

## Chrysalis 1081

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#### Chapter 1081: Road Test

Hmmmmm.

The battle against the ka'armodo is over. Well, I say battle, more of a skirmish, really. They probably scried me acting all weird and thought they might as well see if they can knock me off. Capitalise on my apparent weakness.

I was able to quickly persuade them that I'm just fine and dandy, so they left without committing much. If I'd been a bit smarter, I could have flopped around some more and really baited them in.

My new mutations got a nice road test at least, can't complain about that. The resonant properties of my carapace and inner plating were on full display, reacting to my gravity magic and empowering me further, creating a harmonious cycle that made that sweet purple mana so efficient to use.

I can create a well to lift myself into the air, and some of the energy feeds straight back into the mana gland, some of it hardens my carapace, some of it helps regenerate the carapace, and to top it all off, it gets slightly condensed for free on the way out.

I'll take it!

My dream of becoming an all powerful gravity ant is well on the way to being realised, which is extremely exciting.

I still have a few issues that need to be tackled, some kinks that need ironing. Careful thought will need to be put in befo-

[Look, will you stop laughing?! I'm trying to think!]

Nearby, Sarah, the Asura Rage Bear of legend, is collapsed on the ground wheezing and huffing her massive bear heart out.

[Ha-hah! I mean... the legs... I can't!]

Her stubby legs rise up and kick helplessly.

[It's not that funny! Look, none of my siblings are laughing!]

They are, however, continuing to not look at me directly.

[The way... the way you drooped down... I-I-hah!]

Further gales of laughter roll from the bear as I stand nearby fuming. I knew it didn't look great, but I had to test it out against the lizard enemy when I had a chance! Such an opportunity doesn't come around every day, after all.

From the reaction, I probably should have held off until I found a way to achieve a more graceful hovering pose. Eventually, Sarah manages to contain herself long enough to get back to her feet.

[I haven't laughed like that in... goodness, I can't remember how long. When did you even figure out how to float like that?]

She almost breaks again when she mentions the floating, but manages to contain herself, barely.

[I was able to purchase the gravity magic Skill after I evolved. I can create localised gravity wells with it that I use to pick myself up, cancelling out the gravity of the planet.]

[O-oh. Tha-that's... super neat. Really. I-I'd just...]

She takes a big breath.

[Try and work on... the dis-distribution of... of the gravity... across... across your b-body. That way you'll be... a li-little s-straighter.]

She got through it without busting a gut. I almost feel like clapping. Judging by the way her fur is standing on end and the expression on her face, as if she's got a fat salmon wedged in her throat, she's working hard on keeping the laughs in. I appreciate the effort.

[I know it looks dumb, alright! I just wanted to test it when I had the chance. Sheesh.]

[I'm sorry. It was just so unexpected!]

I can imagine. I need to try and steer this conversation back to more serious topics. The sooner we can leave this incident in the past, the better.

[So have the ka'armodo been active along the border recently? Probing attacks, that sort of thing?]

[Not recently,] she says, trying to match my tone. [Ever since we received word that a wave was coming, they've been much more quiet. If you'd asked me that a week ago, I would have had a different answer for you. Clashes between patrols, little forays into Colony territory, there was always something going on.]

Makes sense. Tensions were rising here when I left for the fourth and nothing had really happened to cool them down. If anything, me getting the Colony involved in the little proxy war they had going with the Mother Tree was a clear escalation.

[Now that a wave is coming, everyone is probably going to batten the hatches,] I predict. [We'll be the same. After all, we can experience explosive growth during a wave if we manage our resources properly. We don't want to be fighting external conflicts if we can avoid it.]

And thanks to Brilliant, we've gotten word of this wave faster than ever before. A huge win! There should be enough time to get our farms and defences ready for the insanity to come, though it's likely to be close.

[I'll leave you be then, Sarah. Good luck with everything out here. Don't hesitate to come and find me if you need me.]

[Thanks, Anthony,] she says. [I'm okay. I wasn't happy about how things ended, but I know there's no one to blame for it. I'm... happier now than I have been for a long time. I just want things to stay this way for a while.]

[Sounds good to me.]

I give her a friendly wave, and a wave to the rest of the patrol as well before I head on my merry way. There's a ton of things to do around the place, and I'm having trouble trying to work out on my own exactly where the Colony would like me to be.

Complicating matters is the Call. You'd think the pain would be getting better over time, or I'd be getting used to it, but that is just not the case. If anything, it's getting worse.

The Call is just so persistent, it just never ends.

Every time I manage to push it out of my mind, it comes roaring back when I least expect it, demanding I go deeper into the Dungeon. If I'm not careful, I find my feet are already moving before I can think about it, running to throw myself into a tunnel and descend.

I hate it.

The gang and I make our way back toward Roklu, the heart of the Colony's territory in the third, and I try to catch up with Sloan about plans for the upcoming wave.

[It's going to be a complex situation,] she tells me when I can get a minute to talk to her. [We want to farm monsters in the second and third stratum primarily, but the issue with the demons is really tangling our legs.]

[Why's that?]

[Because we don't think the fighting will die down during the wave, we think it's only going to get worse. From all the intelligence we've been able to gather, the spawn rate of demons *explodes* during a wave, which means the plains will give rise to far more tier four and five demons. It's from those demons that the roaming warbands are gaining the most recruits, picking them up before they reach a city. We think lower tier demons are more susceptible to the corrupting influence.]

[So those rampaging groups of demons will get bigger and stronger.]

Led by those tier eights, that's going to be a problem. I have more questions, though.

[What about the fourth? What are our plans there?]

The little general shrugs.

[Not much we can do there. We aren't strong enough to challenge the fourth, especially not during a wave. We'll hunker down and defend as best we can.]

I sigh.

[Sounds like I'll be most needed here on the third then.]

Which sucks. The hook in my guts yanks persistently to a steady rhythm.

*Descend. Descend. Descend. Descend. Descend. Descend!*

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**Chapter 1082: Instincts**

*The Blademasters of the Folk are renowned for their extraordinary skill with their weapons of choice. Their reputation is such that it exceeds that of even the golgari Stoneswords, whose techniques were forged in the Dungeon during the Rending.*

*Their extraordinary methods are beheld with some trepidation, as the tension between the Old and New races is such that none can ever be comfortable with the achievements of the other. Not monsters, though originating in the Dungeon, the Folk are always held in some suspicion wherever they go.*

*The exact nature of their mastery, and how they have achieved it, remains a closely guarded secret among their enclaves. What combination of Classes and Skills is required to produce these fearsome warriors? Or is there some innate property to their people that makes it possible to achieve these feats? There are many who would sacrifice much to know, though to our knowledge, none have succeeded in replicating it.*

*Several outside the Folk have claimed to have achieved the status of Blademaster, but quickly found themselves challenged by the real thing. Since Blademasters only fight duels to the death, these false positives quickly dried up.*

*- Excerpt from 'The Reclusive Masters: Warriors of the Folk' by Xinci*

Titus took a deep breath, hesitated, then let it out in a long sigh. Minerva caught onto his mood in an instant.

"You've gone soft, husband," she grinned, "I can remember when the whiff of mana in the air was enough to get the fire burning in your eyes. What's changed?"

The commander turned to the former Consul, almost exasperated at how little she'd changed over the years.

"I would've thought the responsibility of leading the entire Legion would have tempered your own hunger for battle, my love. I can see now that it hasn't been the case."

Minerva threw back her head and laughed.

"You can't be serious. If you actually expected that to happen, even for a single second, then you don't know me as well as you should. I've been suppressing my rage for over a decade, and now I can finally let it loose."

A living legend, the walking disaster, she would never be kept from the fighting for long. That was exactly why Titus felt that slight melancholy.

"It's been nice, though, hasn't it?" he asked.

His wife stood from where she lounged on the other side of their pod and approached to wrap her arms around him.

"It's been wonderful. She's grown so well, Titus. You did an incredible job."

"Nothing I did," the commander snorted, "she practically raised herself after you left. Ran away as fast as she could."

“You brought her back.”

“Aye. I did.”

“That’s all that matters.”

She squeezed him hard, hard enough he thought he heard a rib crack before she let him go.

“Come on then, you big softie. Let’s go tell her.”

Titus nodded.

“Let’s.”

They left their pod, opening the bulkhead, waiting for the filter to sweep them, then stepping into the corridor of the residential area they stayed in. Resources were tight in any Legion base within the fifth, and it was largely due to Minerva that they’d been able to stay here at all.

Navigating the narrow corridors, the two endured the awe-struck gaze of the Legionaries deployed for training, and from more than a few of the instructors. It didn’t bother the pair overmuch, they were used to attention.

Eventually, they strode up to their daughter’s door and knocked heavily. Even through the reinforced and enchanted metal, they heard her scrambling to tidy up and they both smiled.

Then Titus frowned.

It occurred to him that there might be a boy in there. Perhaps that sound was Morrelia trying to stuff some fool into the closet or under the bed. No matter, he decided, regardless of where he was, he would die.

“Relax, would you?” Minerva whispered. “You look like you’re going to commit murder. There’s nobody else in there.”

“You’re sure?”

She shot him an offended glance and he nodded. She had the Skills to sense a rat, let alone another person. After another minute, the door was pulled open to reveal a harried looking Morrellia, her dark hair a jumbled mess shooting off in all directions.

“Mum, Dad?” she said. “What’s the problem?”

“Wave’s coming,” Minerva said as she stepped forward and wrapped her daughter up in a hug. “Your father and I can’t hold it off any longer, we need to get deployed. No more lazing about for us.”

“A wave? Already?” Morrelia was stunned. “Is that even faster than before?”

“Yes,” Titus confirmed, his face grim. “They’re getting larger and closer together. Unless something changes, we may see a repeat of the Rending.”

He reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder as he stared into her eyes.

“Make sure you take care of yourself. It’s going to be dangerous here. The fifth during a wave is... tough.”

Less interested in thinking about herself, Morrelia turned to her mother.

“But what about you two? Where are you going? Where will you be?”

“Hah! Don’t worry about us. I’ve been enrolled back into my old unit. Fourth Praetorian. I’ll be wearing the armour before you do, daughter. Tough luck.”

“I’ll be back with my Legion,” Titus said. “We’ll be deployed to the third under Liria. There are some assets there to take care of, and I think the brass wants to try and contact the survivors of the Garralosh incident.”

Morrelia’s eyes widened.

“Does that mean you’ll be fighting the ants again?”

Titus shook his head.

“Unfortunately not. Information gathering only. From the reports we have, the ants have grown far too strong for a single Legion to handle.”

Minerva tsked and shook her head a little.

“You’re not going back to your Legion,” she said.

Titus blinked.

“*What?*” he rumbled.

She grinned at him.

“You’re coming with me!” she announced. “Time to get back to the big leagues, husband of mine. Don’t forget to bring your axe.”

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### **Chapter 1083: Assembly**

Grey tried to suppress his growl of frustration, holding his wolf-like features in an expression of quiet contemplation. Despite his best efforts, his hands twisted as if wringing the neck of his guest.

“That seems *quite* unfortunate,” he said.

Sitting opposite, across a low table that held two cups of steaming tea, a fellow member of the Folk sat, a wolf, same as Grey. Red shrugged, causing the blade, still in its sheath, on his lap to clink as it shifted.

“Discussions on a matter this serious are always deliberate and careful. They can’t be rushed. If the wrong conclusion were reached, it would be a disaster for us all.”

Such an obvious statement. It was so blindingly obvious a newborn mole-folk, who hadn’t even opened its blind eyes, had seen and understood it.

*Peace, like a lily on the pond. Float above, as the anger sinks below.*

“Discussions on this very serious matter have been ongoing for...” he pretended to think, “why, several months now. Were they to move any slower, we may be accused of being incapable of making decisions for ourselves. I would hate for our leaders to be accused of being doddering simpletons, lacking in wisdom, or the capacity for speech.”

*Nice job keeping your calm, Grey.*

Despite remonstrating himself for his less than diplomatic choice of words, the old wolf didn't regret them. Discussion between the various Enclave leaders had dragged on, with none willing to make definitive steps for or against any proposal.

Regardless how they attempted to dress it up, they *were* being indecisive, which *did* impact on their reputation. The more the Folk appeared to bicker back and forth among themselves, the less unified the front they presented to the outside world. It was that front that had protected and preserved them through the dark days.

Red did not appear perturbed by the harsh words, though a slight edge in his tone gave away his irritation.

“The opinion of outsiders is of no concern to me, or to any of the Folk. We walk our own trail, as we always have.”

Complete and utter nonsense.

“I presume that no blademasters have been sent to challenge others in the past year then?” Grey observed. “An interesting change of policy.”

“I am sure you are aware that they have,” Red said, left eye twitching slightly.

“They have?” Grey feigned surprise. “But why? If we do not care what outsiders think, what need is there to demonstrate our prowess? That would be as if our perceived competence and strength were direct contributors to our wellbeing and safety. Which cannot be the case, according to your words. Please, honour me with an explanation to clarify this mystery.”

To add insult to the injury, he even slid back from the low table so he could bow at the waist, smirking as he did so. Silence reigned between the two as the tension thickened in the air to the point it could be cut by an apprentice.

Finally, Red broke his upright posture and slouched to one side.

“This is why mother didn't favour you for the seat,” he sniped, “you lack patience. You've always lacked patience.”

“What?” Grey snarled, snapping upright once more. “Expecting you to move faster than a titan-stone caterpillar is lacking patience? This is why father didn't entrust the sword-school to you, no decisiveness.”

“How dare you?!” Red snarled back.

The two lunged forward, teeth exposed, growling and glaring at each across the wooden table.

“Master,” a voice came from behind the screen that led to the next room.

“What is it, White?”

“You asked me to intervene if you and your brother began fighting.”

The two Folk continued to stare with anger-filled eyes at each other.

“We aren’t fighting. This is a diplomatic exchange between family members.”

“Master....”

Silence... then.

“Fine,” Grey sat back, as did Red, allowing the anger to drain out of them.

The screen slid open to reveal White kneeling patiently, a placid expression on her face.

“Would either of you like more tea?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” Red said.

“We are fine, thank you, White.”

“As you say, Master,” replied his apprentice, bowing before she slid the panel shut once more.

A polite interruption, but Grey was able to read the message she wished to send.

*Stop embarrassing yourself, me and the tribe!*

Which she wasn’t wrong about. Disgraceful behaviour.

“I apologise, brother,” Grey said, bowing his head in apology. After a moment, Red did the same.

“Think nothing of it. It is hardly the first time, nor do I think it will be the last.”

The two sat up and regarded each other once more. The time to speak frankly had come.

“I am frustrated, brother,” Grey confessed. “These are dangerous times, the waves are coming close together, each stronger than the last. It does not require a brilliant mind to appreciate what may be on the horizon. We need allies.”

“The tribes are disparate and do not agree on anything. They will argue over the colour of a stone for a century. You know this as well as I do. I swear, I have represented your arguments as well as I possibly can. It will simply take time before the Folk are willing to accept this... Colony, as a free people.”

“What of the testimony of the Mother Tree? Has that not swayed minds?”

“It has, but not by as much as you may expect. I must say, brother, I do not understand your sense of urgency. If the worst comes to pass, we may witness another Rending. By your own admission, the ants are weak, barely able to preserve themselves in the face of weak opposition. What difference will they make against the Ancients?”

Grey contemplated the question for a moment before he answered.



“Even a single, green Legion cannot be described as *weak*, brother, as you know. It is not so much the strength they displayed when I left that inspired my confidence, but rather the rate of their growth. As ant monsters, they will accumulate power with incredible speed, maybe even fast enough to be able to contribute when the calamity comes. That is what I believe.”

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### **Chapter 1084: Tree Thinking**

The Mother Tree had a name. At least, she'd *had* a name. The memory was there, vague and distant, tucked in the recesses of her mind. She could recall that she'd had feet, and hands, and eaten food, though such memories were so faint that she couldn't really recall what it was *like*.

She'd done it, certainly, but how it had actually *felt*. That, she could no longer recall.

Birth, or rebirth, on Pangera, now *that* she could recall. The cold and heartless System welcome, followed by her awakening as a brand new life-form.

A plant-type monster. The sense of horror she'd felt was visceral, though now it was hard to relate to the person she'd been in that moment. Back then, the memories of being human, of being Rose, had been fresh. Trapped in a sightless, limbless form had been a nightmare. She hadn't even had a mouth with which to scream.

Roots and leaves had seemed so foreign to her then, strange and useless. How attitudes shifted with the times. Were she offered a human body now, she would reject it out of hand. The plant was superior to the animal in every way. She'd just needed time to realise it.

[Rosa Spina.]

That had been her species. Perhaps a play on her name? Had that been enough to convince the System to reincarnate her as a plant? Or perhaps her work as a botanist had been the deciding factor.

Regardless, those early weeks had been difficult.

People often think of the animal kingdom as brutal and heartless. They see wolves fighting, or bears clashing, or snakes stealing eggs and young from heartbroken birds and think of how tragic it all is.

The Mother Tree knew better, as had Rose.

There are vines that will strangle trees to death over the course of decades. Every plant is locked in competition with its neighbours every second of every day in a battle that will last until one of them succeeds and one of them dies. Competition for sunlight, for water, for nutrients in the soil. Never ending.

Inside the Dungeon, that battle played out too. It was faster, but no less merciless.

Her roots had pushed into the wall, seeking what every plant-monster around her had been seeking: mana. The more she had, the faster she grew, the faster she grew, the better she could compete.

Fear had thrilled her little plant heart the first time she had touched another of her own kind, several days after her rebirth. There had never been any hope of cooperation between them, that wasn't how

things worked. That plant had probably been a sibling of hers, in a sense. They'd been spawned together at least.

Her first conscious act on Pangera had been to strangle that plant to death. Over a period of weeks, her roots had invaded, choking her neighbour out of the precious mana supply, which she stole for herself. As the monster withered and died, she had been quick to grow into the space made available, to claim it before anyone else could.

A lesson, an excellent one. She would repeat that action thousands of times over the decades.

Deep within her trunk, she felt her soul-space emanate with light. Could the massive tree smile, she might have in that moment. Her children were playing. As creatures of pure energy, they intermingled and conversed with each other using the language only those born of the same soul could understand. It warmed her cold, wooden heart.

As they felt her gaze fall upon them, the bruan'chii danced and waved, and her spirit waved back at them, sending them zipping around each other with glee.

So innocent, her children. Too pure for this world.

When she thought of how close she had come to losing them, she felt anger shake her branches. Even after all this time, even after all the strength and power she had accumulated, it still wasn't enough. Without the intervention of the ants, she may have been crippled.

Even now, her roots, buried hundreds of kilometres beneath her trunk, writhed with fury at the thought.

That there would be someone who dared to engineer an entire species to target her weaknesses. She hadn't encountered anything like it before. A million flowers across three strata hissed with frustration, but she soon settled herself.

The mana was rising.

Her tap-root already thrummed with power collected deep within the Dungeon, and soon, her entire root network would do the same. It would take time for her to recover the power she'd been forced to expend.

Regenerating after the assault five decades ago had been a long process, one that still wasn't complete. When her strength had fully returned... she would ensure that those who had tried to steal away her children would get their just deserts.

Until then, she would be patient. In all of the Dungeon, with its long-lived races, immortal monsters and slumbering Ancients, there were few who could be more patient than a tree.

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### **Chapter 1085: Farm Life**

Hanging out on the third stratum is uncomfortable, that much has been established. While I'm here, I may as well get something out of my time, but as a tier seven, there isn't a whole lot I can do to gain experience. I get a bit of Biomass, obviously, but the most important thing to mutate is my Altar, and I'm still not entirely clear on how the thing works.

As the mana level gradually rises, Tiny, Crinis, Invidia and myself stick to Colony territory, hunting and grinding as the Colony works itself into a frenzy around us. Farming the waves has become something of a Colony tradition, and this time around is shaping up to be no different.

I've no doubt that the already existing network of farms in the Shadow Sea are being massively expanded, but it's here on the Demon Plains that the biggest push is being made.

I had a chat with a few engineers when I walked past, just because I was curious as to how they were going to go about it. The main goal of the farms is to create an enclosed system wherein the monster spawns have a high chance of forming a core. Getting Biomass out of them is nice, obviously, but the dramatic increase in core inflow is the real prize of the waves if you ask me.

There are a ridiculous number of ants now, and more being born every day. There are something like twenty egg-producing nests now, each with three queens hitting their quotas daily. Thousands and thousands of eggs every week! The Colony is well on the way to reaching Super-Colony status!

I feel extremely proud of our progress. On Earth, there were some truly massive ant Colonies that we can compare ourselves to. A single nest, or Colony, of some species could hold up to several million individuals, a number we are rapidly approaching.

A super-colony is created when ants in multiple nests recognise each other as the same species, and therefore cooperate. For ants, this isn't normal. The pheromones of one Colony are usually too different after a single generation, so the children of a Queen will fight and compete against ants from the nest she was born in!

When this doesn't happen, when the children still recognise their parent nest as being friendly, they cooperate and act as one massive Colony. There were several of these on Earth, numbering hundreds of millions of ants and tens of thousands of queens. The largest was the Argentine ant super-colony, covering over six-thousand square kilometres, with capital B Billions of workers!

One day....

Anyway! The farms... it's quite interesting how they're going about it! Obviously, monster spawning on the third works differently than anywhere else we've attempted this. The larvae just pop out of the ground in truly absurd numbers, immediately start murdering each other until a select few survive to evolve. Then they kill each other and a few evolve. Then they kill each other and a few evolve. And so on.

Our research ants have determined that the ratio of larvae that survive to reach tier six is close to one in a million.

So wasteful!

The Colony has already succeeded in selective demon rearing. Picking out a promising larva and tending it to ensure that it matures, feeding it cores to fuel its development.

By far the biggest issue with demon evolution is that precious few larvae form cores before evolving to the second tier, but those who do, and then go on to survive to level five again, are waaay overrepresented in those who make it to tier six. Which is expected, since they have better evolutions. So how do we create a system wherein the maximum number of tier one larvae achieve a core?

The answer can be found on the Plains of Leng right now.

It's basically a multi-floored maze. The interesting thing about demon spawning, is that they tend to always want to spawn on the ground if they can. If you build a wall, they'll spawn on top of it, but not inside it, if you take my meaning.

So the engineers have fashioned a massive network of rooms, each roughly fifteen by fifteen metres. They've calculated that this is enough floor space to generate enough larvae that a tier two will be formed every five minutes. The hope is that the victorious monster will clear out the room, find no threats and therefore feel comfortable forming a core. By the time they wake, the next round will be ready to spawn, which they can farm up and evolve.

Here's the interesting bit. There's an iron grate on the roof, which will only open if a tier two pushes on it. An ingenious mechanism that utilises the latest in enchanting techniques to measure core strength. Impressive to say the least! And what do the demons find when they climb through? A whole new room, larger this time, connected to exactly twenty of the lower rooms. The floor here is made of iron, no spawning allowed, so only tier twos will make their way in here.

So what happens then? They fight each other! Over and over again until a tier three is created. Once the tier three has cleaned out the room, there's nowhere to go... except... you guessed it, up!

The next level, they find an even larger space, in which they fight, until a tier four is created! Then they climb up the final grate, ready to achieve freedom... except they get harvested by the Colony instead. If it's a particularly useful, or powerful demon, we may end up just recruiting them. Help them get to tier six and then move them into a city within our borders.

It's still a wasteful process, but the boffins crunching the numbers and doing the antgebra believe this is five times more efficient than just leaving the demons to spawn on their own.

The whole farm is enormous, covering well over a hundred square kilometres, and should produce a steady stream of demon cores. And that's just one of the farms. More are being constructed around the Roklu nest as we speak.

It's a fairly brutal process, especially when we consider that demons are rapidly approaching true sapience once they reach the fourth tier. In reality, this is simply a streamlining of the process we are already undertaking across the plains. Teams of ants scour the terrain between the cities for Biomass and cores, or plunge down into the caverns for it.

The demons themselves don't seem to care. As long as the larva spawning is uninhibited, they don't really mind what happens to their weaker brethren.

According to all reports, the spawn rate of larvae goes absolutely gang-busters during a wave anyway. Considering the entire floor of the stratum is a literal living carpet already, I honestly can't picture what it's going to look like.

Sadly, I'm not going to have to wait too long to find out.

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**Chapter 1086: Altar Testing**

Farming aside, I've got other things to worry about, namely trying to work out exactly how the Altar of Self actually works. I mean, I have the basic idea, it's not that complicated; the Will of the Colony flows through the Vestibule, is amplified by the Nave, feeds into the Altar and is consumed to help fuel my Skills.

Simple in concept, but there's a lot of variables I need to take into account. Which Skills use the most energy? How much do they use? How quickly does it replenish? What effect does it have on each Skill?

I need to put in a lot of reps just to figure out how it all works. By practising over and over again, I can develop the instinctual feel I need to make snap decisions and use the ability in battle.

The issue I have is that I don't want to be taking experience away from my precious pets. The three of them need a ton of experience to reach the next tier, and I don't want to slow down their progress in the slightest.

[It's fine, Master,] Crinis says, [you need experience. We can't take everything!]

Huh. She must have noticed me musing off to the side while the three of them hunt.

[Don't worry about it,] I tell her. [I've got my own stuff to work on, you three need the levels.]

[A-are you sure? I really don't mind!]

[Of course I'm sure! I wouldn't feel right if I stayed stronger than you guys. You need to hurry up and reach my tier!]

[Alright! We will!]

[That's the spirit.]

Crinis turns and rips into the demons around her with renewed rage and I'm happy to avert my gaze and continue to contemplate what I need to do.

I mean, better start with the basics, right?

There isn't much room down here in the tunnels, and whenever my three pets have finished pulverising the opposition, I have to pick up and follow after them, but there's enough space to test a few things.

Facing a wall, I pull back my mandibles, lock them in place and then lunge forward, allowing them to tear into the steaming hot rock in front of my face.

Crunch!

My impossibly hardened mandibles shear through the stone like butter, crashing together with a satisfying clack! Very nice.

I step back and take a look at my mandi-work, pleased with what I see. The ol' face hands are doing good work. Longer than before, they really have quite the reach now, snapping together metres in front of my face.

Crucially, I didn't activate a Skill with that chomp, so as impressive as the result might have been, that was down to pure physicality.

Next, I shuffle a few steps down, give myself a little shake and prepare for another bite.

Everything occurs as before, except this time, I try to draw on the energy boiling away inside the Altar of Self.

When I say boiling, I really do mean boiling. With so many ants running around the plains, and several demon cities within range, each with its own mega-nest built against the pillar, let's just say the Vestibule is absolutely *humming* with energy. It's to the point that I'm actively avoiding dipping into the stream, lest I get overwhelmed with the impressions from hundreds of thousands of ants.

My jaws slam together, but despite my best efforts, the energy, unlike the spice, does not flow. Hmmm, interesting.

So unless I'm actively using something System related, it won't work? Like, I can't just run and use the Altar to run faster, I actually have to *dash*?

Well, let's make this next test then.

I shuffle down another few steps and set my legs, locking my mandibles in place and getting ready.

Time for the **VOID CHOMP!**

As I unleash the Skill, the dark ball of energy manifests before my face, along with the mandibles formed of pure, black light. More than that, I feel the Altar surge with power, pouring out from deep within me and filling my mandibles.

The chomp immediately goes berserk mode, soaking up that energy and growing stronger and stronger before my mandibles smash shut with a colossal detonation!

I'd blink if I could.

Rock flies everywhere, along with ash, dust and flecks of magma. It looks as if a bomb went off in front of me as stone comes rumbling down, collapsing on the empty void that I'd created by vaporising the stone in front of my face.

Uhhhh. Whoops.

[Master?]

[Ah! Sorry about that, Crinis. Just trying to work on a few things.]

[P-perhaps work on them... outside of the tunnels?]

[... That might be a good idea.]

I don't really want to drop a thousand tons of rock and lava on our heads. No more bite testing. Not until later, at least.

As we move forward, the pets continuing to annihilate everything in their path, I reflect on the experiment.

That chomp drained the Altar of about a tenth of its energy, which feels like a lot. I could probably mutate it to increase capacity, but it only takes a few minutes to replenish with so many ants in the area. Something to consider.

Well, if I can't keep testing the bite skills out, perhaps I can try something else....

As the others are fighting, I find a decent stretch of tunnel that I can use for my next attempt.

I already know the Altar has quite an effect on the dash Skill. When I tried it before, it practically felt like I was teleporting. To establish a baseline, I try a few warmup dashes, about a hundred metres long up and down the tunnel, just to get the feel for it.

Alright, now with the Altar.

Again, the energy thunders through my body like a tidal wave, soaking into my six legs this time as I activate the Skill. All of a sudden, I feel like my legs are just bursting with power, I flex them, kick off, and the world just seems to *stretch* in front of me, the wind so thick I feel like I'm pushing through a brick wall.

BAM!

Then I smash through several metres of solid rock and bury myself.

[MASTER!]

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1087: Further Altar-ations**

It took an embarrassing amount of time to get myself out from under all the rocks and I apologised to the others profusely. I'm taking away from their precious training time with my idiocy, after all!

We push down to the next layer, bypass the demon city there and the three pets continue their hunting activities on the plains while I focus on using the greater space to run my tests with a little more safely.

Turns out my dash Skill needs a *minimum* of a hundred metres room when I'm charging it up with my Altar. At least, that remains the case until I get a better handle on it, I can't seem to accurately judge the distance or control how far I travel when I'm moving with that much juice.

Further chomp testing yields similar results as before. Essentially, an Altar boosted Void Chomp is completely off the chain, so out of control that it and control have never been seen together in the same room. The destructive power is... rather intimidating. When compared to the normal, unempowered Void Chomp, the result is more than twice as devastating in terms of the area. It's difficult to tell what sort of effect there is to damage, the rock doesn't exactly do a great job resisting the attack.

It's stronger, how much, I can't really tell.

With the basic physical Skills tested, I move on and try to use my spells. Not getting crazy about it, no Gravity Bombs or the like, at least not yet, but I fling out a few firebolts to see what happens.

Unempowered, they're not overly impressive, but when I attempt to use the Altar, I'm delighted to find that the energy floods out one again, beefing up the spell to a much more impressive version of itself.

Which still isn't much, it's just a firebolt after all.

Even so, this is progress! I run through a few other spells, testing how much energy is used and what sort of effect I see from the influence of the Altar.

The amount of Will consumed seems to be roughly commensurate with the amount of mana contained in the spell. Which makes sense, I suppose. Basically, the Altar tips in an equal amount to whatever Spell or Skill I'm activating, which means the beefier the attack, the more it gets beefed.

That explains why the Void Chomp experiences such a dramatic upgrade.

I shudder to think what might happen with I fire off a full power Gravity Bomb. Not likely to be testing that any time soon.

I can kind of think of the Altar as making my Skills and Spells act like they're one rank higher than they already are. I'm not certain if that's an exact estimate, but it feels like a simple way to understand what is happening to my abilities.

As my three friends keep hunting, racking up experience, I continue to test my abilities and chow down on the Biomass. I'll need to mutate the Altar at some point soon, along with everything else I have. It'll be easy to get my body fully mutated before I next evolve, but there's no point in lollygagging and taking it slow, I'll pack in the food now and mutate as soon as I can.

If I'm going to taking on a series of monsters an entire tier higher than I am, I'll need to make sure I have every advantage squared away. Those are the most dangerous battles and minimising the risks is obviously the smarter strategy.

Overall, we stay out for a couple of days, which isn't enough to make much of a dent in the experience needed for Crinis, Tiny and Invidia, but every bit of progress is good.

It's quite eye opening really. I've reflected on this before, but trying to get three separate pets to reach tier seven is an incredible resource sink. Splitting the cores between us, we go through a fortune in precious gems without scratching the surface of what's required to max out our cores. Then the experience....

Level one hundred and sixty is no joke! The sheer amount of hunting that needs to be done to reach that kind of level is absurdly high. To create a single tier seven pet, you could raise an army up to tier four.

I can see why it really isn't worth it for most to pursue this path, but I'm determined. I refuse to allow my pets to be weaker than myself! We will rise together, as true equals!

The entire premise of the pets being essentially bonded servants is distasteful to me and I still haven't given up on eventually finding a way to release them from their bondage.

Obviously Crinis would say that she'd rather remain a pet than be free, but that's just the obedience compelled by the Master/Pet bond talking. Free, independent monsters! That's what I want for Crinis, Tiny and Invidia!

I'll get it one way or another.



As we return, it's clear that the mana levels have continued to rise across the stratum. The little larvae that coat the floor are giving us a little taste of the chaos to come, writhing and threshing each other with even greater vigour than usual, without ever seeming to run out of fresh spawns.

I'll need to check in with the troops, see what's happening on the demon front. If more of our own allies are going rogue, then there's going to be issues, especially if the stronger demons start to turn against us.

I mean, I'm totally confident I can smoke a tier seven demon like a fresh ham, but I can't be everywhere at once!

The Colony has just gotten too big for me to protect every single part of it, which means I need to be especially careful where I place myself....

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 1088: Nectar of Life**

*The Church of the Path is founded on the belief that all things born of the Dungeon belong to the Old Races. The resources that are found there, the territory and space, the mana and, perhaps most importantly of all, the monsters.*

*Monsters give experience when killed, allowing the slayer to grow stronger. They also contain valuable materials; their cores, primarily, but also the precious substances that make up their bodies, things that often cannot be found any other way.*

*A globe-spanning entity with adherents in every one of the old civilisations, the Church is a powerful entity with a simple mission: the complete and utter domination and exploitation of the Dungeon.*

*This view has put them at odds with other organisations, such as the Legion, who view the Dungeon as a danger and threat, but they remain undeterred.*

*Among the most important secrets of the Church has been their development of the Elixir, otherwise known as Dungeon Nectar. A miraculous beverage that can empower others simply by drinking it, the method of its manufacture is known only within the Church, though many would commit dark deeds to learn it.*

*- Excerpt from "Power and Influence: Church of the Path" by B.S. Wordsmith*

The monster twisted in agony, suspended from hooks anchored into the stone ceiling. Senior Priest Alir tsked loudly as he looked up from his desk.

"Try to be still, stupid beast," he grunted as he stood.

A quick tour of the chamber showed that the array was still functioning as intended. As he watched, another drop of golden liquid dripped down from above into the receptacle and he nodded, satisfied.

"You will serve your purpose in death, monster," he said as he sat once more and turned his attention to the report that had filtered to him from the Cardinals.

Cardinal Horace had remembered Alir was the one to first report contact with the ants and ensured the document found its way to him. Quite considerate.

What he read was... fascinating, to say the least. Monsters, actively working with others, seizing territory, reports of a *tier seven* ant, the first in recorded history. Rather than a ravenous horde of mindless insects, these ants appeared to be building an empire.

Unusual, would be one way to phrase it, unheard of, another. There was something different about this, but then, these were unusual times.

Mana continued to rise across the Dungeon, repeated waves, so close together. The Church could clearly see what was coming. Thousands of years of preparation were coming to a head, any change or new factor had to be carefully considered.

What to do with these ants then?

It was hard to put them out of his mind. There had to be millions of them, most of them tier four, and a mythic as well. Such a *resource*. Should they be properly harvested, a veritable *river* of Elixir would flow through the Church. It could be just what was needed to fortify them before the Ancients rose.

Or it could come back to bite them. Kicking the anthill at the wrong time wouldn't pay off, rather the opposite.

Alir glanced down at the letter the Cardinal sent.

*There are plans underway already, but I value your input. In fact, I wish you to be a key component of our council. We must not make missteps at such a critical time.*

It was a summons, drawing the High Priest away from his critical work. Still, he understood it, he was an Elixir specialist, and these ants would make a fine brew indeed.

He needed to think.

He stood once again and walked a slow circuit around the monster that continued to thrash weakly above. The array carved into the stone continued to burn with a dull light as it worked its magic on its target. The result of hundreds of years of research from tireless priests who demanded that the Dungeon yield to them, this array was one of the greatest achievements of the church, or indeed, of civilisation.

After all, why should a monster only yield a portion of its experience? The System was the Path on which all must walk, but who's to say it could not be improved? Extract *all* of it, that had been the dream of those early pioneers. They had very nearly succeeded. The Elixir wasn't perfect, but it certainly was close.

A million ants, just what would Alir do to get his hands on a crop like that. But how? They couldn't be underestimated, that much was certain. They had survived an attack from the *Legion*, nothing to sneeze at. It would not be a simple endeavour to launch an undertaking of this magnitude.

They would need allies. It may be possible to draw on the Legion, though unlikely; they would be too focused on the upcoming cataclysm. The Ka'armodo, the Empire of Stone, perhaps even the underwater kingdoms of the Brathian, surely someone would be willing to assist if promised enough Elixir.

Alir chuckled darkly to himself.

With enough Elixir, the Church could make the whole world turn. Perhaps even the Tower, or the Golden City, could be made to move for wealth of this magnitude. Everyone knew what was coming, even the silver beards buried in their libraries had to be clear on the danger.

Now would be the worst time to have a burgeoning Ant Kingdom rising.

Yes. Yes, that was how he could sell it. This was a threat that *needed* to be extinguished now, before the Ancients rose and turned all monsters into their ravenous slaves. From that point of view, he could say that this mission wouldn't be drawing *away* from their defence against the cataclysm, but striking an early blow against it.

It made sense, the logic worked.

He looked up at the monster twisting above, continuing to have its essence ripped away and dripped down into the pool below. Another three hours and this creature would no longer exist except as a husk, ready for the Dungeon to reclaim.

He stepped carefully to the centre of the array and reached down with one hand, scooping a small handful of the precious liquid and bringing it to his lips.

The taste was dreadful, as was to be expected from anything extracted from monsters, but that was hardly the point.

**[You have gained experience.]**

That was what made the world go around.

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 1089: Those Raging Demons**

I have to say, the demons are acting more... vigorous, as the wave approaches.

[It's a combination of the rising mana level, and the growing influence of Arconidem,] Al informs me. [As our access to mana grows, it feeds our obsessions, making them stronger. Look over there.]

I can already see where the demon is pointing, but I turn anyway, facing down a narrow path in Roklu toward a cluster of buildings. At first, I'm not sure what I'm meant to be seeing, but after a few seconds, a wicked, blade-coated demon bursts out of a building, barbed, scythe-like arms swinging as it screams bloody murder at the ash-filled sky.

[Blood demon. The urge has grown too strong to resist. Disappointing.]

As we watch, the demon in question throws itself at its nearest compatriot, still shrieking like a banshee.

[Uhhh. Should we do something about that?]

[Your compatriots have become quite proficient at dealing with situations such as this. Watch.]

And we do. The crazed blood demon continues to go absolutely wild at everything it sees, without much success, it must be said. I think the unthinking, berserk nature of the attack is helping in that department. Another few moments pass and then... BAM!

Like a squad of determined ninja-police, ants appear. Leaping over the edges of the buildings, scuttling down the walls, they rush into the conflict, barrel over the offending demon and just like that, the threshing mass of demon and blade is contained.

In fact, the ants deploy something I've never seen before. It appears to be a weighted net of some sort. It must be made of incredibly hard material, since even the blood-demon hasn't been able to cut through the threads.

Just like that, what had moments ago been a frightening spectacle, a powerful tier six demon going on a rampage, has been resolved. The ants quickly check the area, repair the damage, heal any wounds, tip me a quick dip of the antennae, then drag the still screaming demon away.

[Holy moly,] I say, impressed. [What are they going to do with the demon?]

[They'll take her down to the plains and set her loose. *Messy*. Doing so will enable her to satisfy her obsession in a safe manner. After that, she will be able to return.]

Man, the Colony really has done a good job trying to manage the demons living in our territory. Rather than trying to suppress or control them, we've let them indulge their obsessions in as safe a way as we can manage. Safe for the Colony, anyway.

Which isn't being mean to the demons, they *expect* to live this way. Each of them cares only about one thing, and I think they honestly find it strange that others don't.

[And this heightening of obsession is *normal* for a wave?] I say to Al.

The knowledge demon burns bright.

[Yes. Although the mana levels attained during the last two waves have been higher than normal. With the Ancients waking and the levels climbing even higher, this will be the worst yet.]

There's a definite tension in the air, one I can practically cut with a twilight-filament antenna. The threat of violence is explosive, and if demons are growing ever more obsessive, I can imagine exactly what's going to happen.

Pride demons will be even more insufferable to everyone.

Grudge demons are going to lash out for practically everything.

Murder, Blood and other violence-motivated demons are going to cause absolute mayhem all the time. I can only imagine what it's going to be like when a war demon is around. Ugh.

Then we have to deal with those who succumb to the urging of their meddling Ancient... parent, or whatever he thinks he is.

[I presume those who are falling into Arconi-dumb's crusade are more numerous as well?]

[That is the case. It is... *interesting*, watching it take place. I have not seen it myself before.]

[Are there any demons old enough to remember the last time this happened? I didn't think there would be, considering it was... what... like a thousand years ago?]

[There are some, but they are not on our side.]

[Well, darn.]

He's probably talking about the tier eights below. After checking out the city with AI, we march down into the gigantic anthill built beneath the plate to see if the brass have worked out where they need us.

I don't exactly get what I'm looking for.

"There are spot fires everywhere, Eldest," Sloan tells me wearily. "I could ask you to go to a hundred places, but putting out one isn't necessarily going to help."

"None of those issues are large enough to warrant your attention," Victor says. "There are plenty of others to deal with things like this."

It's something of a rare treat to see the two of them together in the same room these days. The two premier military commanders in the Colony have been in high demand to the point where they almost never have the chance to work together.

"You two're coordinating the response to the wave from here?" I ask them.

"That is the case," Sloan confirms. "My sister and I work better when we have each other to refine our ideas. We've been training other teams to help plan strategy around the Colony so we won't be split up as much going forward, we hope."

"Bit of an issue when you're needed everywhere at once, isn't it?" I nod sagely. Then I step forward and poke the two of them with an antenna each. "But it's better than being told you aren't needed *anywhere*. I'm up here dealing with this damn Call and it sucks! Don't tell me there's nothing for me to do!"

The two generals share an uneasy glance before turning their focus back to me.

"There really isn't anything big enough to demand your attention, Eldest."

"We have a hundred problems, but none so dire that only you can solve it."

"That doesn't mean you just leave me twiddling my claws until some massive problem kicks up! I'm not a strategic reserve! Lemme help!"

The two generals shrug helplessly and I give up on them.

"Bah! Fine. You two go back to your planning, I'll find something to do that will help out."

I can immediately tell they don't like that. I'm not even done backing out of the chamber (not enough space to turn around) before they rush up to me.

"Eldest! You aren't planning on doing anything stupid are you?"

"What? Stupid?!"

THWACK!

"Just what are you suggesting? In fact...."

THWACK!

“I didn’t say anything!”

“I can definitely say you were thinking it. No, I’m not going to do anything stupid. I’m here to help! You two worry too much.”

I can tell they both want to say something, but a quick flex of the antennae and they keep it to themselves. Luckily for me, I can still hear their Will.

“No sending troops after me either! Sheesh. No faith.”

[Come on gang,] I tell the others when I get back out of the nest. [I’ve thought of a place we can go that will get us some experience fairly quickly.]

Tiny grins a manic, feral grin.

[That’s right, buddy. Warm up those fists, it’s time to smash!]

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 1090: Straight to the Sauce**

No more mucking around. I want to power up my allies, and we’ve been dithering around on the plains and in the tunnels. Why bother?! There’s an enormous feast of experience just waiting for us to go and claim it!

I’m of course talking about the rampaging demon army.

We rush down into the caverns below Roklu, heading deeper and smashing everything in our way. Tiny is hopping up and down like a kid on Christmas morning, anticipating the fight to come. When we break down to the second layer, little sparks are flying off his fur. He usually isn’t too keen on the long climb down the pillar, but he literally jumps at it this time. This ape is just too simple.

The city we pass through, I never bothered to learn the name, is starting to fall apart at the seams. There’s rubble all over the place and a number of tier six demons are running wild, causing absolute havoc.

I’ve no idea who the city lord is, they’ve never stuck their nose out when I’ve been passing through, and that continues to be the case now. Whoever they are, they really need to get their act together.

Aside from a pride demon who runs up to challenge Tiny, we make it across the plate without too much trouble so Invidia and I make a platform to take us down the rest of the way.

It’s hard work considering all the extra mass I bring to the table now, but the two of us working together are able to handle it. Once we reach the plains, rather than moving in the opposite direction from where mother encountered the horde, we head straight for it.

[Got an entire stratum full of crazy monsters who want nothing more than a fight. Sounds like a perfect power levelling opportunity to me.]

[A-aren’t there too many of them, Master? Also, there are many tier six monsters as well....]

[Yeah, the three of you couldn't take on the lot of them by yourselves. I mean, I could.]

*Probably.*

[So what we'll do is hit and run. Smash and grab. We dive in, hit the horde as hard as we can, then scadoo out of there as quick as we can. If it looks like they might catch up and tangle us, I'll drop a gravity bomb to create some space. Sound good?]

The three of them nod in agreement.

[Tiny, wipe away your drool, man, that's disgusting.]

He grins a little sheepishly as he drags one thick, furry arm across his face, but the fire in his eyes never goes away.

[Keep an eye on the condition of your armour,] I warn him, [if it gets too battered, then we'll need to pull back and get it repaired. There's way too many demons that can hit a lot harder than you can take, so watch out.]

His current suit isn't as complete as what he was wearing before, but it still gives a lot of protection to his chest, upper arms and neck. Anything to make the glass cannon a little bit harder to crack. His bones have proven to be absurdly strong, which is a win, since he doesn't mind blocking a lot of shots with his face. That skull has had a workout since his last evolution.

With that, we set out across the plains, and it isn't long until we find signs of the hordes' passage. They aren't bubbling up from the layer below anymore, at least not here, but we catch signs of them in a nearby city. When the pillar emerges from the darkness, we can see the fires burning, smoke billowing into the ash-filled sky.

It's on like Donkey-Kong!

We rush forward to find the demons still all over the pillar and crowded around the base, though it appears they're leaving rather than coming.

[Hold up,] I tell the others, [we need to rotate around and hit them from the other side. We can't retreat toward the Colony, otherwise we'll just be dragging them back into conflict with the family.]

A little bit of wisdom, from me? Gweheheh. I mature!

So we circle around, although I have to latch my mandibles around Tiny's arm and physically drag him at one point. The demons are already starting to trail away, looking for a new fight.

You're about to get one, you poor, poor idiots.

[Alright, Tiny. Get 'em!]

**“AAAAAARRRRRRRRRRR!!!!”**

The massive gorilla, unable to contain himself any longer, unleashes a stone-shattering warcry, pounding his chest with his open palms. When he leans forward and smashes the ground with his fists, propelling himself forward, I swear I hear thunder.

[Go on, Crinis. If he gets more than you, I'll be disappointed!]

[AHHH! I'LL GET ALL OF THEM!]

Crinis dives off my carapace and splashes into the stone. A moment later, a wave of slithering shadow flesh is rolling across the plains, three enormous mouths appearing now and again, gnashing at the air.

Well, that's horrifying.

[Do your best to keep Tiny alive, but I want you to make sure you get your share of experience, alright?]  
I tell Invidia, who remains hovering by my side.

*[Your praissssse. I ssssshall havessss it!]*

[Anytime you want it, you got it.]

With a green glitter in that giant eye, he turns and begins to flutter his way over to the fight. Tiny has already arrived, and the big lug's roar almost sounds like laughter as repeated detonations and flashes of lightning explode in the distance.

This should be fun to watch.

I try to stay close and continue to work on my new Skills and abilities, testing my gravity magic and Altar out. I have to be a little sparing with the Altar, though, since there aren't nearly as many ants in range down here. I mean, there's still a ton, I can get all of them from the nest under Roklu, pretty much, but all the surrounding nests are well out of range. Occasionally, I yoink a bit of Biomass during the fight while keeping myself out of harm's way. I'm not here for experience, after all.

My three friends tear into the demons like forces of nature. Each of the three is a peak-performance creature, perfect mutations and evolutions straight down the line, with high-rank Skills to boot. Experienced in fighting together and with complementary abilities, they battle like a well-oiled machine.

So overwhelming is their assault that the demons don't manage to even lay a claw on them for several minutes of fighting. Crinis' ability to seek out juicy targets and turn them against their allies causes absolute chaos within the horde, and the big-hitting Tiny and Invidia have all the room they need to go to work.

I almost feel sorry for the demons, but eventually, the weight of numbers wins out.

[Retreat!] I bark at them. [That's an order, Tiny! No stupid stuff today. Crinis and Invidia, grab onto Tiny and let's get the heck out of here.]

They do as asked and the gorilla zooms past me, bleeding from several cuts and grinning like a lunatic.

The demons rush towards me, minds gone, desperate to kill.

Gravity Bomb!

**HOOOOOOOOWL!**

Not like I'd give them a chance. See you soon, horde. We'll do it all over again!