themselves in the centre of the chamber. Around the outside, scores of ants patrolled in a never-ending cycle, with thousands more guarding the tunnels beyond the chamber, and thousands more beyond them.

These eight represented the single most important aspect of the Colony's social structure, the young. Without the queens, no young would be born, an unthinkable atrocity to the ants. Despite the size of their mining, smelting operations, or the vast fields of crops and fine tea leaves, by far the largest industry within the Colony was the harvest and transport of Biomass. Hundreds of tons flowed into this nest every day, to be consumed by the eight and turned into new young. To make that happen, a workforce of thousands laboured around the clock.

Ever since the queens had evolved to tier six, the demands on the workers had only increased. Patrols had been extended for kilometres in every direction to ensure the Dungeon provided enough food to fuel the nest.

The ants had learned to tend to the Dungeon just as they would a garden. Overhunting would eliminate spawn points, devastating the rate of replenishment. If they hit an area too heavily, they risked reducing the diversity in that part of the Dungeon, which was also a problem. The aim was to extract as much Biomass as possible, after all. That meant allowing the monsters within their territory to hunt and fight each other, to mutate and evolve so they provided better food for the queens.

The scouts were relentless in their observation of the hunting grounds. Carefully monitoring populations, tiers and mutations to maintain the most rich selection of prey.

As the discussion wore on, eventually the tea had been drunk and the tray of snacks had been depleted.

"Time to sleep, I suppose," the first noted cheerfully. "Very important to get our rest, let's not forget."

The others nodded solemnly. The Eldest had decreed that all needed to rest and queens were no exception. They were also known to fall victim to the... enforcers, if they pushed the limits. No one could flaunt the instructions given by the Eldest.

The eight said their farewells and turned their large, ponderous bodies around before making their way to their own rest chambers. Tomorrow would begin with a cleansing as the healers ensured that they were in peak physical condition, followed by a feast as the food that had amassed as they slept would be brought to them.

Then they would begin their work, laying the hundreds of eggs they could produce each day, contributing to the next generation.

A queen's work was never done.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1029: Far Ranging

[What do you see?]

[Much, prey. Dangerous.]

[Let me take a look.]

The vision was blurry, incomplete, but enough to show that the assessment was correct. They couldn't go this way.

[Alright. Come back. Make sure you aren't seen.]

Columbant withdrew her awareness from her distant pet, the small cavern in which she crouched snapping back into focus with disorienting clarity. Even after advancing the Skill to the second rank, it was still difficult to use, especially over a distance.

We can't use that path, she thought to herself, which is going to severely limit our options. Are we cut off?

She consulted her tunnel map and began to plot out the routes still available to her. They'd ranged far from the meeting point, but there were still five days left before she was due to rendezvous with Magellant. She just hadn't expected monster activity to be so high in this area.

[What do you think, Mistress? Shall we fight our way out?]

Her smartest pet, Rist, had long worked out how precarious their circumstances were. The flame demon had a good mind and a flair for fire magic, but was often too eager to engage, a tendency she had to be mindful of.

[It's not ideal,] she confessed before she began to sketch out a rough version of her tunnel map on the floor with one leg. [We currently sit between two expanses that are unusually close together. This one is the shadow coral reef we explored earlier, this one we haven't been into, but I suspect is a shadow swamp type. The spillover of monsters between the two is flooding the tunnels around us and causing the monsters to be higher tiers than I expected. If we try and fight our way out, we need to make it through these three junctions.]

She indicated the points where the tunnels met with an antenna while she continued to sketch with her leg. As she spoke, Rist watched with his ever-burning eyes, carefully taking in her words.

[Due to the density, we might end up pulling more monsters down on our heads than we can handle.]

[Tunnelling?] the demon said, a little disappointed. He hated digging.

[Not really an option,] Columbant shook her head. [The death mana is just too thick in the stone down here. It's sapping the life out of me even to touch it.]

She climbed up the wall and poked at the ceiling, once again experiencing the strange draining sensation she'd felt before. They could still dig through, but it would take more than twice as long as normal due to the frequent breaks they'd need.

[We can dig,] Rist said forcefully, [we dig you out.]

The bottomless, compelled loyalty of the pets was on display. She would sacrifice them if needed to save her own life, but the core shaper would do everything possible to avoid that point.

[No,] she refuted. [We will all make it. I have a plan. Quietly train your Skills and wait for Slither to return. I need to think for a moment.]

The demon nodded and gave her some space, retreating to the corner where he continued to practise his fire manipulation, twisting the flame into shapes and making them dance on his palm. Columbant skittered across to where her third pet rested, still recovering.

She formed the healing mana construct with difficulty, she needed so much more practice with it, before reaching out with soothing energy. The beetle-beast groaned as the jagged wound across her flank began to seal over, bit by bit. A day after the fight that caused it, the tear, two metres long across the flank, already looked much better than it did before.

[How are you, girl?] Columbant asked gently.

Garg extended her head a little from her shell, letting her mistress see the determination in her eye.

[Ready,] she insisted.

[No, girl. Not yet.]

[Ready!]

The small ant felt a pain in her heart.

[Alright. We'll get some more food into you, and then you'll be ready, okay?]

That would give her enough time for another round of healing magic as well. Combined with a bit of Biomass, it would nearly be enough to heal the wound. Nearly.

[Your pet has gained experience. You have received a portion.]

She jumped as the notification came in. What had happened? Was Slither alright? She resisted the urge to reach out to him. He needed to concentrate in order to return safely.

She paced back and forth for a few minutes as she waited for the shadow creature to return, sighing with relief when he finally dropped down from the narrow opening above. A slug-variant of her own creation, Slither splatted onto the ground before reforming himself. Without a word, he crawled to where Garg lay and regurgitated a pile of Biomass. A fresh kill, uneaten.

[Thank you, Slither] Columbant said. [That will help a lot.]

[Thanks,] Garg agreed, her gratitude rolling off her in waves.

The big beetle extended her jaws and in two quick chomps, the food was gone. Was it enough? It would have to be.

[We'll move in fifteen minutes,] she declared to her pets. [Make sure you are ready.]

The three of them nodded and began to rest, conserving their energy for the time to come. For her part, Columbant sank into meditation. This far from the Colony, she had nobody to rely on but herself, and her pets. She couldn't afford any mistakes. If she failed, not a single ant would know of her fall, just another core shaper lost ranging in the Dungeon.

Eldest, Queen, give me strength.

She employed the Meditation Skill to calm her nerves and concentrated on pulling in more mana to restock her reserves. If they were able to make it out of this mess, she might have to withdraw to the first stratum to make it back to the Colony. The mana was already rising, this level was getting dangerous.

After ten minutes had elapsed, she made her way to Garg and healed the monster once more, closing over the wound that little bit more. She wouldn't be able to move without pain, but hopefully the injury wouldn't hinder her in battle.

[Alright, gather up,] she told her pets when the time had come.

The three moved until they stood alongside her, looking down at the map she had sketched.

[We will break out and make our way to this junction. Stealth will be the order of the day, so we will be counting on you, Slither.]

[Okay.]

[But there's little chance we can make it without having to fight. It's important that we retreat into this tunnel, should that happen,] she pointed again.

[Are we clear?] she asked.

The three nodded, though she suspected Garg had only followed a part of it. She really needed a tiny bit more brainpower in her next evolution.

[Let's go.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1030.2: Far Ranging Part 2

It all started well, as things tended to, in Columbant's experience. Usually in the middle was where things started to go all the way downhill. They hadn't reached that moment, but she had plans in place in the event the inevitable happened.

Slither was her stealth specialist, a creation she was incredibly proud of. The slug-like creature sank his body into a shadow, deepening and thickening it. He couldn't maintain this form indefinitely, so she moved quickly, climbing onto Garg along with Rist.

The powerful beetle-beast settled into the black pocket, her dark carapace blending in beautifully.

[Alright Slither, activate your Stealth aura and let's get out of here. Garg, you know what to do.]

[Yes.]

The big insect became enveloped in the darkness and they made their way out of the hiding place swiftly, climbing up the walls and out into the tunnel above.

A little earth magic was necessary to soundlessly widen the opening, but once they were up, Slither directed them away from the main thoroughfare and they managed to blend into the remote parts of the tunnel. Garg moved swiftly and silently, not something that came naturally to a monster of her size. Purchasing and having her train the Stealth Skill had been the right decision.

You couldn't fight everything you found when ranging solo. Being flexible was the name of the game for core shapers.

Slither was able to create an oval-shaped patch of darkness around eight metres from end to end, enough space for Garg to fit with room to spare. They crept along the tunnel, Columbant steering her bulky pet with antennae taps on the carapace as they navigated.

There were monsters everywhere, and several times, they nearly stumbled upon a nest or gathering, having to back up and choose another path. Growls, hisses, snapping and cracking could be heard in all directions. This deep in the second stratum, almost every monster was touched with an aspect of death, causing them to be exceptionally lethal. It was impossible to know which monster could apply a touch of death, or how.

[Slither. Care,] she breathed over the mental link. [I sense something coming, we need to hold.]

[Time is short,] he told her.

[Got it. We still have to wait. Let's hide behind that rock.]

The quartet snuck their way over to the side a little further as the foreboding feeling grew stronger. Even the regular monsters, without the benefits of her senses, were able to detect it. As the seconds ticked past, they became more agitated, scrambling to finish their fights, or escape into a separate area. Several leapt out into the larger tunnel connected to this one that Columbant was heading for, maybe hoping to slide into the smaller paths whose openings dotted the walls.

It wasn't to be.

There was a sudden rushing sound, followed by a dull CRUNCH. Those desperate monsters were gone in an instant, vanished into the ethereal gullet of the new arrival.

Bones as black as night enveloped in ghostly, translucent flesh, the serpent was a nightmarish vision. For a long moment, it hovered in place, looming over everything with its enormous, elongated body. When no further prey made itself known, the creature once more began to glide forward, soon sliding out of view.

That was far too close, Columbant shivered, *that's exactly where I wanted to go.*

She let a few more seconds pass by before she indicated to Slither it was time to move forward. That bright core she had detected was fading away as the ghost serpent found other tunnels in which to feast.

She would dearly love to get her hands on that core, but now was hardly the time to try hunting such a high tier prey. It wasn't often that she found monsters such as those, ones that had managed to, by luck or design, achieve a powerful core and secure potent evolutions. Such creatures were lords of their own little slices of Dungeon, suppressing everything beneath them until such time as they grew too powerful and needed to descend in order to stay alive.

[Out of time,] Slither gasped.

The shadow returned to normal as her slug pet reformed, sliding out of the ground and into the tunnel. The darkness around them retracted, revealing Garg and her passengers to their surroundings.

Fortunately, not many monsters noticed, or else they were still so intimidated by the recent passer-by that they refused to emerge and challenge them.

[Move, quickly!] she urged the beetle and Garg responded, rushing forward and taking them into the larger tunnel. [Now left, we need to go this way.]

This junction was just one of several they would need to pass if they wanted to make it back to safe ground, and now they found themselves in a major arterial tunnel, much larger and more heavily populated than the one they had left behind.

[Stay together,] she urged her pets.

Getting here without having to fight had been a significant win. They were fresh and ready, without having been tangled in a dozen skirmishes just to get this far. Now they would have to fight, the only question was how long they could put it off.

Not long, as it turned out.

They hadn't made it far before the hundreds of monsters who had ducked for cover as the serpent came through began to emerge once more. As with all monsters, they had only one thing on their mind, growing stronger! In small packs, or as individuals, they began to hunt and the sounds of combat rang out in all directions once more.

She tried to avoid them, but it was inevitable that they would stumble into something.

Two spine-covered creatures that reeked of death had been hidden beneath a small patch of coral. Their cores were weak, to the point Columbant almost didn't see them until they were upon them. The monsters leaped from their hiding place, desperate to sting the attackers.

[Garg, use your carapace!] She warned her loyal pet.

The beetle-beast responded instantly, turning to present her massively thick shell to the spines of the monsters, which pierced into the hardened chitin, but failed to penetrate.

[Rist!]

The demon was ahead of her, already directing flames down to sear the two creatures. The spined things took heavy damage, weak to fire as most things in the second stratum were.

To strike the final blow, Slither leapt from the darkness and showered their opponents in thick acid, burning them away.

[Your pet has gained experience. You have received a portion.]

[Expert Pet Commander (III) has reached level eight.]

The fight was over, but the danger hadn't passed. Columbant swept her senses through the tunnel, waiting to see if any had been drawn closer by the noise.

At first there was nothing, and she began to feel relieved, but then came the slithering hisses and she knew trouble was coming. When wasn't it?