

Chrysalis 1061

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Chapter 1061: Colliding Waves pt 4

The Queen recoiled as the heat flared, searing her carapace and burning her sensitive antennae and eyes. The demon roared, tongues of flame lashing the air as healing magic flowed over the Queen once again.

Around them, the Colony and demons continued their ongoing battle. Dramatically outnumbered, the demons struggled to make any headway against the massed ranks of ants who bombarded them with acid and spells, yet the arrival of this tier seven demon had complicated the situation to no end.

Advant ground her mandibles in frustration as the stalemate continued. The Queen could withdraw if she wanted, even a tier seven wouldn't be able to punch through the formation they'd assembled before she managed to get away, but the burning aura the monster projected was a wonderful counter to the Colony's numbers.

If their mother was to fall back, it would cost thousands of lives to bring this demon down without her. So she stayed. Yet it was difficult for the ants to support her in this battle. So potent was the fire that emanated from the demon, even Advant couldn't get within fifty metres of it without beginning to take serious damage.

If she were to draw near enough to actually bite it, she would likely be burnt to a crisp a few seconds later. And would she even damage it?

The only reason the Queen had been able to hold on was due to her healing magic, but that had a limit.

"Mother! We need to retreat!" she implored the Queen once more.

The Queen didn't look down.

"I will not allow my children to die in my place," she said calmly.

"If we take any longer, then even more powerful demons may rise from the depths! If that happens, then we *all* will die."

If the tier eight demons climbed out of that hole in the ground, then maybe not even an army of hundreds of thousands of ants would be able to defeat them. Certainly, the Queen would refuse to leave, probably ordering them to flee while she tried to buy time, but she would fall instantly.

Then Advant and her siblings would charge in to avenge her, leading to innumerable casualties.

She desperately cast her thoughts about, trying to find some way to avert this disaster. All around her, her siblings fought against the demons who continued to rise from below in a neverending tide.

Artillery spells and huge blasts of acid rained down from above, wreaking havoc amongst the demon ranks, yet still that burning demon stood tall. The unnaturally searing heat that surrounded it acted as a perfect shield against acid attacks, evaporating even the most dense barrage with ease. Their spells also seemed to do less than they should, as if the flame burned their mana away.

A sufficiently dense and powerful enough spell would surely punch through, but the Eldest wasn't here to deliver their strange, horrific purple spell.

She couldn't hesitate any longer. Advant made her decision.

"We will charge together," she told the Queen. "We must defeat the demon as quickly as possible and then retreat in good order."

"You mustn't," the Queen said, "the heat will destroy you."

"I will not stand by and let you die in my place, just as much as you won't allow me to do the same. So we go together, and whatever happens, happens. Are you ready?"

The mother of the Colony wasn't happy about it, but she could see the sense in her daughter's words.

"Very well, child," she said. "Gather the others behind me and I will shield them as best I can."

Advant bit back her protest and nodded. This was as good a compromise as she would get, so she would take it.

"Quickly!" she called the others, spreading her scent as wide as she could. "Gather behind the Queen! We will charge the monster and overwhelm it so the Colony can retreat. Somebody contact the mages and coordinate their artillery with our charge."

As efficient as ever, the ants scrambled into position with their customary rapidity. In less than a minute, the long range firepower was being concentrated on the giant demon as the ants formed a column behind the Queen.

"Stay close to me, children," the Queen said, her scent determined. "I will shield you from harm."

"FOR THE COLONY!" Advant roared.

"FOR THE QUEEN!" The others roared back, their collective pheromones spreading like a tidal wave across the ant horde.

Once more, the flame-wreathed demon bellowed its fury. Heat radiated from the beast beyond that of a hundred smelters, enough to sear and crack even the Queen's thick carapace.

The space between the charging ants and the roaring demon flickered.

A giant ant appeared, sprawling onto the ground and sending thousands of demon larvae flying as it skidded to a halt, face buried in the rock.

"Holy moly!" the Eldest groaned. "Brilliant, are my insides back on my inside?"

"I - I think so, Eldest," a small ant said, gripping onto the back of the other for dear life. "At least mine are."

"Didn't you say this would be safe?"

"I didn't not say it *wouldn't* be unsafe."

“... I’m going to throw you in Invidia’s mouth and leave you there for a hundred years,” the Eldest declared flatly. “In fact, a hundred might not be enough.”

The little ant waved an antenna weakly in protest.

“I don’t think you quite appreciate what an incredible feat I just achieved... Eldest. Most would say I have done... the impossible.”

“Just get off of me, would you? I feel like my guts are about to be yanked out of my eyeballs.”

The little ant released its grip, rolled to the side and thudded into the ground.

“Good enough.”

The Eldest groaned as they forced themselves to their feet, then gave their antennae a quick clean.

“Right then. Mother, wonderful to see you again. Have you been well?”

One of the Queen’s antennae twitched, and the giant ant, far larger than the mother, flinched backward.

“Just trying to be polite! Show some respect and all that. Okay, deal with the demons first, chat later. I get it.”

The enormous, dark-coloured ant turned itself to face the fiery demon.

“You guys can leave now,” the Eldest said. “This won’t take long.”

“Are you sure?” Advant asked. “You are the same tier. Shouldn’t we work together to bring it down?”

The Eldest chuckled, the scent of amusement spreading far and wide.

“I mean, technically you *are* helping just by being here. How many of us are around here right now?”

“Maybe two hundred thousand.”

The Eldest crouched down, bracing their legs, then *exploded* forward. The rock cracked under the force, sending shards flying as the giant ant rocketed ahead.

Mandibles peeled back, glowing with terrible purpose.

The demon screamed in rage, then brought both arms down as the air itself ignited and burned.

The jaws closed.

Advant couldn’t describe it later when asked. A terrible silence fell upon them. Then a terrible roar.

And the demon was no more.

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Chapter 1062: Dawn of a New Era

What makes a mythic monster so powerful? There are numerous theories, some confirmed, others more nebulous, but the strength and dominance of this class of monster in the Dungeon is a long studied and generally well understood phenomenon.

At the risk of oversimplifying, we can apportion the bulk of that inordinate power to the core. After all, what classifies a mythic monster as such, is its core.

At certain densities and sizes, the core of a monster undergoes a qualitative change. This is what drives the price and demand for larger and more potent cores. A basic monster core can hold less mana than a special, which holds less than a rare, which is inferior to a mythic. This is obvious, and only scratches the surface of a complex issue.

Cores also absorb mana more readily as they increase in class. The increase in intake rate is more than linear, meaning more powerful cores are ultimately more efficient and can support larger, hungrier enchantments.

But what this eventually boils down to, is the body of the monster. At the point a given monster becomes mythic, its body and mind have evolved far beyond what a normal, organic creature can sustain. Where does the energy necessary to fuel these behemoths come from? How do they sustain themselves?

Mana, mana, mana. A mythic monster is a walking mana vacuum, sucking in the energy around them at a tremendous rate in order to fuel their very existence. Crossing the threshold from rare to mythic is a qualitative leap that brings a monster's existence closer than ever to returning to their point of origin: a being of pure mana.

This is only one reason for their special existence, but a major one, as it plays into everything else that makes them so fearsome. The powerful evolutions, the special materials that form their bodies, the unique abilities that they gain, all are attributable to their capacity and affinity for the energy that underpins the Dungeon, and therefore the entire world.

- Excerpt from "Monsters and Mana" by Xinci.

Heh.

Gweheheh.

Hoo haha!

Hahahahaha!

MUAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

A new age has dawned. The age of Anthony has arrived! I feel so powerful, so overwhelming, so potent! Did you see that, mother? Were you able to witness my coolness as I dispatched that idiot demon with one slick move? Your child has become amazing!

BEHOLD ME!

THWACK!

"Ouch!"

"Stop posing in the middle of the battlefield, child," the Queen scolds me. "We must ensure the family is able to retreat safely."

I rub at my head with one antenna. I might have a fancy new carapace, but somehow the Queen's thwacks still sting!

"Ah. You're right," I mumble, embarrassed, before I turn and begin to spin up my gravity mana construct. "I'll hold them back for a bit, you help the family disengage and then we can run back to the pillar. Things are going crazy up here, I hear."

I pump mana into the new spellform I learned, the *only* new spell I learned, when I finally unlocked the Skill I had yearned for.

Centred above the hole from which the demons are emerging, an invisible energy begins to pulse, growing stronger each passing moment. My antennae buzz as the new gravity source begins to take hold, dragging demons back as they try to rush forward, lifting those beneath it up into the air.

My other brains go to work, dozens of mind constructs spinning at once, and lances of condensed ice fly forward as if blasted from a machine gun. The front line of demons is annihilated in an instant, and with the reinforcements delayed, my siblings finally have the little separation they need to retreat.

Too easy! I barely have to draw on the Will of the Colony for these small fry, though I burned through quite a chunk to one-shot that massive demon. Not to worry, though, with so many ants within range of my Vestibule, the energy continues to flood into me along with their thoughts and impressions.

Inside my body, nestled close to my core, the completed trifecta of Vestibule, Nave and Altar are burning with light, flooding me with power that suffuses my being.

The feeling is incredible, as if a bottomless well of strength that will never run dry has been built inside of me.

"Let's get the heck out of here," I announce to the others. "You go first, I'll bring up the rear."

My orders are hardly necessary, and largely ignored, since that's exactly what they were doing already. Feeling a little redundant, I take up my position at the back of the column and prepare to blast the demons with magic if they get too close. May as well eat while I can as well.

Except I'm not needed there either. Without the protection of the big boy, ordinary demons stand little chance against the combined firepower of so many ants. Acid and magic rains down in a ceaseless torrent, leaving me with nothing to do.

Not for the first time, I'm left to feel useless by the incredible competence of my siblings. Unfortunately, that means I have nothing to distract me from the horrific pain in my guts.

Stupid Ancients and their stupid Call. As expected, my evolution has resulted in the terrible yanking sensation on my soul intensifying. Coming up to the third stratum was necessary, but holy moly it stings. I can't even imagine what it would have been like as a tier six monster in the first stratum.

"Eldest... are you well?" Advant asks me, scuttling along at my side.

"I've been better," I reply, grinding my mandibles in pain. "Once I get back to the fourth, I'll be much better."

“You won’t be able to stay?” the soldier asks, somewhat alarmed. “There are tier eight demons possibly coming towards us.”

I nod.

“I’ve heard as much. Unfortunately, sticking around here until they turn up isn’t something I can do. As long as Brilliant can move me between strata, I should be able to wait below and pop in here if you need me.”

Although the experience of being warped through dimensions was... harrowing, to say the least. I’d wish for eyelids so I didn’t have to see it, but for some reason, I feel like even removing my eyes wouldn’t improve the situation.

“Eldest... I’m not sure what you’re capable of now, but the way you dealt with that other demon.... I’m not sure we’d be able to fight them without you present.”

I wave an antenna as I keep an eye on the situation behind me. The bombardment has been more than enough to keep the demons occupied so we can create a good gap. All we have to do now is sprint across the plains and we’ll be home free!

Until they reach the pillar and climb up after us anyway.

“Don’t worry about it,” I declare, flexing one leg as we run. “Tier eight demons? Hunk of Biomass. I’ll smash ‘em to bits.”

[Right, Tiny?]

After a long moment with no reply, I twitch when I finally remember. Brilliant wasn’t able to bring the crew along with me, I’m actually here without them. It’s been so long since I was separated from them, it feels extremely weird. Being freed from my babysitters is a little liberating, but it’s lonely without my friends. I hope Crinis is coping alright...

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Chapter 1063: Size Up

“So how does it feel, Eldest?”

I turn a little to look down at Advant. I’d never really considered before, because I’d never really had to, that the position of my eyes and shape of my head blocks my vision to the ground beneath me. Unlike a human, with a handy dandy neck, I can’t exactly look down.

So when Advant approaches close to my legs and wants to chat, I actually can’t see where she is. I lower my legs on one side to change the angle and I spot her on my left.

“Oh, there you are. What do you mean by that?”

“To be a tier seven? You’re reaching levels of power that most in the Colony can only dream about.”

I feel a little uncomfortable when she puts it that way.

“What do you mean? You’ll reach this point soon enough. Bit of time, Biomass and cores are all you need and bam, you’ll be my size before you know it.”

Or bigger, considering her energy is mostly dedicated to physical growth, whereas I split mine. To my surprise, she shakes her antennae in denial.

“No, I don’t think there will be many who manage to take the leap that you have. The amount of resources required to push one of us to such a high tier is hard to justify. There are over a million members of the Colony now, each and every one of them in need of cores to fuel their evolutions. We must consider the strength of the overall family.”

“We still need a few heavyweights,” I suggest, “that big burny demon was a good counter to our normal swarm tactics. Having one big shot to take it down fast is the right call.”

“I agree with you, but I don’t think that will be me,” she sighs. “I have responsibilities as a member of the council, I can’t be hoarding resources and putting myself on the frontline all the time. Vibrant will likely be supported to make a push toward evolution, but I doubt I will ever reach tier seven.”

Huh. It’s a sobering thought. I’m tempted to say something like “if you wait long enough, you’ll surely get there eventually,” but that doesn’t really work. Sure, a monster will accumulate Biomass and experience throughout their life, but cores are a different matter. If the population of the Colony continues to grow in the manner that it has, then the demand for this precious resource will only continue to grow. If the Colony decides they would rather direct that resource to bringing up new members as opposed to investing at the top end... it’s hard to argue with the decision.

After all, I was the one who insisted we do everything we could to boost each individual in the Colony.

“It’s hard to describe,” I say, trying to give a better answer. “I’m not used to being this big, for starters.”

Of all my evolutions, this is by far the largest increase in size I’ve had. Other than the tier five soldiers, almost everyone around me can walk straight under my carapace without me even having to lift myself up.

Comparing back to my human body is almost pointless. My mandibles are longer than I was tall, even before the leg thing. In short, I’m huge! The tunnels and caverns I roamed through in the first stratum are forever off limits to me now, there’s just no way I would fit!

I have to admit, thinking back to that period, it feels good to know I could totally stare down a croca beast with trivial ease.

Tiny is still taller than me, but in terms of total mass, he’s fallen far behind me for the time being, something that appeared to hurt his feelings. At least, he was sulking up a storm when I woke up, flexing quietly in a corner.

“I’ll be able to give you a better answer when a little more time has passed,” I tell Advant. “For now, I’m still not used to a lot of things.”

The soldier nods.

“Well, what are your plans for now, Eldest?”

I’d love to experience less pain....

“I’ll return to the fourth and help things get rolling down there for the moment. You’re all safe enough for the time being, even though the demons are going crazy. When you need me, send word and I’ll pop in to help.”

I can probably use the Mother Tree’s gate to head back, but I’ll have to rely on Brilliant to bring me back in an emergency.

“As far as I can tell, you’re going to have a harder time than I am,” I tell her, “but you’re all way better at organising this sort of defence than I am. Once we get dug in, a million demons won’t be enough to break through.”

Now that the Queen and the rescue force have returned to friendly territory, the short term emergency has been resolved, but the ongoing danger in the demon stratum continues to grow. The Colony needs to get to work preparing for the onslaught, and I need to prep myself for battle with possibly multiple tier eight demons.

Not looking forward to that....

“Alright, I’d better get going then. Good luck, Advant,” I snap her a quick salute which she returns after a moment of surprise. “Take care of our people. I’ll make sure at least half of the troops in the fourth come back to support.”

“That’s not necessa-” she starts to reply, but I rush off without letting her finish.

They want them all to stay and protect me. Bah! As if I need it!

I really need to find Sarah and see what she’s up to as well. She’d be a great help in the current situation. I don’t want to catch up with her just so I can laugh about being bigger and taller. That’s just nonsense.

I rush across the demon plains, exchanging greetings and waves with the many, many ants I pass along the way. It feels like the entire stratum has come alive as the Colony has moved in with much larger numbers. Construction is occurring all over the place, forts here, walls there, bridges, raised roads, nests, mines, forges.

The wheels of industry turn ever forward, especially when it’s ants doing the driving. The gigantic nests we’ve constructed under the plate cities we conquered were just the beginning, apparently. I feel sorry for anyone who thinks they can get rid of us once we decide to move in, even the demons. It ain’t happening!

Driven by the ceaseless pain of the Call, I rush back to the garden of the Mother Tree.

Aside from the agony of the Ancient-inflicted curse, I’m also a little concerned about Crinis. She’s always been a little... attached to me, ever since she was reformed as a pet. I’m hoping she’s been able to cope with the separation.

I’m sure it’s fine. I’ve been gone for what... a couple of hours?

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Chapter 1064: So What Have We Gained?

[Crisis... what the hell happened here?]

[Master!]

A wave of black shadow-stuff peels off the walls of the evolution chamber and rushes towards me. I flinch back, but it's too late, and in moments I'm once again wrapped up by the overly attached murder-ball.

[Gah! At least get off of my eyes, I can't see a damned thing.]

A few seconds later she's adapted herself a little better to fit on my carapace, covering even the little purple glow that I still retain. It's been a harsh blow, losing my glorious lustre, but I'll definitely get it back via mutations! That's how I got it in the first place after all.

As I lament my lack of shininess, Crisis shrieks endlessly in my mind.

[Master! Are you well? Are you hurt? I think I can feel a scratch on your carapace. WHO DID IT?! Tell me, and I will rend them into pieces and grind the remains into paste! Then I will dive into the mind of the paste and drive it insane for a thousand years! Death! Deaaaaaaaaath!]

[Quiet down, dammit!]

For a few minutes, all I can hear from Crisis is her gasping for mental air as she continues to writhe all over my chitin, checking for injuries. I wasn't even gone that long, for goodness sake. And look at what she did to the room....

Looking around the chamber I evolved in, there are tentacle marks smashed into every inch of it. The only time you can't see the clear imprint of the tentacles, is where the slashing lines cut into the rock are so dense they completely cover it up. It looks like someone went nuts in here with a diamond-tipped chainsaw.

Even Tiny, trying to look nonchalant over in the corner seems a little relieved to see me return. The big ape flashes me a discreet thumbs up from the corner he'd burrowed himself into with Invidia and smiles confidently.

Oi. I can't take you seriously while Invidia is *still* maintaining the shield covering you.

[Holy moly, Crisis. You need to settle down. I'm sorry I couldn't bring you with me, but this is excessive. I've only been gone a little while, and I'm perfectly fine. Alright? If this ever happens in the future, I expect you to be able to control yourself.]

The shadow flesh covering me quivers in shame at my rebuke.

[Yes, Master,] she replies in a small voice. [I'm sorry, Master.]

Poor thing sounds like she might cry. My heart softens.

[Look, I'm not actually mad at you. Just keep yourself under control, alright? Think of the poor Colony members who have to fix all this damage.]

[I will. I promise.]

There, all mended. Still, I don't really want to stay in this chamber for... any further amount of time. This place looks like the scene of a horror movie.

[Alright Tiny, Invidia, let's head outside and work out what we're going to do next. I need to go through my status as well.]

The two finally release the shield and emerge from their bunker. As a group, we head out of the chamber, and as we move through the tunnels, I notice that which I missed on my way in. It seems that Crinis' rampage extended far beyond just the evolution space. Everywhere we go, there are ants smoothing out suspicious-looking grooves cut into the walls, or flattening sections that have been smashed by an elongated limb.

I don't say anything, but I can feel an occasional quiver run through the monster attached to me.

Sigh.

I thought she was getting less reliant on me. Turns out that's not quite the case. What's going to happen the next time she gets separated from me, perhaps for an extended period of time?

Something to worry about another time. We've got things to deal with right now, and there's little chance we get split up again, at least in the short term. If I need to get teleported back to the third stratum again, it should be another short visit at least.

The mountain is still filled with my siblings busy working at the million and one tasks required to get a nest of this size up and running. The crafters are overloaded with work, and judging by the way their antennae swing carelessly from side to side, they couldn't be happier about it.

They better be getting enough sleep....

When we make it out to the 'surface' I find a comfortable spot and throw myself down on the ground. The ground shakes beneath me and a nearby carver clacks her mandibles with irritation.

"Sorry," I say.

Gotta remember how much I weigh now. Aside from the muscle I've put on, my new carapace is *way* more dense than my old one. In fact, if I hadn't bulked up in that evolution, I probably couldn't walk anymore. Getting myself up the pillar in the third stratum took a little doing, let me tell you.

After settling my position, I bring up my status for a good look.

Name: Anthony

Level: 3 (Mythic) (VII)

Might: 380

Toughness: 342

Cunning: 228

Will: 195

HP: 684/684

MP: 1070/1070

Skills:

General:

Grandmaster Excavation (V) Level 6; Master Grip (IV) Level 10; Expert Stealth (III) Level 18; Tunnel Compass (IV) Level 25; Iron Mind (V) Level 22; Master Stamina (IV) Level 26; Still Meditation (IV) Level 40; Flash Dash (V) Level 16;

Mana:

Advanced Mana Craft (VI) Level 11; Condensed Mana (V) Level 9; Grand Finer External Mana Manipulation (V) Level 16; Mana Hoarder (V) Level 9; Layered Mind Magic Affinity (V) Level 41; Extended Directed Mana Sensing (V) Level 15; Master Healing Magic Affinity (IV) Level 12; Advanced Omni-Elemental Affinity (VI) Level 43; Advanced Mana Masking (IV) Level 8; Wood Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Metal Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Lightning Magic Affinity (I) Level 1; Advanced Force Magic Affinity (IV) Level 22; Advanced Barrier Magic Affinity (III) Level 19; Gravity Magic Affinity (I) Level 2;

Pet:

Far-Flung Pet Communication (IV) Level 4; Core Crafting (IV) Level 18; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 5;

Defensive:

Divine Exo-Skeleton Defence (VI) Level 12; Grandmaster Dodge (V) Level 8; Grandmaster Endure (V) Level 5; Master Grace (IV) Level 6; Expert Mandible Parry (III) Level 4;

Offensive:

Guided Acid Shot (V) Level 8; Grandmaster Precise Shooting (V) Level 11; Void Chomp (VI) Level 14; Expert Chomp Combo (III) Level 6; Spear Charge (III) Level 5;

Mutations:

Senses:

Focal Compound Eyes +30; Future Wave Sight Antennae +30 (Twilight Filament);

Defence:

Carapace (Gravity-Compressed Diamond); Inner Carapace Plating (Boson Agitating Crystal Flesh);

Physical:

Fortified Absorption Legs +30; Mandibles (Gravity-Compressed Diamond); Hastened Potent Regeneration Gland +30; Widespread Stinking Pheromone Gland +30; Expanding Discerning Stomach +30; Coiling Hyper-Twitch Musculature +30; Distributed Instantaneous Sub-Neural Network +30;

Acid:

Spreading Binding Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +30; Flexi Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle +30; Enriching Draining Acid Concentration Gland +30; Viscous Enfeebling Acid Stimulation Gland +30;

Mental:

Indomitable Coordination Cortex +30; Crushing Gravity Well Main Brain +30; Mind Mana Mastery Sub-Brain +30; Mind Mana Mastery Sub-Brain +30; Mind Mana Mastery Sub-Brain +30;

Mana:

Gravity Magic Gland (Resonant Well Stone); Might Infusing Collective Will Vestibule +30 (Soul Crystal); Communal Spirit Nave (Soul Crystal); Altar of Self (Soul Crystal);

Species: Perfect Paragon

Skill points: 145

Biomass: 820

So much to be proud of, such immense progress. But the crowning jewel of it all is sitting right there in my Skills list. Of course, I checked for it the second I woke up and, lo and behold, it appeared!

Gravity Magic is finally MINE!

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Chapter 1065.2: So What Have We Gained part 2

The war has dragged on beyond what any thought was possible. As I look back now on those early years, I can scarce reconcile what I thought then with what I know now.

An easy conflict, over in months, I had been convinced of it. So confident. Now all of that is gone, drained out of me over the long conflict. So many have fallen in battle, so many have been lost in the depths.

I honestly can no longer recall how it started. When the first battles were fought, before the stories had been worked out and the politicians got involved, who was it that made the first strike?

I suppose it doesn't matter now, both sides are fully committed, have been for a long time. When the silver city fell, the alliance could no longer settle for anything other than total victory.

Perhaps the civilised races of the world should have come to this conclusion a long time ago, but we are unified now. Either the Dungeon will be cleansed, or we will fall.

- Excerpt from a diary of an unnamed General. Year thirty six of the Dungeon War.

It's hard to describe the level of joy I experienced when I finally saw that Skill appear in the list. It appears that Gandalf has finally seen my dedication to all matters gravity with my latest investments. And perhaps my magic Skills have finally become high enough that I can handle this amount of raw power.

And it is freakin' hard. It takes a huge amount of my mental energy to create the construct to produce Gravity Mana, it's complex beyond imagining and it'll be ages before I can reliably make it.

Fortunately, I have a ready supply of the purple stuff ready to go!

The new technique I unlocked was somewhat disappointingly bland, but extremely powerful nonetheless.

I was hoping for all sorts of crazy spellforms to drip into my brain, but I only received the one. It takes a *ton* of mana, and is hard as heck to cast, but it lets me create what I would suppose are gravity wells.

Effectively, I can make a localised gravity field over which I have total control. I can use it to lift things up, or pull them down, or drag them sideways. It's cool as heck.

Even better, it resonates with my new carapace, mandibles and mana gland whenever I'm within the effect.

The new materials that compose my body are incredible also. Each of the resets have been super impactful and I'm very pleased with them. The carapace and mandibles, from what I've seen so far, are *hard* as heck. And heavy! The gravity-compressed diamond is far darker than I would have liked, but so far I'm impressed. Considering what I paid for it, it should be at least this amazing!

I still have to mutate it as well. I don't know what I'll pick up, but that's going to be an incredible opportunity to power up.

But the central component of the evolution, the big ticket item, is the Altar of Self. I wasn't exactly sure how this was going to work, the descriptions being what they are.

As it turns out, the advantages of the Altar are completely off the chain. They're out of control. They're... like... really good.

The description stated that the will of the Colony would be able to do more than just refresh my body, that I'd be able to use it to empower my Skills and abilities.

I'd figured that meant I'd be able to convert that Will into mana, or some sort of mana adjacent energy source that could pay the stamina and mana costs for my abilities.

Which would have been absurdly overpowered. With all the energy that the Colony gives me, I'd basically never run out of resources... effectively ever. With the incredible level of toughness and sustainability I already had, I figured I'd become an invincible, durable killer who never ran out of juice!

As it turns out, it doesn't do that. A shame, it would have been so sweet.

Instead, what it does is something I completely didn't expect. When the description said it would "empower my abilities," it quite literally does that. I can use the Will of the Colony to use more powerful versions of my Skills and spells. A perfect example being that monstrous Void Chomp that I used on the demon.

The Altar serves two purposes. First, it draws in and stores the Will that enters through the Vestibule, and then it allows me to expend that energy to support the purpose I chose for it, which was to empower myself. I assume it has some sort of maximum capacity, which I may well have reached at some point, I wasn't actively checking. Finding a mutation to increase that may be a priority.

Essentially, with the support of the Colony, I can now punch well above my weight, which is perfect since that's exactly what I need to do if I'm going to keep the family safe. With tier eight monsters, ancients and whatever other nonsense the Dungeon is going to make me deal with, having this ability to hit much harder than I normally should be able to is going to help me protect the family until we can truly establish ourselves.

With my hugely buffed stats and array of new abilities, which will only get further out of control when I start mutating, I really am starting to become a truly beefy monster, and it feels good!

[Are you happy with your evolution, Master?] Crinis asks me.

[More than happy,] I tell her with satisfaction, perusing my status. [But it's not just about me. It's about time that I take a look at where you three are up to.]

[You mean?]

[Yep. Time to have a peek at those cores!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1066: The Pet Scenario

It's been a while since I checked in on my three companions, ages in fact. At tier six, they're powerful and intelligent monsters in their own right, capable of making their own decisions about how they want to progress and grow.

And yes, I'm including Tiny in that. He's not as dumb as he once was, though he's still quite dim, and he's proven that he can invest his Skill Points and make smart mutations. I've struggled to believe it at times, but even his pick up of Fancy Feet ended up paying dividends.

Of course, the fact that I haven't checked their cores in so long is a reflection of my trust and faith in my comrades, and *nothing* to do with an overwhelming sense of laziness and deep-rooted hatred of details and numbers.

Don't look at me like that.

But of course, now that I have achieved Mythic Status, now that I have ascended to this summit, I naturally need to bring my friends along with me. Some might call me crazy, or insane, or profligate to the extreme, but I'm determined for the three of them to rise to the same heights that I do.

[Right then,] I tell them, [how are you all travelling? How are you going? It's a long road to reach level one-hundred and sixty, I had to blow up a mountain of termites to get there as quickly as I did.]

Tiny flexes sadly and I understand immediately what he's trying to say.

[Don't worry about it buddy, you'll catch up in no time.]

Crinis also sounds apologetic as she speaks to me.

[I'm sorry, Master, I still have a long way to go.]

[It's not a problem, really,] I reassure her.

Invidia stares at me with his one eye, unblinking.

[*Give me your levelsssss. I wantssss them.*]

[You know I can't give you levels. We'll focus on you guys going forward, don't worry.]

The three of them seem keen to evolve and become mythic monsters, which is good. Motivation is important in any endeavour.

[Don't stress about it, team. Let's have a look at where you're at, then we can work out what we're doing going forward. Who's first?]

Invidia floats forward.

[I sssshall go first.]

Interesting. He probably didn't want to get jealous of the others so he put himself first to avoid it.

[Alrighty, let's take a peek.]

I bring my antennae forward and touch them against the tiny demon, activating my core skill and accepting the flood of information that comes with it. Sorting through it all, I get a good look at his status.

Name: Invidia

Level: 91 (Rare) (VI)

Might: 14

Toughness: 40

Cunning: 212

Will: 149

HP: 80/80

MP: 660/660

Skills:

General:

Diamond Mind (V) Level 76; Master Stamina (IV) Level 8; Zen Meditation (IV) Level 37; Master Clumsy Flight (IV) Level 25;

Mana:

Mana Weaving (VI) Level 71; Compounded Mana (V) Level 56; Gripping External Mana Manipulation (V) Level 68; Mana Hoarder (IV) Level 34; Multi-Layered Mind Magic Affinity (VI) Level 10; Broad Mana Sensing (V) Level 61; Condensed Demon Laser (IV) Level 32; Grandmaster Combustion Magic Affinity (V) Level 5; Master Shield Magic Affinity (IV) Level 5; Expert Healing Magic Affinity (IV) Level 22; Advanced Directed Explosions (II) Level 8; Expert Boom Control (III) Level 14; Advanced Gas Control (II) Level 5;

Defensive:

Grandmaster Flutter (V) Level 49;

Offensive:

Master Precise Shooting (IV) Level 34;

Mutations:

Senses:

Deep-Penetrating Eye of Envy +30; Majestic Mana Sensory Organ +30; Surgical Mana Filament Finder +30;

Physical:

Endless Bottomless Stomach +30; Mega-Rapid Mana Charging Wings +30; Expanded Mana Soaking Demon Pocket +30; Mana Drinking Dimension Mouth +30;

Mental:

Expanded Omni-Divergent Thought Brain +30; Girded Will Barrier +30; Multi-Layered Neural Adaptor +30;

Mana:

Fine Mana Manipulating Cortex +30;

Species: Lesser Envy Demon

Skill points: 88

Biomass: 344

[Holy Moly, Invidia. You've been a busy little dude.]

And he has. His spell Skills are climbing higher and higher over time, reaching new tiers that have no doubt expanded his capabilities massively. It looks as if he recently purchased new explosion-based Skills as well, furthering his control and damage output.

The little green-eyed demon is turning himself into a fluttering bomb factory. At the rate he's going, he'll be dropping nukes when he evolves.

Speaking of evolution, he's primed and ready to go. Full mutations, increasing his ability to absorb and manipulate mana even further. Despite evolving a step ahead of him, this guy can pull in and shape mana far better than I can. That's the power of the specialist, I suppose.

[You've got a ridiculous amount of Skill Points kicking around though, Invidia. I'm sure you can find some more things to spend them on. Try and find some fusions that can elevate your strengths or add some flexibility.]

The eye glitters.

[*More Skillsssss. I ssshall havesss them!*]

That's the spirit. I give him a tap on the head with an antenna and turn to Tiny.

[Alright then, big guy. Come over here and let's take a look under the hood.]

The big ape lumbers over and I'm once again impressed with just how tall this dude is. I severely outmass him at this point, but that's due to me being long. He still stands head and shoulders over me.

I stretch forth an antenna and examine his progress.

Name: Tiny

Level: 74 (Rare) (VI)

Might: 550

Toughness: 126

Cunning: 20

Will: 38

HP: 252/252

MP: 466/466

Skills:

General:

Master Athletics (IV) Level 15; Instant Dash (IV) Level 10; Master Dodge (IV) Level 30; Advanced Flight (II) Level 5;

Mana:

Defensive:

Sparkling Fancy Feet (V) Level 45;

Offensive:

Kong Fist Arts (VI) Level 24; Cloud Piercing Uppercut (V) Level 31; Meteor Leap (V) Level 29; Grand Master Heavy Smash (V) Level 35; Master Grappling (IV) Level 39; Resonant Smashing Blows (V) Level 22; Expert Ape Jab (IV) Level 12; Advanced Magic Counter (II) Level 8; Master Kong Combo (V) Level 25;

Mutations:

Senses:

Physical:

Bombastic Enhanced Musculature +30; Unbreakable Channelling Bones +30 (Earthblood Basalt); Shock-Collapsing Meteor Legs +30; Metal Shattering Sonic Enhancer +30; Hyper-Ignition Energy Conversion Gland +30; Meshed Shadow Wings +30; Sparking Tesla Fur +30; Regenerative Steel Fists +30;

Mental:

Mana:

Storming Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +30; Storming Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +30; Arcing Lightning Ignition Gland +30; Arcing Lightning Ignition Gland +30;

Species: Thunderstrike Mountain Kong (Rare)

Skill points: 76

Biomass: 211

Just like the little demon, Tiny has made great strides! His boxing Skills continue to rank up, giving him even more explosive power and damage potential. Also fully mutated, his ability to channel vast amounts of lightning in shockingly (heh) small time frames has really improved. His fur is an almost perfect conductor, and the ignition glands are now able to amplify the mana that passes through them, increasing his overall output. If he keeps going down this route, he'll be a walking, boxing lightning storm in an ape body.

His punching Skills are also coming along nicely. I can see he's added a few new items as well. Not nearly enough, though!

[Spend your damn Skill Points,] I scold him, [you've got a ton banked up and I'm sure there's some things you can use them on. Maybe think about a Skill that doesn't use your fists?]

He looks at me like I'm talking in another language.

[Just have a look, dammit. Almost all of your Skills are offensive. Try some defence or general stuff for a change. Look, you've even got a limited ability to fly now, there might be other awesome stuff you can use!]

Time for Crinis. Since she's currently on my back, I stretch an antenna back there and have a look at what she's been up to.

Name: Crinis

Level: 64 (Rare) (VI)

Might: 180

Toughness: 160

Cunning: 156

Will: 134

HP: 320/320

MP: 660/660

Skills:

General:

Exalted Shadow Flesh Manipulation (VI) Level 20; Omniscient Tremor Sensing (V) Level 79; Soul Infecting Fear Inspiration (V) Level 50; Dextrous Tentacle Walking (IV) Level 37; Master Stealth (IV) Level 22;

Expert Shadow Shaping (III) Level 15; Advanced Mental Warfare (II) Level 8; Advanced Target Seeking (II) Level 3;

Mana:

Mana Moulding (IV) Level 38; Finer External Mana Manipulation (V) Level 12; Grand Master Shadow Magic Affinity (V) Level 15;

Defensive:

Advanced Tentacle Parry (II) Level 6;

Offensive:

Grand Master Grappling (V) Level 56; Grand Master Shredding (V) Level 11; Horrific Dismembering (V) Level 36; Grand Master Tentacle Fu (V) Level 67; Expert Shadow Striking (III) Level 10; Expert Mind Invasion (III) Level 18; Advanced Tentacle Strike (II) Level 8;

Mutations:

Senses:

All-Seeing Mana Sensory Gland +30; Penetrating Shadow Eye +30;

Physical:

Efficient Resistant Shadow Flesh +30 (Immaterial); Atomising Ion-Void Maw +30; Unlimited Endless Dimensional Stomach +30; Quad-Legion Tentacles +30; Hardened Sharpened Diamond Barbs +30; Ripping Visceral Teeth +30; Immaterial Flesh Generator (Void-Core) +0; Deep-Fathomless Light Sink +30; Hyper Shade Phase Organ +30; Atomising Ion-Void Maw +30; Atomising Ion-Void Maw +30; All-Shape Cell Structure +30; Madness Lingering Soul-Seeker Cilia +30;

Mental:

Symphonic Tentacle Conductor +30; Symphonic Tentacle Conductor +30;

Mana:

Expanded Compressing Reservoir Shadow Magic Gland +30

Species: Immaterial Mind Breaker

Skill points: 84

Biomass: 149

[Wow, Crinis. You've been working hard!]

[Thank you, Master!]

Despite many of her upgrades sounding absolutely terrifying, she's clearly been trying to improve on her strengths and shore up her weaknesses. Her ability to inspire fear and invade the minds of her foes has improved... to a disturbing degree.

But so has her control and options with shadow magic. She's investing in Skills that supplement her spellforms, much like Invidia has started to do, allowing her to stab and attack enemies with raw shadow mana as well as manipulate it more easily.

She's even picked up a defensive Skill to help prevent her losing so much shadow flesh in battle. If she can actually protect her tentacles, she won't lose as many, and therefore will last longer in the fight. Good thinking! Not to mention these supplemental Skills that help her attack with her tentacles in new ways. Tentacle Strike? Good stuff!

Her mutations are much as I expected. Her tentacle conductors are capable of controlling a huge number of limbs and putting them through extremely intricate, coordinated movements without her having to think about it at all.

That mutation on the Soul Cilia... oof. Basically, even if a monster escapes after being attacked with them, the effect will linger, meaning she can attack a monster with them, then quickly shift to another without having to stay "attached" to it.

Spooky stuff.

[You've all done well,] I congratulate my three allies. [Let's keep working on our Skills and funnel as much experience as we can into you. Before you know it, we'll all be the same tier again!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1067: Wake Me Up, Before You Go Go

My first nap as a tier seven, a deep and satisfying torpor that I luxuriate in. Indeed, life is only complete when one gets their eight hours! I've been flat out for way too long, to the point I've started to worry that the Torpor Police might disappear *me*.

That would have caused quite a stir, I've no doubt.

They do an incredible job of hiding, those little ninjants, but ever since I picked up the Vestibule, it's been impossible for them to conceal themselves from me.

Unlike my bodyguards. Whatever it is that they use to create the strange forgetful effect was powerful enough to give me trouble for a little while. Ever since my evolution, though....

I reach out with one leg and poke at the air.

....

I poke again.

....

Another poke, harder this time.

"... Is that really necessary, Eldest?" Protectant complains.

Gweheheheh.

"I just find it fun, how easily I can spot you now."

The guard smells decidedly unhappy about it.

“We would like to know how you do it,” she grumbles, “out of professional courtesy.”

“No way. You’d just try and find a way around it.”

Not that there is one. As far as I can tell, as long as they’re ants who believe in me, they will provide me with Will. As long as the energy is flowing, they’ll be lit up like a christmas tree, regardless of what they do to hide.

It’s kind of interesting, actually. The organ that causes me to ‘forget’ or ‘ignore’ their presence still works on my other senses when they actively try to conceal themselves. I can’t see Protectant with my eyes, or even feel it when I poke her with my leg, or detect the scent when the guards communicate with each other, despite knowing for a fact exactly where they are.

The level of stealth they’ve achieved is absurd. They’re like ghosts.

Which is why it’s so fun to prod at them. Poke. Poke. Poke.

“Eldest. Please stop it,” Guardian complains.

Heheheheh.

“Now that I’m tier seven, you all need to make the push to tier six,” I tell the invisible squad of babysitters. “If I’m going to be rumbling with tier eight enemies, you’ll be flattened just by being near me if you don’t measure up.”

“Maybe if we evolve, we’ll be able to hide from you again...” Protectant mumbles.

I whip around and poke her again, with both antennae this time.

“Don’t be stupid! You can hide from everything you need to hide from already. You need to seriously bump up your stats and combat prowess. That concealment organ has soaked up way too much evolutionary energy, don’t waste the next evolution on something you don’t need!”

“Alright, alright! Just stop poking me!”

One more prod, just to drive home the point, then I turn to Crinis and the others for a quick meeting.

[Alright, gang. We’re fresh, we’re ready for action and we need to get some Levels into you, pronto. Hunting in the fourth stratum is likely to be our best bet, but at the same time, we need to be on standby in case they need us in the third. There’s some funky business going down up there, and we may need to elevate up in order to get to the bottom of it.]

The three of them nod in unison. It’s rewarding having an audience of active listeners.

[So we’ll hunt and gather Biomass. I need a fair bit to get my mutations ticking along, but we should make sure to contribute to the Colony stockpile, since you three are all maxed out. Let’s go see what we can find.]

Hopefully we run into a few of those diamond centipede nests. My rage won't abate until I wipe that species from the Dungeon! As it turns out, we don't even make our way out of the tunnels before someone finds us with an urgent message.

"Eldest!" the scout calls to me and I stop to let her catch up. "Eldest. They want to see you down on the shoreline. It's about something centipede-related."

Damn centipedes! They're my highest priority on this stratum, I won't let them get a foothold. I rumble down to the shoreline, my friends in tow, only to find the mercenaries from earlier have returned.

The three of them stand awkwardly, surrounded by a host of ants that watch their every move with preternatural stillness. The leader, a fairly burly-looking golgari, almost seems happy when he notices my approach, even as he winces under the effect of my aura.

Gweheheheh. It's nice to have my strength radiate out around me like this. Weaker enemies can't even stand up to me!

I spin together a mind bridge and latch onto the mercenary, then I bring his two followers into the conversation as well.

[Back again so soon,] I greet them. [Excellent, excellent. I suppose your hunt was successful?]

The three of them grimace as the force of my mind impacts onto their own, and I make a conscious effort to tone it down. I can't be scaring away our potential partners in claw-centipede eradication.

In response to my question, the three of them begin unloading the cargo in their boat, depositing a dozen of the offensively glittering and shiny scum onto the shore.

[We found them pretty quickly, all things considered,] the leader grunted warily. [The Dungeon seems to be spitting them out at quite a rapid clip. We sailed two mountains west and tried our luck, ran into a nest almost immediately.]

Stupid Gandalf and his love of centipedes. They're probably being spammed everywhere on this level of the Dungeon. New spawn points will be popping up all over the place!

[Well done,] I tell them. [Keep up the good work, and spread the word. As long as people bring in these... things,] I kick at the merchandise, [then we will be willing to pay.]

"Can someone pay these guys?" I ask the nearby ants.

One of them quickly steps forward and drops off a pile of cores, and after a moment of nervously eyeballing me, the mercenaries step forward to collect them.

[Will you be back tomorrow?] I ask.

The golgari hesitates.

[We will probably return home and resupply. We lost a team member and have been... drained, by the events that took place here. After some time to rest and regroup, we will return.]

I'm a little disappointed, but I can understand where they're coming from.

[Make sure you spread the word,] I remind them. [We'll accept any and all who are willing to work with us. In fact, we should probably build a permanent setup for making exchanges with you guys.]

"Can we get someone on that?" I ask a nearby carver.

"Sure thing, Eldest," she says, "we don't have much else to do around here, after all."

Alright, ouch.

"It's not a priority," I reply defensively, "but it's something we're going to need eventually."

"I'll put it on the list," the little ant sighs before rushing off to speak with her comrades.

The mercenaries hurriedly pack their boat and sail away, heading back to wherever the heck they launched from. I look positively on this development. Soon, there will be an army of hungry mercenaries knocking on our door, ready to hunt the foul enemy to the ends of the Dungeon.

[All right then,] I turn and tell the others, [let's get to hunting!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1068: Those Glittering Isles

It's a shame that I haven't been able to enjoy the fourth stratum a little more thanks to the assault we endured from the termites. With the pressure abated and a solid, well constructed nest established, the Colony is now able to take a breath and expand out into the area. Naturally, that means fighting all the monsters which were previously suppressed by our insect rivals and their endless fields of fungus.

"Die, fiend!" I rage as I bring my reforged mandibles down on a claw-centipede, shattering the brightly glittering diamond carapace with ease and ending its life with a single blow.

Seriously, if you aren't tough enough to survive the attention, then don't make yourself so easy to spot! Swanning about on all those legs like a mirrorball at a disco, you think we can't see you?!

In fact, since the centipedes move in packs, they're so easy to see moving around it's a miracle they survive at all! Though I may be biased in this regard. Not every monster on the fourth is going to hunt them down with extreme dedication as I am, and as much as I hate to say it, this new breed of my hated foe is rather tough. They've seemingly popped up everywhere, mounds filled with the lousy things are all over the place, and since they cooperate well with each other, they're doing rather well.

Not for long, though.

I toss what's left of my opponent back to Invidia and he opens his multi-dimensional gob to store it. I get the feeling the diamond coating on these bugs will turn out to be a useful material, so we may as well harvest all we can. If Smithant can't figure out a good way to use it, then we'll feed it to the grubs. It may bring them good luck, or something.

Another pack of too-many-legged monstrosities dealt with, I take a moment to look around and enjoy the view.

The fourth stratum sure is easy on the ol' eyeballs. Filled with life mana, the entire place just sparkles with vibrant energy. The water glitters like a rolling sea of jewels, the plants and trees are radiant and

bursting with vitality, even the air feels brighter and cleaner. Doesn't hurt that it's so much better lit than previous strata as well, it almost feels like daytime walking about on the surface, and inside the tunnels it's cosy and clear.

[What do you think of the view, crew?] I ask the others.

Tiny looks about and shrugs.

[I can't really see it, Master...] Crinis points out.

Invidia just stares at the environment, his eye aglow with hateful light.

[Invidia? Do you like it here?]

[*It'sss too bright,*] he hisses, and I almost stumble with shock.

What? He doesn't want to own it or control it? That has to be a first. Although, considering he's from the third, which is quite diametrically opposed to this layer, I shouldn't be *that* surprised he doesn't really vibe with the mana here.

[Oop, heads up, I think we've got another elemental.]

Making our way over the surface of a neighbouring mountain, we've run into a number of these monsters, which I've dubbed 'elementals'. We fought one during the last wave, a water elemental, which proved to be a bizarre and unique type of creature.

I wouldn't say they're super common down here, but they aren't rare either. The pool of water a dozen metres ahead of us might seem like an ordinary pond to the untrained eye, but there's a few things that give it away. First, my mana sense, which is always on these days, shows a definite spike in energy. Second is the purity of the liquid. Water on this stratum shimmers like a sapphire, as I already said, but this takes it to the next level. If a human looked at it without eye protection, they'd get retina burn.

[Tiny, you ready?]

Not bothering to reply, the big ape unfolds his shadow wings and leaps high into the air, his fists igniting as he reaches the apex of his jump. Sensing danger, the seemingly innocuous pool of water starts to shift, but too slow.

Tiny crashes down with the fury of a lightning bolt, both fists slamming into the sentient liquid and discharging sizzling electricity down into the water.

The elemental can't scream or yell, but in its own watery way, it thrashes and communicates its displeasure well enough. With a surge, the monster gathers itself and rises up, a stationary wave that looms over us.

[Watch out!] I shout at the others, a split-second before it fires.

A deep boom resounds as the elemental fires its water cannon directly at me, the pressurised liquid as hard as diamond at the laser-like speed it's fired at.

Fortunately for me, I saw it coming, in the literal sense, and my legs fire, sliding my massive body to the side.

Gweheheh. Still got it!

[Invidia!]

The demon's eye flashes with green light before he unleashes his laser. The super-heated beam lances through the air and plunges into the elemental, boiling away the liquid it comes into contact with. Gathering itself into a sphere, the monster foams and twists before lashing out with more jets of water, trying to strike down the little demon.

But Crinis is ready. Her tentacles streak through the air, blunting the force of the attack by sacrificing her shadow flesh. Yet more dark limbs rise from beneath the elemental, plunging into the frothing waters to reach for the glowing core.

That doesn't please the monster one bit, and it transforms into a whirling dervish of death, ripping Crinis' limbs apart. Which is fine. Tiny, standing to one side, shoves both fists forward, each glowing incandescent with energy.

At point blank range, he lights up the elemental, pumping it full of lightning until steam is quite literally bursting out of it in all directions.

After enduring this for a short moment, it gives up the ghost, collapsing in a heap and allowing us to reap the rewards. Unfortunately we don't get any Biomass from these things, but the cores are always strong!

[Great work, everyone,] I congratulate them. [Let's keep it up. You need all the experience you can get.]

Chrysalis

Chapter 1069: Return to Civilisation

As always, it was the Eldest who pushed us in directions we did not think were possible for us to go. Without them, we would never have been able to forge the alliances we did, or perhaps more significantly, turn potential enemies into staunchly neutral parties.

Especially in those first years, it was difficult for the Colony to understand the motivations of the so-called 'civilised' races. What did they want? What did they seek to gain? What was it that they feared to lose?

We had no answers to these questions, and it cost us many times until the Eldest introduced us to a simple maxim: First, try money.

- Excerpt from the notes of Historiant

When Rillik felt his feet touch down on solid ground, he breathed a heavy sigh of relief before he turned to the others. Elly looked haggard, her usual positive outlook completely smothered by exhaustion after a truly difficult few days.

Lacos appeared better on the surface, but after being on the same crew for so long, the golgari had learned to read the man's scaly features. Despite how he looked, he too was running on fumes.

The city of Gliax, rising up from the waters on the coast of the mountain which had come to be known as Prosperity, was as busy as always. Mercenaries, merchant ships and larger expeditions moved in and out

of the docks in an endless stream. The docks themselves swarmed with the thousands of workers needed to load, unload and crew the vessels at the required pace. It was bewildering to the exhausted trio and Rillik was quick to hustle his younger team members away from the noise.

Before they reported back to the union, he decided to pull them into a pub where he ordered a round of drinks and a hot meal. They ate in silence, for the most part, enjoying the camaraderie and comfort that came with civilisation.

Rillik took a long pull from his mug before he placed it back on the table and spoke.

“That expedition was something of a disaster,” he said.

Elly and Lacos nodded solemnly. Financially, they’d managed to save it thanks to an unexpected turn of events, but emotionally, they were at a severe deficit.

“It’s always bad, losing a crew member. Whether they’ve been with you for a week, or for a year, it’s always bad. Losing people to the monsters, it hurts.”

He paused and took a deep breath.

“It’s far from the first time for me, as you know, but it hurts all the same. I don’t know what got into Drake, why he was so desperate, so impatient, but he paid the ultimate price for it. He knew the risks, he knew the dangers, and he made dumb choices. It might feel unfair, but dumb choices get you killed in this business.”

Elly and Lacos nodded dumbly. It might have been a familiar experience for the older golgari, but for them, it was the first time someone they’d worked and fought with had not returned from a delve. It was hard to take.

“We won’t be going anywhere for at least a week,” Rillik announced. “Take some time to get your heads sorted out. Mourn however you need to, then make a decision whether you want to stay in this business or not. A lot of people quit after losing friends, and there’s not one bit of shame in that. To be honest, they might be the smart ones. I’ll swing by your place and drop off your cut once I get it. If you’re still in, we’ll talk then.”

He pushed back his chair and stood.

“You’re good people. Make the decision that feels right for you.”

With nothing left to say, he turned and walked out, then made his way toward the union building. For the umpteenth time, he wondered why he never considered quitting himself, before shoving the thought to the back of his mind. He was a delver, that’s just what he was. He couldn’t imagine doing anything else with his time, it would just feel *wrong*.

No point analysing it further, he would do what he had always done. Regroup and rebuild, from the ground floor if he had to.

The first floor of the grand mercenary building in Gliax was an expansive, gilded chamber, with tables, bars, bounty boards and high vaulted ceilings. In his eyes, a tasteless attempt to mix the rough and tumble nature of mercs with the finer things success in the business could bring. It came together as poorly as one might imagine, yet some seemed to enjoy the unique atmosphere it created.

The reception desks were busy, as always, and he stood in line for twenty minutes before finally managing to speak to someone. He'd thought about how this would go a number of times in his mind, but still found it difficult to find the words as he approached.

"Hello, how are you?" the young woman behind the desk smiled as she greeted him.

"Hi there. Manager, thanks."

She blinked.

"Ah, we need to confirm your identity before anything else, and I'm certain I can handle whatever your request."

Tired and irritated, Rillik didn't have the patience to deal with the bureaucracy.

"Babbit!" he yelled, "Get out here already!"

Everyone around him jumped at the sudden leap in volume and an older woman stuck her head out from an office door behind the reception area, scowling in his direction. When she saw him, her eyes widened, though the displeasure did not fade from her features.

The manager emerged from her office and scuttled over, tapping the receptionist on the arm and saying, "I'll take it from here, honey." It took another moment for the chair to be vacated and then several more for the incredibly short Babbit to settle herself into it before they were ready to continue.

"Mr Rillik. I've warned you multiple times not to hassle my staff. They're just doing their job."

"Babs, I'm just back from an expedition and I don't ask to speak to you unless I absolutely need to. I can't be bothered with the paper pushing."

"That paper pushing keeps the jobs flowing and you in a job," she said smartly as she leaned forward and levered open the weighty volume on the desk.

"Since you're back so late, I presume the church-listed expedition was a failure? Care to report?"

He nodded, not remotely surprised she remembered what job he'd been on. She always knew.

"Total disaster. Smaller monsters turned out to be a species of intelligent ants with a well-fortified presence in the mountain. The mythic, the most powerful ant I've ever heard of, woke up early and annihilated the delve."

Babbit tsked as she made a number of entries in the book, crossing out names and noting each one on a separate sheet by her side. Mercs to be purged from the roster, families contacted, blood gold paid.

"You and your crew came out alright?"

He frowned.

"Drake didn't come back."

"Ah."

Another line, a little more scribble.

“I’ll want a full report on the monsters, of course, intelligent ants? Terrifying. What will the Dungeon spit out next? There will likely be a bounty put on this mythic as well, though I don’t suppose many will want to try for it. Anything you know about it will be helpful, I can get you a good commission for the information.”

He nodded, that was all fine.

“Although, you hardly need to upset my girls over this, Rillik. Any one of them could have handled the paperwork.”

“That’s not why I called for you then, is it?” he replied. “Sorry, I’m tired. The reason I needed to speak to you was what came next. My crew and I were caught and spared by the ants, but only because we hadn’t killed any.”

The diminutive manager snorted. He ignored her.

“Then, they offered us a contract.”

Her eyes went wide.

“They *what?*”

“We were offered double the value in cores if we could hunt a particular type of diamond coated centipede, a new monster I hadn’t seen before in the fourth. System name: Adamas Scolependra. Not too strong, mid-tier considering they operate in nests.”

“You actually took them up on the offer?”

“We did. After the expedition, we needed to recoup our costs.” He hefted the bag he held in his left hand before he placed it on the desk between them. “They came through as well. Need to cash these.”

She eyed him doubtfully for a moment before opening the bag and quickly assessing what he’d brought. After a moment, she grabbed a key from a chain around her neck, unlocked a drawer and meticulously withdrew a number of coins that she slid across the table before relocking the drawer and tucking the key away.

“You know it’s technically against union rules to take jobs from outside sources.”

“There’s nothing in the books about taking contracts from *monsters*, though.”

She stared at him for a moment, mouth working but no sound coming out.

“That’s... true.”

She thought for a moment.

“Well, if the ants want to set up a rival brokerage, then they’ve made an enemy of the entire union,” she declared. “If they want to muscle us out of our business, then they have another thing coming.”

Before she could build up a full head of steam, Rillik intervened.

“I don’t think they want to run you out of business,” he said, “I think they want to register as a job provider.”

“They *what!?*” she shrieked.

“And here’s the thing,” he leaned in and whispered, “they said they would happily pay until these rival bugs are wiped from the Dungeon entirely. You understand just how much money that would be, right?”

The manager swallowed, eyes filled with visions of cores, piled high as a mountain.

“We will... need to negotiate,” she said, her mouth suddenly dry. “I thank you for bringing this to my attention,” she said. “You did the right thing, Rillik.”

“I try,” he said dryly before he stood. “If you need me, contact me at my place. I’m going to go sleep for two days.”

“We’ll be in touch.”

Chrysalis

Chapter 1070: Experiments in Floating

You know, I always considered buying wings. Ants have wings, after all. You might be thinking to yourself, “What!? No they don’t!”, but it’s true. Male ants and young queens have wings. You can see them crawling about outside the nest after rain during mating season, or even just generally if you’re lucky. They don’t have a lot to do, these young royals. Eating and sleeping is pretty much all they’re good for.

Until they eventually take flight.

Little ants, flying all over the place, looking for other young royals from other colonies of the same species to mate with. The males then go die in a ditch (rough life) while the queens rip their wings off with their own mandibles and then go start a new colony, because they’re hardcore.

So it’s not like ants fly a great deal, but they can! I’ve thought about it now and again; it’d be quite cool to be airborne, zipping about like a dragonfly. But there are a few problems that have prevented me from making the purchase.

Overall, it’s quite expensive. The wings themselves don’t cost much, but I’m sure you can imagine the difference in musculature between an ant that can fly and one that can’t. Incidentally, young queens *liquify their own flying muscles* to feed the first batch of workers. That’s dedication.

Adding all that bulk, adjusting the carapace to accommodate the new appendages, tying it all together, it’s an absolute pain in the area zoned for commercial enterprise.

But now....

Heh.

Heheheheheh.

GWEHEHEHEHEH.

I am the master of gravity! If I want to soar through the air, what’s going to stop me? Nothing is what!

So as the other three hunt nearby, getting the experience they need to get closer to evolution, I take a little time apart to practise my new skillz.

Alright then, brains, let's do this!

Being careful with the energy saturating my gravity mana gland, I bring some forth with my main mind and begin to manipulate it. I'm still not ready to use the construct to generate it yet, no need to complicate the process more than it already is.

Once I have a nice, dense stream of mana flowing, I begin to weave it, my ever-present mind constructs chipping in to assist with the work. The main brain is dedicated to handling the weave, since it's mutated to work with this type of mana, and all goes smoothly through the first steps.

To create a gravity-field is... tricky. For one, it takes a lot of energy. Like, *a lot*. Then there's the issue of complexity. I continue to weave the mana in and out of itself in an endless pattern that rolls deeper and deeper within itself. That's right, for this one, I have to start with an intricate outer shell, and then go *in*. Even the omni-elemental construct allows me to build outwards!

Controlling the mana through the interference of multiple layers of that same energy type is fiddly, putting it mildly. I imagine it's something akin to keyhole surgery, slipping my control through ever narrowing gaps to create ever more intricate weaves.

Once all the complicated stuff is done, it's time to pump the thing full of juice.

The steady flow of power becomes a raging torrent. Within the spellform, the beating heart of the well begins to pound and my antennae begin to burn, sensing the rising gravitational pull.

As with a gravity bomb, controlling the amount of mana that gets sucked into the spell isn't easy, it feels like it pulls it out of me once it's past a certain point. I tie it off once I judge I've fed it enough, and the well is complete, hovering in the air, a spherical patch of something that warps the air around it.

I study it carefully with all of my senses, and I'm excited when I realise that my antennae are by far the best detectors, my mutation paying dividends. I can sense the energy with my mana sense, obviously, but that doesn't give me much of a clue as to how strong the gravitational field is. I can guess based on the density of mana, but with the antennae, I get a direct read.

Now let's see what this puppy can do.

Taking hold of the well with my mind, I begin to manipulate it, shifting it into position above my body. As I draw it closer, I can feel my weight begin to lift, my carapace rising slightly and my legs extending as I rise.

Holy moly! I'm doing it!

Take that, Pangera! You think your piddling mass can hold me down? No chance! This ant was born to fly, baby!

A little giddy with excitement, I bring the well a little closer, until it's only a few metres from my carapace, and I rise a little higher. The other thing that happens is my new hardened exo-skeleton begins to hum, resonating with the gravitational energy being provided.

Deep inside me, my new gravity mana organ begins to do the same, the energy flowing into it faster and thicker than before.

The holy feedback loop has been achieved! Finally, actual synergy!

This is going to be so sweet when I finally get the hang of it, I can't wait!

Unfortunately... this current test isn't a success.

I dangle there in the air, not quite off the ground, but not fully on it. My legs are extended, sure, but my claws are still touching the rock below. I feel like I've been hung from a coat hanger, I'm just flopping here.

I try to raise the well a little higher, to lift me up, but I don't go with it, the force isn't strong enough to take my whole mass off the ground.

A failure. The well needs more juice in it to get me into the air. I move to break apart the spell, but after a moment, I change my mind. It's actually kind of nice to dangle here a bit, give my legs a rest. It's relaxing, almost like I'm in a hammock.

Not to mention it recharges my gravity mana faster. May as well keep hanging out!