

Chrysalis 111

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Chapter 111: The reality of the wave

After eating I now have enough Biomass to advance my Gravitational Energy Gland to +5, thus completing my perfect, all +5 physique. Sadly due to the wave I'm too tired to take my full measure of joy from the accomplishment. The omnipresent threat to the colony, my adoptive family, and myself is simply too pressing to allow much room for other emotions.

Heading down the far end of the tunnel even the indefatigable Queen is flagging, in desperate need of food and rest. Without the ability to transport the dirt out of the tunnel itself the workers have been piling it close to the entrance, narrowing the entrance considerably.

At some point we'll have to try and shove as much dirt as possible out into the chamber and then perhaps seal the entrance.

I'm in two minds about sealing the entrance to the Queen's chamber. On the one hand, we'll be protected from the monsters at least a little, on the other, we need to fight monsters in order to eat! We might be digging this tunnel for several more days, food supply is going to be a problem if we seal ourselves off from the Dungeon.

After I've seen that the digging is continuing as quickly as it can I return to the tunnel entrance where Tiny has fallen asleep. The massive ape blocks off almost half of the tunnel space with his prone frame, not that the workers seem to mind, any traffic simply walks over him or climbs up the walls to go around the slumbering ape.

He needs a good rest, he worked hard.

With a little time and space I need to spend my Biomass points to improve myself, every advantage must be sought in order to combat this threat!

[Do you wish to improve Gravitational Energy Gland to +5? This will cost 9 Biomass]

[At this level you may choose a mutation advancement, please select from the menu]

I can't even muster my usual glee at being able to peruse the menu of available options due to this gloomy atmosphere, even though there are more choices than I'd imagined being available.

I can cause the Gland to regenerate the energy faster by increasing the conversions speed, have the gland draw in ambient mana to regenerate on its own rather than siphoning energy from the core, increase the density of the mana, whatever that means.

I think the option I want is as unexciting as I think it will be effective. I haven't found a way to use the Gravitational Energy that is cheap in terms of the amount of mana required and for some reason I don't think I'm likely too. The Gravity effects of spells seem to be rather powerful or grandiose, which makes sense its gravity after all, and to achieve those effects the cost must also be considerably high.

[Deep Gravitational Energy Gland. Greatly increases the capacity of the gland, immediately doubling the capacity and further increasing the capacity with further mutation].

That's right. When it comes to the Gravity magic what I need is MOAR!

More spells! More time! The thirst of these spells is no joke! It must be slaked!

Maybe being able to fill up the tank faster would be better for the short term, but I still think this mutation will prove useful during the wave, and be much more effective afterwards.

So I confirm it!

BUGAAAAAA!

The Gravity gland is positioned right next to my core, deep inside my thorax. Needless to say it an extremely awkward place to have an explosive itch.

Rolling around on the ground whilst I endure the mutation process doesn't prevent the colony from doing its work at this time. Workers delivering food to the far end of the tunnel simply climb over me or, at one point, stop walking entirely and drag me to one side so I no longer block the traffic.

How rude!

I'm too absorbed with my own struggles to take much notice though.

As it always has before the feeling eventually fades away leaving me feeling even more exhausted but somehow satisfied. It always feels like an accomplishment when I manage to reach the +5 milestone. Now that I've achieved +5 across the board I suppose my next goal is +10?

I don't actually know when the next mutation advancement happens, it could be +10 or even +15... I'll just to pick something and keep advancing it until I hit the advancement, if it comes.

As much as I want to lie down and rest next to Tiny, I don't. Instead I drag my sorry self to the entrance and push my way past the smaller workers until I'm standing on the front line. The sudden glare of the light which had mostly been blocked by ant bodies is almost blinding compared to the darkness of the escape tunnel. The veins of mana are so bright they almost blend together, the walls becoming one complete light source.

Monsters have continued to spawn in the chamber, even if only a few minutes have passed since the chamber had been clear already six creatures are engaged in a desperate struggle.

Seriously, I wonder what on earth the forest is like right now? We are far from any spawn points that I know of down here and there are monsters popping up constantly! It must be sheer madness up there!

I leave it all to my imagination, I'm certainly not going up there to check...

The sounds of battle still echo out from the chambers above and the tunnel below with a new sound also ringing through, eating. It seems some monsters have been able to defeat enough enemies and secure some space for themselves to take in some Biomass. With mutations and the experience gained from surviving the first wave, these monsters will have a decisive advantage over any newly spawned creatures, if they can stay alive long enough and heal from their meal they'll be able to quickly advance, possibly mutate or condense a core.

The wave will send the usual cycle of monster growth into the overdrive, the freshly spawned level one creatures will be shredded by those that managed to survive before them, the lucky few who can survive deep into the wave will have had their growth accelerated dozens of times.

Dammit. I'd love to out and hunt those monsters down, kill the threat before it can become too serious but I dare not risk it. Exposing myself to such danger when I'm this weak, potentially bringing harm to the colony as well, is simply not acceptable.

Until Tiny has woken I'm going to take responsibility and defend the colony. After a few hours I'll get him to take over for a while so I can sleep. The tunnelling must also continue at all costs!

Very slowly I advance until half of my body is in the chamber whilst the other half sits in the escape tunnel. Rearranging my legs slightly I manage to balance myself so that the front four are in contact with the chamber floor whilst the back two support the business district.

Immediately my feet feel as if they are on fire. The feeling doesn't go away either, it simply spreads up my legs and the absorbed mana is transported towards my core. From there a steady stream of mana is being sapped away into the Gravitational Energy gland, there to be converted over time.

There is just so much mana here! I just can't explain how it makes me feel.

Insignificant, in a way?

Impressed? Awed even?

A piercing hiss intrudes on my thoughts suddenly. Not from inside the chamber but from above. What the heck is it? My body suddenly tenses up.

Even the monsters already fighting inside the room flinch and step back, giving each other some space as they assess the situation.

From the shaft above first one, then three, then dozens of dark tentacle like appendages descend slowly into the chamber, licking at the walls and curling around the rock outcroppings.

Supported on these limbs, a writhing mass which somehow connects together to form one whole enters my sight, that sharp, almost metallic hiss cutting the air.

Holy. Moly.

That thing, is hideous.

Either this creature was spawned in the last few minutes or perhaps it is a monster that has been victorious against those that spawned with and evolved already!

It doesn't really matter, this thing looks nasty!

Luckily I have an answer for it.

Hopefully it doesn't attack too quickly!

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Chapter 112: Interloper

Our new squiggly companion has certainly struck some fear into the hearts of each monster inside this room. They cower backwards in a decidedly non-monsterish manner as the new challenger descends.

I immediately start to draw on the mana inside my core, pulling out great streams of it and starting the process of compacting inside my throat. Whatever this monster is, I'm not mucking around, I'm going to give it both barrels of a forceful mana shout!

The roar of my soul!

I don't only have to use the Gravity Bomb every time! The normal mana from my core has proven deadly enough on several occasions. Hopefully whatever this monster is proves just as susceptible.

With the aid of my sub-brain I begin to pull out the mana and compress it as quickly as possible, straining my already tired mind to its limit.

Brilliantly illuminated by the light the strange new monster is a bizarre creature to behold. It lowers itself to the floor gradually, the only visible part of its body, the dozens of tentacle like appendages that extend and curl at impossible angles through the air, all emerging from within the central mass.

I'm not even sure this creature has eyes, how exactly does a wiggling mass of noodles make sense of the world anyway?

As the creature settles upon its mass of tentacles it seems to start getting a feel of its environment by just... feeling about with its many, many appendages. Around the chamber long, distended limbs feel their way about like sniffing dogs, quickly slithering their way towards the occupants of the room.

As it happens the creatures already in here fighting are closer to the tentacle thing than the escape tunnel and so, even though they are shrinking back like the savage and wild beasts they are, eventually one of them is cornered by those snuffling limbs.

What follows is a horrifying scene.

As soon as that seeking tentacle makes contact with the monster's leg the rest of the limbs snap into action, whipping through the air like lightning. Up and down each tentacle, glistening hooked barbs emerge and as those dark appendages lash around the unfortunate victims those thorns rip and tear at the beast's flesh.

In a solitary second the target monster, a Gnashing Shadow, has been completely enclosed by those limbs, hidden from view. The tentacles pulse and flex, tearing away at the beast trapped within without letting a sound escape. In complete silence we witness the end of that monster in horror.

Holy heck!

What a way to go!

As soon as those tentacles whipped through the air to strangle the victim I began drawing mana out of my core even more frantically, siphoning out everything I can and then compacting it viciously in my throat.

Gogogogogogogo!

The horror show isn't over however. Suspended on yet more of the shadowy tentacles the main body of the monster shivers slightly before the broken body of the prey, still totally enclosed, starts to be dragged towards the center of the room.

As it's meal approaches, the central body, wreathed in tentacles that seem to float weightless in the air, the spherical, nebulous body in the middle of that mass appears to... unfold ... and an impossibly large maw opens wide, grotesquely curved fangs emerging from seemingly nowhere.

When the trapped monster is dragged close enough to that mouth the entwined tentacles lift it and deposit it directly inside. The remains of that monster disappear in an instant, the only sign that it existed at all is the gnashing and crunching emerging from that nebulous main body in the center of the room.

...

...

...

SCARY!

What the heck was that Gandalf? By your flowing and munificent beard, tell me what the heck was that?!

The mouth! The TEETH! This is getting messed up!

Compress that mana Anthony! With all the damn speed in your two brains!

Horrified by this display of predation by the floating tentacle has got me seriously shook!

Sadly for my lidless eyes the activities of our new visitor don't end there. Having near silently slain and consumed its prey the tentacles once again go hunting, slithering and seeking through the chamber for more creatures to hurl into that hungry maw.

My heart clenches as those tentacles twist their way through the air towards the edges of the chamber, towards the escape tunnel. I'm not ready yet dammit! I need more time!

I hold my nerve as those ghastly appendages silently seek their next victim, but the other monsters aren't so constrained. One of the remaining beasts surrenders to either its fear or its bloodlust and howls a piercing battle cry before dashing towards the nearest limb aggressively!

Sharp claws glisten in the light as they draw a cold arc through the air, slicing one of the tentacles into pieces!

Foolish...

Before the beast can even celebrate its short lived triumph over the solitary limb, the others flash through the air with impossible speed. Barbed hooks once again reveal themselves before the tragic victim is encased by dozens of tentacles, silently rendered apart in a matter of seconds.

Once again the prey is dragged towards the central mass and fed to that endless mouth.

I use all the time I can to condense more and more mana. I don't want to release a weak blast, this monster seems to mean business! If I don't finish it in one shot I may not live to make another attempt!

[Forceful Mana has reached level 4]

Nice! That might help the process go a little faster!

Even as it feeds itself there are still tentacles spread throughout the room, not actively seeking prey but twitching and shifting every now and again, seeking a stray foot or arm.

Suddenly it strikes me what this creature reminds me of, a jellyfish. This is like some sort of nightmare jellyfish! Hunting through touch using many seeking appendages, those barbs might contain poison as well!

I shall dub this frightening beast the Jellymaw!

...

It'll do.

Having consumed another monster the Jellymaw once again begins seeking for new prey, the tentacles drifting and floating through the air as if it were water. There are very few monsters inside the chamber now, all of us scattered around the edges of the room, pressed against the walls.

After checking out the area in which the first two monsters had been located the Jellymaw begins to widen its search.

My heart chills as I realise just where those seeking limbs are headed.

I guess we wouldn't be so lucky as to avoid danger three times in a row.

Gradually those tentacles twist and turn their way through the air towards where the colony stands protecting the entrance to the escape tunnel. Oh man, if the tentacles touch the other workers before me, what would happen? This monster could latch onto dozens of ants at the same time if it wanted to! One tentacle alone might be enough to rip apart a hatchling!

Only one thing to do...

Oh boy....

Slowly, I step forward, emerging from the wall of workers behind me until I stand completely exposed.

Of course, I'm frantically compressing mana inside my throat the entire time!

As the vicious tentacles pass by I slowly stretch out one antenna and lightly tap it.

I really wish I could close my eyes for this...

Quick as flash the remaining limb streak through the air towards me. Before I can even blink I've become completely surrounded, vicious hooked barbs grating and scraping against my diamond carapace.

Come on carapace! Hold out for me!

Quickly checking my hp I can see that it is only gradually being shaved away as I get compressed within the Jellymaw's grasp.

I can't believe how strong these tentacles are! I'm being compacted in here!

In fact, I'm fairly sure several of my legs are broken...

Hold on Anthony! Just keep compacting that mana!

I pretend to struggle against the restrictions, wiggling and trying to force my legs to move. As I do so the tentacles continue to grip and grind against me, trying to rip into flesh and tear me apart.

Damn that hurts!

After a few moments of struggling I go limp, hoping the monster will think I'm dead.

I think it worked.... The grinding has stopped,

I can feel myself being pulled towards the center of the room now. The monster is preparing to feed. This is my moment!

Prepare to receive the Dragons Breath!

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Chapter 113: The Vigil

Being thrown into the mouth of oblivion isn't exactly what I had planned for myself in my second life but I guess things don't exactly turn out according to plan all the time.

For instance I was reborn as ant rather than a human, but hey, no use in complaining.

As the tentacles part before me to reveal the cavernous, impossibly wide mouth of the Jellymaw a tingle of fear shivers through my carapace.

The inside of this monster is simply, black. I can't see a throat or anything! Long curved fangs emerge from pure darkness and outline a gaping void, empty of any trace of the creatures I'd seen consumed before.

What. The. Heck.

I don't have much time to admire the scenery! Let him have it!

Opening my mouth wide I unleash the tightly packed mana I had concealed in my throat. Like a tightly packed explosive given a tiny outlet the pure force of energy roars out of my mouth in a focused beam of destruction. Idly I wonder why my teeth don't get shattered by the blast as it canons out of me but I may just have to put that down to my perfect aim and control.

....

The moment I unleash my strike the world flickers before my eyes, the mass of tentacles that is the Jellymaw vanishes from before me as my vision is filled with a flurry of hooked appendages and cascading dirt as the kinetic force of my blast slams into the far wall of the chamber, obliterating the other monster who happened to be skulking there.

[You have slain level 2 Lesser Imp]

[You have gained experience]

...

Sorry buddy. That wasn't on purpose.

Finally my feet hit the ground and I can tell I'm a sorry sight. Three of my legs are busted from the pressure the tentacles applied as they constricted me. Thankfully not all on one side so I can still walk somewhat well. Numerous punctures and scratches mar my carapace after the barbs tore into me as best they could.

Checking my regeneration gland I can't help but curse internally, still not topped off. I could activate it immediately but instinct tells me the effect will be exponentially better if I can hold off until the gland is full. I'll have to cope with my injuries for now.

May as well collect the Biomass whilst I can, I need to get something out of this to help me recover.

I begin to painfully drag myself across the chamber, snapped legs trailing in the dirt behind me and firing hot lances of pain directly into my mind. I don't think I'll ever get used to having so many broken legs, although I can't really recall what it was like to have only two. I think I heard somewhere that the human mind is capable of adapting to a new environment in only two weeks. It's been significantly longer than that for me here and already it feels as if some aspects of being a human are starting to feel strange in my memory.

Like... hands? I haven't had hands for a long time. I mean, do you really need them? Mandibles seem to work out just fine. I guess I don't have to open any doors, which helps.

The Jellymaw lies in a coiled heap at the edge of the chamber, looking for like a tangled rope than a horrific monster.

I know it's still alive, I haven't heard the announcement from Gandalf yet, not going to fall for that one again.

Behold! The power of human learning!

As I draw closer I can see how the monster managed to survive my shout. At the very last second the beast reacted by bringing every tentacle it could in front of its face to block as much energy as it could, angling the limbs to try and deflect the strike.

It was barely enough. Most of those fearsome appendages have been destroyed or heavily damaged, they twitch and flop on the ground now as the beast attempts to protect itself. It isn't any good.

As I draw closer I can see that the core of the Jellymaw wasn't able to escape my strike, half the core is a molten mess, sagging and weeping what I assume is blood from its collapsed head. The mouth is nowhere to be seen.

I step forward yet again, coming into contact with one of the injured limbs and suddenly I sense danger! The several tentacles whip through the air towards me! The core unfolds itself once more to reveal a that mouth, missing half of the teeth now but still fearsome!

The tentacles lash at the ground, hauling the body of the monster into the air as it collapses down on the position where it sensed that touch!

But I'm not there anymore.

IDIOT!

Trying to outsmart the great Anthony!? Only in the dreams in which you yourself are dreaming of outsmarting me! Ha!

Cautious to the extreme I retreated as quickly as I could, admittedly not very quick, as soon as I touched that loathsome tentacle!

The beast fumbles about in confusion as it failed to find anything, the tentacles flopping about, attempting to seek its foe even as the creature breaths heavily, clearly on the edge of death.

You need to settle down Jellymaw.

And become my food!

Shattering Bite!

Pouring out the last of my energy I manifest the mandibles of energy once more, bringing them down with the force of a collapsing mountain on the main body of the Jellymaw.

Under the immense pressure exerted by my mandibles the beast has no choice but to give up the ghost.

[You have slain level 4 Crinis Inanis]

[You have gained experience]

I'm.... So tired!

In the wake of my triumph I wobble on my three remaining good legs, my vision fuzzing to black before I manage to take hold of myself.

The last shattering bite was pushing the limit right to the edge, but I had to be sure I finished it off, this monster was such a pain in the gaster to deal with.

Exhausted, I pull myself towards the remains of the beast and immediately begin to feast.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass, Crinis Inanis, one Biomass awarded]

[Basic profile of the Crinis Inanis unlocked]

I'm too tired to read the damn profile, just let me eat. Even shifting my jaws is almost too much effort.

I can't even be bothered checking if there are more monsters in the room, I just have to eat.

As I'm eating my sight begins to blur several times and the aches and pains in my body fade to dull aches before roaring back to the forefront of my consciousness.

I focus all of my willpower on mechanically eating, just move the jaws and take in the food, repeat, repeat and so on.

When I'm halfway through consuming the creature and beginning to feel full I slowly and painfully drag the Biomass back towards the colony.

My mind is on autopilot now, I'm barely thinking at all.

Slowly I begin to realise that other ants have appeared around me, grabbing hold of the food and dragging it back to the escape tunnel. They are dragging me as well, pulling me towards safety, making sure to avoid dragging at my injured legs.

When I sense the relative darkness of the escape tunnel embrace me I pull myself free from the workers and move back to take my place at the entrance, one ant among many protecting the entrance to our safe passage.

Tiny is still sleeping, healing his injuries and recovering his strength, I won't rest until he is ready to take my place.

With a thought I activate my regeneration and the healing fluid floods my system, stimulating my cells, snapping my bones back into place and repairing my joints. Hopefully it will be enough.

Once again I prepare to take up my vigil. I will keep my family safe.

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Chapter 114: The bleary days preceding the panic

After several hours of weary defence Tiny awakes, his wounds mostly healed and the fire in his eyes rekindled. So exhausted I can barely form the thoughts I tell him to defend the entrance until I wake up and retreat further into the tunnel where I collapse flat on my face.

Torpor comes over me like a warm embrace. Like a thick blanket.

Without closing my eyes, my thoughts grow slower until they shift and sink like molasses until they barely move at all. This is the rest of ant-kind!

When I awake several hours later I feel much refreshed. The heavy exhaustion that had smothered me before has mostly been lifted and the rest, combined with my feeding has closed over almost all of wounds, almost restoring my hp to full.

I get another pleasant surprise when I awaken in the form of a dark coloured gem, the core of the Jellymaw I defeated. The colony must have fished it out of the remaining Biomass and left it here for me to deal with as I was one who defeated it.

How thoughtful! Truly the workers are the best of siblings!

I'm tempted to absorb the core immediately but in the end I hesitate and decide to deal with it later. Instead I bury it in the wall alongside the other cores I had brought to the escape tunnel.

As quickly as I can I hustle back to the front lines.

Tiny is cheerfully standing as part of the wall of defenders, workers crawling over him. The poor ape is covered in wounds once again, clearly demonstrating that the wave has not let up at all whilst I was sleeping.

Indeed, the room before us is still filled with monsters battling furiously!

[Got enough energy for one more offensive?] I ask my ape companion?

Tiny turns quickly to eyeball me and nods, a big smile breaking out on his face.

Of course he does, he likes fighting almost as much as he likes food!

With Tiny helping I once more activate the Gravity Domain and we work together to clean the room once more. When that task is done I lead the workers out to collect as much of the Biomass as we can, once again securing the food supply for the colony. Under my instructions, Tiny drags a chunk of food inside the tunnel and stuffs his face before falling asleep, resting whilst I take my turn to defend.

Just like this we begin our long watch. Every few hours we would swap and rest whilst the other took their turn standing against the endless spawns of monsters. On my second watch I took the initiative to push out as much excess dirt as possible whenever there was a break in the fighting, mustering the workforce to move back up the tunnel whilst I protected the entrance, collect the dirt that had been shifted by the Queen and her dig team at the other end before transporting it out to the Queens chamber and piling it up, partially covering the entrance.

In this way we were able to close over at least part of the tunnel entrance and at the same time make a little more room in the escape tunnel.

I didn't want to close the entrance over completely, the monsters in spawning from the Dungeon were a threat to us but at the same time our only source of food. Whenever I awoke from my rest my Gravitational Energy gland would be charged enough that I could maintain the Gravity Domain until almost every monster in the chamber was killed, providing the colony, Tiny and myself the sustenance we needed in order to keep heal and fight.

There was a cost though. Despite my best efforts, despite Tiny exhausting his strength to the limit every time he woke up, we weren't able to protect every worker on the front lines. Sometimes a strong monster would spawn in the chamber, lashing out with mana or claws before I could react, or monsters fighting would lose their sense of direction and battle their way directly into the midst of the ants. Those monsters would always be quickly subdued but sometimes an unlucky worker or two would get sliced before we could save them.

Those losses hurt. I didn't look at these workers as tools or monsters that were different from myself. They had their own childlike intelligence and I accepted them as members of my family, I wanted to save them all if I could. We had grown quite tough at the frontline, a number of my brethren had successfully evolved from hatchlings to workers as time passed. When I was attempting to scout with my mana sensing I was able to discover that some of the mature workers had in fact condensed a core! A milestone well worthy of celebration!

The seemingly endless grind was giving benefits to some members of the colony even as it wore away at our nerves.

After four cycles of resting and fighting the first major shift occurred.

Luckily it was me on duty when it happened. Towards the end of my watch, tired and battered from the constant fighting I had almost not noticed the signs. I was so used to staring at the fighting directly in

front of me, sensing for heat sources coming from the walls or from the tunnel above us that I had almost forgotten about what had worried me the most at first.

The tunnel below.

Mostly blocked off in the first hours of digging the escape tunnel the passage leading down into the Dungeon had never been explored by me, too nervous about what I might run into down there. I had grown accustomed to not really worrying about what was happening down there so much that when the sound of fighting from beneath me changed suddenly I didn't know what to make of it.

At first it was just a faint scraping sound mixed in with all the rest of the noise, I'd hardly registered it at first. My mind, weary from the hours of vigilance and fighting only made a mental note of it before focusing on more immediate threats.

It only grew louder with time.

Eventually the scraping was becoming more and more clear, a consistent backdrop to the more insistent sounds ringing out in front of me. Then the sounds echoing from the chambers below changed, the ringing sounds of combat replaced by harsh shrieking of crazed monsters and a rather ominous chewing.

It takes a little while for my tired brain to click as to what exactly that means.

The monster from below are rising up!

The second shock strikes me at exactly the same time. From my peripheral vision a twinkling light strikes at just the wrong angle catching my attention just as I'm worried about the noise from below.

What I see makes my blood run cold.

The veins of mana that are energy source of this Dungeon are starting to grow into the escape tunnel! As I stare at these new veins my worry only grows larger.

Not only have the veins started growing, they are extending so quickly I can actually see them move! It's slow for sure, but actually visible!

Not good....

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Chapter 115: Retreat from danger

This stupid wave! Just how threatening does it have to get? I'm already a wrecked heap. A heap I say!

Now the veins are extending into the escape tunnel, which will surely cause monsters to spawn right under our feet!

An addition we have to deal with these unknown threats from below? It's enough to drive an ant crazy!

Ok.. Think Anthony, what are you going to do?

Stay and fight? Against what!? We have no idea what sort of horror is going to ascend up that tunnel, eager to eviscerate our most sensitive zones? There is absolutely no way we stay here and battle it out

against whatever is coming up. One of the first things I learned about in this Dungeon is not to pick a fight you aren't sure you can win.

Run?

Run where? The tunnel isn't complete! All we can do is run up towards a dead end! They don't call 'em life ends for a reason!

Only one choice remains! Hide!

"Quick! We need to cover up the entrance and seal this tunnel!" I shout to the workers around me,

The workers respond to my call to action rapidly, as they usually do. This is a family that can be relied on in a pinch!

A hundred workers leap into action, hauling dirt up to close off the remaining open section of the tunnel entrance, quickly shovelling dirt with their mandibles.

From beneath us the sounds of bloodcurdling screams and the wild gnashing of teeth, grinding away at the bones of still living foes echo endlessly, certainly providing ample motivation to my own digging efforts.

What the heck is going on down there? Actually, I'm not confident that I really want to know.

It sounds like the monsters down there are experiencing a kind of existential terror that I wasn't sure the beasts I'd seen had a capacity to express.

I've always had a urge to investigate, to explore the deeper layers below just to know, just to see what it was like down there, what sort of creatures inhabited that space.

The ghastly sounds echoing from below have somewhat cured me of that feeling, I have to say. To the surface my fellow ants (and Tiny), maybe find a mountain to climb when we get up there!

As we pile the dirt high I can see the gradual progress of the mana veins slowly extending their baleful reach further into the escape tunnel. The speed is still slow, perhaps only as much as thirty centimetres an hour, but just seeing them visibly growing is unsettling to me.

Is the mana concentration still growing?! Is that why they are moving in this way? There is still too much that I don't understand!

Don't think about it! Just dig!

I repeatedly urge the workers to move faster as the dirt flies, ants crawling all over each other in their eagerness to complete the task they've been given.

As the horrific noises from below continue to grow louder we quickly seal off the escape tunnel, plunging ourselves into near darkness.

I'm still not satisfied though. The muffled noises and vibrations that pass through the loosely packed soil are enough motivation for me to continue stacking dirt against the entrance. I want to get some width between me and that room!

"Keep stacking that dirt, fellow workers! Start bringing it from the other end of the tunnel!"

I continue to exhort my fellow workers to keep piling dirt against the entrance, trying to put an amount of earth between us and the horrors that will soon enter that chamber that I'll feel comfortable we are safe.

After ten minutes of constant hauling the sounds of monstrous combat have receded and we've managed to pack the dirt far enough back that even the gradually extending tendrils of the mana veins on the wall have been covered over. Any monsters that spawn in those walls will claw themselves out only to find they are still encased in dirt!

If they manage to actually dig themselves out into the tunnel they'll be easy pickings for the watchful ants.

The colony has entered a strange state now, completely sealed within a dirt cylinder. As the rest of the Dungeon is plunged into blood and madness these ants and I exist in a separate, sealed container.

The worries I have are air and food. I'm not exactly sure how much air monstrous ants require in this world, monster live up to 10000 km under the surface here after all.

Food on the other hand. The colony has a voracious appetite, the need for sustenance is constant. Without being able to charge out and secure Biomass every few hours we will eventually starve to death.

Exactly how long will Tiny last without food?

I'll leave him asleep for now, if I can put off letting him know then I will...

After a period of time helping the digging, with the sounds rippling out from the Queen's chamber growing more and more muted until barely the slightest of vibrations can be felt I decide to head to the front of the tunnel to check on our progress.

The Queen and her dedicated cohort of workers have been furiously ripping into the soil and rock the entire time Tiny and I have been occupied with the defence. A lot of progress has been made! According to my tunnel map, which has reached level two, the tunnel still has a long way to go before we reach the surface.

At the front lines the Queen is still diligently digging, her massive mandibles ripping huge chunks out of the solid ground in front of her as she cheerfully encourages the workers around her to put forth their efforts.

The smaller workers at this end of the tunnel are still vibrating with enthusiasm, fawning over their mother and, vigorously transporting the loose soil further back in the tunnel.

Have they taken a break up here at all?

The escape tunnel has now become like a moving pocket of air within the solid ground, the dirt removed from the front is transported to the back and compressed as best as possible.

Quite an odd situation to say the least.

Taking my place next to the Queen once more I begin to furiously attack the soil, sending a blizzard of loose earth flying to shower the ants behind me who gather it up enthusiastically before carrying it away.

Despite no longer having to fight monsters I feel like the pressure of the wave has increased rather than decreased. The expansion of the mana veins and the movement of monsters from below has rattled me.

Firstly, the monsters from below. Why are they moving? It stands to reason that only reason they are rising up is because they have been displaced by even stronger monsters from beneath them. Is there a possibility this upwards migration would continue until those more powerful creatures rise to this level? Would even the surface be safe if that were to happen?!

Secondly the speed at which the mana veins are moving. I can only think this is caused by the mana at this level growing in intensity. If that intensity continues to grow during the wave then what exactly are conditions going to be like after a week?!

I estimate the wave has only been underway for a day and a bit at this point....

There is still a long way to go.

Casting aside my worries I begin to activate my mana sensing skill periodically as we dig. The best chance of finding food is for us to pass by another tunnel and dig towards it, performing a raid on the monsters there in order to secure Biomass for the colony.

We have moved far past my previous Dungeon exploration and my Tunnel map is completely blank in this area of the Dungeon, the escape tunnel appears as a clean line pushing into unknown territory when I view the map in my mind.

The best chance of finding a tunnel is if I can detect the core of a powerful monster or perhaps sense the mana flooding through the mana veins, then we can dig towards it.

I just hope it doesn't take too long.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 116: Body of Iron, Heart of Flame

Donnelan was exhausted. The young fire mage has been repeatedly rung dry over the last twenty four hours, expelling every ounce of mental effort until his mind felt as if were on fire and blood had started leaking out of eyes.

Blood! Right out of his eyes!

When he'd turned to the centurion in charge of his section to indicate the distress he was in, all he got was a cold snort of contempt and five minutes rest. He'd spent his five minutes with his head in a bucket of ice water in the med tent before climbing back up the wall to finish the last thirty minutes of his shift.

This was the first time Donnelan had been involved in defending a wave, so he wasn't sure if what he'd seen was normal or not, but what he had witnessed in the last day had shaken his impression of the Dungeon forever.

He knew the Legion was strict, really strict, on the management of the Dungeon. The mercenaries had a nickname for the Legion's rules in the Dungeon, they called them the 'Stone law', unbreakable and crushing like a mountain.

Donnelan had felt some sympathy for their view in the past. The Dungeon was dangerous to be sure but it wasn't that bad, idiots got themselves killed exploring down here sure, but idiots could kill themselves shaving, was there really such a need to regulate them?

The mage didn't feel that way now. When the light returned the Legion had been in full force on the wall of their temporary fort, officers striding up and down like angry demons, checking equipment and snapping angry hand signals to any Legionary found wanting in their preparations.

When the monster started bursting out of the soil, tearing out of walls and even dropping down from the roof Donnelan was sure he was seeing a vision of hell. Brutal combat erupted everywhere in an instant, the stench of blood and the shrieks of monster flooded his senses until he wanted to puke. Several trainees had, thrown up right over the edge of the wall. The centurions turned a blind eye to reaction of their younger soldiers, some of them had been in the exact same position once.

The endless waves of monsters crashed into each other like a roaring sea before converging on the fort in fury. None of the Legionaries could explain it but once the monsters drew close enough to the fort they seemed attracted to it irresistibly, suicidally charging in an attempt to scale the walls or burst their way through.

It hadn't taken long for the fort to be surrounded by so many monsters it looked like an island under assault by the endless tides.

The only reason the monsters didn't spawn directly under their feet was due to the deployment of an ancient Legion artefact that suppressed monster spawning in an area in the center of the camp. This was another of the Legion secrets Donnelan had been exposed to over the course of this expedition, he wasn't sure how much more they could possibly hide up their sleeves.

It was shocking to him that he could be a trainee alongside these people for five years and not a whisper of any secrets had ever reached his ears, nothing!

"How are you holding up Don?" an exhausted voice reached him.

Donnelan looked up to see Mirryn, face covered in dust and dried ichor approaching his position in the rest area before she slumped down against a tent post, seemingly devoid of energy.

Mirryn had been working just as hard as he had, pushing her archery skills to the extreme in order to damage long range monsters as well as plugging any gaps when the beasts managed to climb the walls and threaten the mages.

In the background the roar of monsters and regular explosions rocked the fort as mages continued to bombard the beasts with every ounce of magic they could grasp. Donnelan had never felt mana so thick in his life, every mage felt as if their spells were super charged in these conditions, their fire hotter, storms larger and ice colder than ever before.

The same was also true for the monsters of course. Hence all the noise.

The constant din was starting to get into a few Trainees heads. Donnelan had seen another archer, nice guy, they called him 'Fingers' due to his extremely dextrous digits he deployed in his archery, after about 14 hours of the wave he'd collapsed in a quivering mess, screaming for the noise to stop, right in the middle of the rest area.

Two medics and knocked him straight out with a rune, tumbled him into a bed where he'd been ever since.

It was almost enough to cause Donnelan to wonder if he should start shrieking himself, maybe then he'd get some sleep!

"I've never been better Mir" Donnelan drawled, "I'm practically on vacation".

Mirryn chuckled, her eyes shut and head leaning back against the post. "I heard about the eye thing. Really only five minutes?"

"Really" Donnelan affirmed.

His friend could only shake her head in disbelief, too spent for any more expression than that.

After a pause she spoke again. "I may have some good news for you though".

"Oh?"

"Apparently the trainees are going to be given a twenty four hour break before our next shift on the wall".

Donnelan was so shocked he sat up too quickly, causing a cramp in his leg.

"Ouch!" he wailed.

It took a few minutes to straighten out his leg and stretch it until the pain faded, during which Mirryn continuously chuckled painfully.

"How are they giving us a rest? Don't they need us up there? I don't see any sign of the fighting dying down..." Donnelan muttered doubtfully.

Mirryn snorted, "If anything it's getting worse! You know that as well as I do. I have no idea what the brass are planning but I was passed this news by the Tribune ten minutes ago. I swear it!"

The young fire mage could only shake his head. How were they going to hold the defences if so many soldiers took a break?

In the center of the camp the senior officers had gathered together, hundreds of years of collective Dungeon experience amassed in one place.

Despite the horrific din that battered the eardrums of everyone inside the camp the officers were unruffled, stroking their beads or thumbing their chins as they exchanged grumbling words about the state of the young soldiers these days.

There is a stirring amongst them and they turn towards their left as a unit, conversation falling away. Moments later Titus emerged from with his command tent, dark plates of armour strapped to his aging yet still bulky frame.

As he approached his old friends and comrades Titus smiled freely, clapping them on their shoulder, sharing a laugh and a warm nod with each of them. Despite the howling battle occurring not one hundred metres away the commander appeared more relaxed than he had in some time.

Quite a few of his officers noticed the change.

"Almost feels like home now doesn't it commander?" grinned a grizzled centurion.

Titus looked at the dazzlingly shining forest and drew the air deep into his lungs, drawing the rich mana into his system.

"Almost Margnus, about another 10% and it'll be just about there."

The others similarly breathed deeply before nodding in agreement. Not just the commander but the rest of these veterans were similarly looking more refreshed and moving more easily than they had in years.

Magnus glanced back at the tent Titus had emerged from before he spoke, "Any luck waking her up commander? I'd love to see her in action again after all this time."

Titus just shook his head. "It's going to take a lot more than 10% to get that old battle axe going, you know that" Titus laughed, "still, I think if we can shake out our old bones then the rest of the soldiers should be able to rest easy for a day, what do you say fellows?"

The men and women who made up the officers of the Legion Liria branch surface headquarters laughed and hefted their weapons, before moving towards the walls. Only Titus and Aurillia remained behind.

"How much longer until they start to show up, commander? Will the trainees be ready?" the Tribune asked, worry in her tone.

Titus only smiled. "Those old dogs will have starting rising up a few hours ago, the pressure in the second strata will be hitting its peak pretty soon. It won't be long until those monsters start to push up here. We'll give as many soldiers a rest as we can for now and then we'll really test their mettle."

The Tribune nodded. "Body of Iron".

"Heart of Flame".

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 117: Raid

I'm so damn hungry!

As I human I never would have expected that digging would be so tiring. Although, unlike when I was a human I've been able to move a hell of a lot more dirt. With my excavation skill targeting my instincts and my mandibles acting as a movable super shovel, I can really smash out some tunnel space.

All the work is really putting a strain on my empty stomach. When Tiny awoke I had him collect my monster cores and then put him to work compacting the dirt at the rear of the tunnel, despite having eaten relatively recently my ape buddy is also starving.

I can only imagine how the Queen is feeling. She appears to be fine, cheerfully chomping away at the earth and encouraging the workforce with her seemingly endless positivity.

My mind isn't completely focused on the digging I have to admit. As often as I can I activate the mana sensing skill, desperately searching for some sign of a source of food! On the positive side my constant scanning and digging has raised my skills, mana sensing by two levels and excavation by one, on the negative I'm yet to find anything.

In my tunnel map the escape tunnel continues to spear upwards and outwards into empty space. I am somewhat worried about where exactly we will surface, the best I can say is that it will be several kilometres away from the guarded entrance I ran into at the very least.

As I grow more and more depressed with the failure to locate anything I finally get a response.

At last! A bite on the line!

As the skill level has risen the range I can detect mana successfully has likewise increased, which is lucky since I doubt I would've been able to reach this response otherwise. Very faintly on the edge of my awareness I can barely sense the ripples of mana. Strong or weak I can't tell at this stage, the only way to get a more accurate reading would be to get closer.

It's been a number of hours since the last time the colony had access to any sort of food, not to mention, if I pass up this reading there is no guarantee another one will come in range of my mana sensing before we reach the surface, the entire colony could starve to death by then!

I won't risk it. The tunnel needs to be diverted. I turn to the Queen.

"I've found a source of food!" I say, "We have to divert the tunnel slightly in order to reach it."

The Queen pauses in her digging to turn her face towards me, I take it as a sign of politeness since, as an ant she doesn't need to turn her face to see me (compound eyes) nor to speak to me (pheromone communication).

"Do you know what you have found, child?" she asks.

I can only be honest here. "I have absolutely no clue, but we may all starve to death in a few days if we aren't able to secure some food soon. If we pass up this chance we might not get another".

The Queen ponders this for a moment before wagging her antennae in agreement. "You speak sensibly child, tell me where to dig".

After a little prodding with my antennae and trying to feel out the ground with my excavation skill I adjust the angle of the tunnel and start to curve the tunnel towards the mana source I'd detected.

If we regularly the direction of the tunnel as we approach we should be able to arrive above the source and then I can dig a small distance down towards it, allowing myself and Tiny to infiltrate without having to risk the workers unnecessarily.

The reading I just was only just able to sense is roughly two hundred metres away. Tunnelling through two hundred metres of solid earth and rock is not a casual endeavour by any means, even for a colony on monstrous earth moving machines like us.

All in all it takes us around five hours of digging to advance the tunnel towards the mana source. I continue to sink my consciousness down into my core and reach out with my senses to detect the ripples echoing outwards.

As we drew closer the form of the mana I had detected becomes more clear and it isn't long before I know just what it is that we have found, a tunnel, and a fairly narrow one at that. Joy blooms within my ant thorax when I confirm the shape of the source. This is perfect! A tunnel, covered in mana veins is sure to be packed with monsters, aka lunch, and due to the narrow width of this tunnel the size of said monsters should be fairly manageable.

After repeatedly sweeping the tunnel I can detect only a few small cores moving about before they shift out of my range. The best possible result. We may be able to harvest a few cores whilst we are at it!

When the tunnel has been dug to the correct position, I tell the Queen the correct angle to get the tunnel back on track and start digging a short passage of my own in order to push my way down towards my meal, I mean the tunnel...

[Tiny! Come up here and get ready to eat!]

I swear it takes less than ten seconds for Tiny to get from one end of the tunnel to other, drool running down his bat face as he gently pushes his way through the workers towards where I'm digging.

....

I shouldn't have called him over. This ape is way too excited. The burning hunger in his eyes feels hot enough to burn all life in this tunnel to ashes. I've invited to fight and eat, I should have known this was going to happen!

It takes me ten minutes to dig my way down to the prey cave and the entire time Tiny is hopping from one foot to another and ripping away at the side of my tunnel in order to widen it out enough for him to fit more comfortably.

Suddenly the soil gives way from in front of me and the thick scent of monster assaults my senses.

[Tiny! Time to eat buddy!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 118: The furious Tiny, the delectable feast!

Before I've even finished speaking Tiny releases a ravenous howl and dives directly into the vertical tunnel, right on top of me!

My plan had been to drop into the roof of this tunnel and scope it out a bit before taking any action. Instead I get pushed down the tunnel by a sheer weight of ape mass that propels us out of the tunnel and sends us smashing into the ground directly between to battling monsters.

THUMP!

....

Get off me Tiny you stupid ape!

Wait a sec. Er.

[Get off me Tiny you ape!]

He isn't listening. Eyes alive with hunger, for food and battle, Tiny leaps up, planting one foot squarely in my back, before diving headfirst into the nearest monster with his fists swinging and electricity zapping in every direction.

He flattened me. I've even taken damage dammit!

Turns out having a giant ape land on your back is less than pleasant.

Groaning internally I pick myself up and try to switch my mentality back to battle mode after the rather rude shock I experienced. Once I get my feet under me I try to grasp hold of the situation as quickly as I can.

What are we up against?

The tunnel itself is quite narrow and absolutely blazing with light, the mana veins snaking through every surface of the walls. Monsters are battling each other up and down the space, even as new monsters are pushing their way out of the walls were they have been spawned.

Havoc! Chaos!

Except they are all low level monsters!

Looking around all I can see are the sorts of enemies I'd seen when I first entered the Dungeon. Slugs, centipedes, wolves, the occasional Croca-Beast and Thorn lizards. All of the weakest foes. I was able to fight against this stuff before I'd even formed a core!

I have evolved twice since then, I am so much stronger than I was before! These monsters are simply no match for me anymore! In fact, most of them look very different now, seeing as I've grown significantly taller and longer than I had before. The Dragon-Wolf hounds can't even look down on my any more. Ha!

Prepare to feel my wrath!

Muahahaha!

Filled with glee I charge towards the nearest Coral-Slug open my mandibles wide and snap them closed.

Shattering bite!

Without any resistance the ethereal jaws of light snap cleanly through the slug. Your goop can't save you now!

[You have slain a level 3 Coral Slug]

[You have gained experience]

Who's next?!

What follows in an extremely cathartic battle. With my much higher stats, body advancements and improved skills these weaker, unevolved and base level monsters are simply no match, practically everything is destroyed with one bite!

I remember when I was afraid of you, take this!

[You have slain ...]

You want to spit your horrible acid on me now? I can barely feel it! Muahahaha!

[You have slain ...]

Oh you want to slap me around with your tail? How about I bite it off?

[You have slain ...]

All the frustration that I amassed in those early days in the upper tunnels of the Dungeon is poured out on these monsters without remorse. Yes, you horrible little beasts. Become my stress relief!

As much as I enjoy the ensuing battle, Tiny doesn't. The monsters are too weak to satisfy his lust for combat, every single one of them crumbles after one impact of his colossal fist. After smashing everything in front of him the poor fellow starts to look somewhat despondent. He continues to battle and slay his way down the tunnel but he doesn't have quite the same verve as he did before.

He just can't seem to muster any enthusiasm unless there is a very real sense of danger.

You some sort of masochist Tiny? Can't enjoy yourself unless you are getting beat up?

You need help man.

Soon a decent section of the tunnel has been completely smashed clean by the two of us as we rampage until no monster is prepared to challenge us. Standing amidst the remains of our victims I am aglow with satisfaction having successfully released some of my inner demons and stress whilst Tiny can only look disappointed.

[Cheer up Tiny! Time to eat!] I tell him.

No sooner are the words out of my mouth than a wide grin plays over that bat face and he immediately starts grabbing hold of Biomass and shoving it into his face. I'm just as hungry as he is at this point so I join in with gusto, ripping into my food with all the strength my ant mouth can muster.

Biomass still tastes disgusting, don't think otherwise, but you can get used to anything after a while, even cramming your face with raw monster body parts.

It's disappointing in a way that the monsters here were such a low level, despite killing twenty or so creatures I wasn't able to level up at all, and I highly doubt I'll be able to gain much Biomass, even if I were to consume all of these creatures.

I do manage to come across three small monster cores though! I put these aside to add to my collection for experimentation. It will be some time before I can evolve so there is no need to rush and soak up every core I find, I'd rather use them to advance my skills first, I still feel that the core engineering skill has a lot of potential.

Nonetheless, Tiny and I continue to eat until our stomachs are fit to bursting, only then do we somewhat sheepishly realise that we were supposed to be securing food for the entire colony, not just ourselves.

....

Got a little distracted there.

It isn't a big deal though, if there is one thing that isn't in short supply during the wave it is spawning monsters. Even whilst we were eating there were monsters spawning out of the walls that we had to destroy between mouthfuls.

I drag myself down the corridor in order to hunt down some more prey and busy myself dragging it back towards the connection to the escape tunnel. After ten minutes I've amassed a small pile of Biomass and Tiny has done likewise after hunting in the other direction.

I head back up the short connecting tunnel in order to summon some workers to come and collect the food. As I do so I notice that the mana vein are already beginning to grow up the connection and into the escape tunnel.

Dammit.

There was no way it wasn't going to happen but it still worries me. Hopefully we will be able to continue digging and outpace the growth of these mana veins, I really don't want to have monsters jumping out of the walls as we dig. The monsters would be quickly killed to be sure, but there is a small chance that a worker would be caught unaware, or that a monster would appear directly underneath the larvae before anyone could stop it.

Dozens of ants have already lost their lives in this wave and we've been very lucky!

"I need some help to collect some food down here!" I announce to the workers after poking my head out of the small connecting tunnel.

At the word 'food', thirty workers immediately stop what there are doing and plunge themselves down the narrow tunnel, pushing me out of the way rudely in their rush to get at the Biomass!

I end up losing my grip and falling once again, this time landing squishily in a pile of monster parts.

...

My dignity!

As the ants crawl over me and start to carve up the Biomass I take a moment to rest. After fighting and then digging and then fighting some more, I really feel like a sleep!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 119: Breaching the surface

After breaking into the smaller tunnel to feast it has been two full days. Two days of nothing but digging and snatching the occasional hour of shut eye.

The colony was able to harvest quite a haul in Biomass from the hunt, bringing up piles of Biomass to feed the Queen, workers and larvae, providing much needed energy for the labours ahead.

Before the colony dug far enough that our little capsule pocket passed completely over it we managed to make a few raids down there, grabbing enough of a food store that it should be sufficient to feed us until we make it to the surface.

The problem was the mana veins. After connecting our escape pocket to that smaller tunnel the mana veins grew and extended into our escape vessel so quickly we weren't really able to do anything about it. After just a few hours they were spreading out beneath our feet and not long after that I could feel heat sources starting to appear.

I did what I could and warned the ants, tried to get extra guards near the larvae, many of whom had reached maturity after the last feed and begun to spin their cocoons, turning into pupae. Despite these preparations we still lose a few hatchling workers and a couple of larva.

Although painful there really wasn't anything more we could have done, the colony had to be fed and without Biomass there was no way those grubs would have lived to reach maturity anyway.

At least, that's I say to console myself.

The veins are growing even faster than they did before, so quickly that we can't out dig them. It isn't long before our entire escape tunnel is lit by the mana light and as we dig forward we just can't seem to leave the things behind. Thankfully we must be high enough in the Dungeon that only weaker monsters are spawning.

Our digging has been slowed considerably over the last two days by large patches of rock that required the application of my infused mandibles to crunch our way through. Currently we have pushed through the second such patch and the going is much smoother, soft earth all the way.

According to my Tunnel map, which increased in level again to three, we shouldn't be too far away from the surface. It's hard to tell since I don't know if the surface is flat or not between the entrance I know of and the location we are digging towards. I mean, there is a slim chance we will dig up underneath a river or even the ocean, which would make me a little salty.

Heh.

I'm no digging expert but I'm hoping that if that were the case we would notice the soil getting progressively more damp as we continued to dig. There has been no sign of such a change so onward we go!

I haven't been completely idle as I dig. Using my sub-brain I've been continuing to practice my mana shaping skills, reaching the mighty level eight! Handling the mana into the various patters has become so much easier than when I started, which isn't to say it still isn't brutally challenging. Having had more practice constructing a few of the patterns though I've noticed that my proficiency has increased along with my familiarity.

Which just goes to show that I should rely solely on the skill to improve myself. Actively practicing a certain pattern will make me better at using it, even if my level doesn't necessarily increase.

I also began to experiment more with external mana manipulation. Damn that is hard! Mana inside my body is so much easier to handle than mana outside of it. Reaching out to grasp it with my mind feels like pulling my thoughts out of my own head and using them as a rope to pull in nearby energy.

I manage to level the skill up once before I go back to my shaping practice. I feel the latter is simply much more profitable right now.

Currently my status looks like this:

Name: Anthony

Level: 8 (core)

Might: 41

Toughness: 29

Cunning: 32

Will: 22

HP: 50/50

MP: 45/58

Skills: Excavation Level 8; Improved Acid Shot Level 5; Advanced Grip Level 1; Shattering Bite Level 2; Advanced Stealth Level 5; Piercing Chomp Level 5; Tunnel Map Level 3; Mana Shaping level 8; Forceful Mana Level 4; External Mana Manipulation Level 2; Mana Sensing Level 4; Core Engineer Level 2; Advanced Exo-Skeleton Defence level 3; Pet Communication Level 2;

Mutations: Focused Eyes +5, Infrared Antennae +5, Restrictive Acid +5, Absorption Legs +5, Infused Mandibles +5, Diamond Carapace +5, Limb Regeneration Gland +5, Pheromone Language Gland +5, Deep Gravity Magic Gland +5;

Species: Mind Ant (Formica)

Skill points: 4

Biomass: 13

A few small improvements to my skills after all of the digging and fighting that has taken place. The gradual improvement of my mana skills is what has left me most pleased. Yapping at Tiny whenever I get bored has also helped improve my pet communication skill, which was an unexpected plus! I can hear him more clearly for a bit further away now.

Ultimately though, I'm really hoping we hit the surface soon. I need a chance to take stock and plan the next course of action for myself and for the colony. I can't make any plans at all until I know what will greet us when we get up there.

Hopefully we wind up in a nice empty forest of something, no civilisation for hours in any direction. Then we could hide and ride out the wave!

I'll keep my six sets of claws crossed!

According to the tunnel map we should be relatively close to the surface now, a little bit further and we could realistically expect to reach it any time. With such an important milestone approaching I decide to share it with the Queen, digging inexhaustibly beside me as always.

"I think we should reach the surface soon! It'll be nice to stop digging for a change."

Without pausing in her work she agrees with me. "Yes, the family needs to rest. I hope no more children are lost as we dig".

Even now she is still primarily worried about her children. I wonder if this is a learned personality of if the Dungeon creates every Queen ant this way?

"Hopefully we won't be attacked any more once we reach the surface and can take a breather" I suggest.

"Do you know what the surface is?" I ask curiously.

"No" she replies.

"So how do you know that it will be good for us to go there?"

"One of my children told me so" I can almost hear laughter in her voice, as if suggesting that her children could be wrong or incorrect in anyway, or would mislead her, is simply not a situation that exists in her mind.

And maybe it doesn't. What sort of ant would lie?

As I'm pondering that situation my mandibles scrape onto something. Dammit! More stone! I'm sick of carving through this stuff, my face hurts like fire already!

Grumbling to myself slightly I start to channel mana into my infused mandibles in order to tear through the stone a bit easier. The Queen backs up slightly to give me more space at the front, when it comes to tearing through the rock my mandibles outperform even hers a little bit, and to be honest I think she secretly enjoys a break, she is the only member of the colony to not have a moment of torpor since the wave broke.

CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH.

Working mechanically I open my mandibles before slamming them closed and ripping into the stone, cutting away at it easily, causing shorn off pieces to crumble away, raining down on my face and bouncing off my carapace.

It feel like these stones are giving way slightly? Perhaps they are a bit loose?

They also seem quite regular for underground rocks...

Ah well.

CRUNCH CRUNCH CRUNCH CLATTER!

After digging for a few more minutes the stones suddenly give way and fall around me, revealing an open space beyond.

Is this!?

Did we make it!?

Excited I push my head forward, forcing it through the gap and pushing away the stones in order to get a better view.

Where are we?!

What greets my eyes is a touch surprising. My compound vision ensuring I get a complete picture at once.

We are inside what looks like a stone building with a high vaulted ceiling. On either side of me long wooden chairs are arranged in rows, all facing the same direction, a crowd of people has recoiled on either side, pressing each other against the walls and looking at my ant face in horror.

All of this is shocking enough.

Just that would have been terrible.

But that isn't what seizes my attention.

Before me, at the front of the building, where all of the chairs are facing is a pulpit with a robed figure pointing at me with powerful emotion twisting his face, and behind that man is a statue.

That statue.

.... Is..... Is that?

Sir Ian McKellan?

Gandalf?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 120: Cultural exchange

There are so many things wrong with this situation. In my peripheral vision I can see humans pointing fingers, whispering fearfully in response to my intrusion. At the dais to the front of the chamber the impressively robed figure recovers from his shock and launches into what sounds like a truly impassioned diatribe, full of furious gestures. The man is practically screaming in his fervour, spittle flying from his lips as he exhorts the crowd.

The people are beginning to respond to him as well, turning to listen, the fear slowly dropping from their faces. Their expressions slowly changing from unease to a rapt attention and then to something I could say is religious ecstasy.

Meanwhile, all I can think about is that stupid statue.

How the heck did they get those features so perfect?!

It isn't even Ian McKellan dressed up as Gandalf, as he did for the Lord of the Rings movies. It's just Sir Ian, albeit with something of a beard. The statue depicts him standing, wizened eyes and lined face

depicting both wisdom that comes with age and the warmth of a kind soul. His arms are outstretched, one reaching forward in invitation and the other held wide, as if gesturing to the wider world.

He is wearing robes, which clearly fits with the character, and upon the robes there are hundreds of lines of text, carved so small and intricate that I can only imagine the effort that went into producing such a statue.

That is so weird. I'm aware that other people from my world have come to this one as monsters, is it possible that some have come as humans also? Perhaps one of them also recognised the voice as that of Gandalf and decided to jokingly use his image to found some sort of religion?

I mean, this is clearly a church of some kind, they even have the stained glass windows, through which I can see the faint rays of something I had barely experienced in this world, sunlight! The windows are incredible though, each depicting a different scene which I assume relates to their faith.

In one I can see miserable humans working and fighting. Next to that there is an image of Gandalf descending from above, words pouring from the cloth of his robe to fall upon a joyous populace. Next to that the window depicts dark creatures, monsters I presume, emerging from the ground where they are met in battle by powerful and sturdy looking humans, lines of text exploding from each battle like special effects.

Actually, looking closely I can see that words have been stitched into the robes of the priest also, lines and lines of them in an impressive looking golden thread. I hadn't noticed at first but as the light shifts over his robe the texts glitters prettily.

They really go all out here in this church! Intricately carved statue, skilfully made stained glass, expensive robes and high vaulted ceiling. The full treatment!

"What is wrong?" I hear the Queen ask.

I must have been still for longer than I thought, causing the Queen to become concerned.

"We've reached the surface, which is good news! We are surrounded by humans though, which I'm not sure is ideal?" I respond.

The Queen thinks for a moment.

"What is a human?" she asks.

Err.

"A living creature... that isn't a monster?" I hazard.

"Hmmm" the Queen ponders.

"Can we eat them?" she eventually asks.

....

.....

Now that is a question. Regardless of whether or not I feel comfortable eating people, something which I am really not sure I want to make a call on in this moment, would they even give Biomass, seeing as they aren't monsters? Do they give experience for killing them?

I wonder how much...

No! Those are living breathing people Anthony! There are women and children in this crowd! Don't think about them as juicy sacks of experience!

Even if they think about you that way....

Wait.

Don't pursue that thought.

Shaking my head I try to focus on the humans whilst I formulate a reply to the patient Queen.

"I'm not sure if we can eat them or not. Wait down there with the family for a moment, I want to make sure we are safe".

Hesitant to make any large movements I begin to slowly push myself further out of the hole I've dug into the floor.

It just so happens my movement seems to correspond with the crescendo of the priest's impassioned speech. The middle aged looking gentlemen has gone completely red in the face and he seems to be struggling for breathe as he continues to raise his volume somewhat beyond what I imaged was normal human capacity.

His face is completely twisted with rapture as he raises his hands high to the heavens, apparently exhorting them for something.

My antennae twitch nervously as I continue to slowly creep out of the hole, bringing my legs out one by one.

My movement doesn't go completely without notice unfortunately and the priest once again fixes his burning gaze upon me. The crowd has become completely captured by his blazing rhetoric by this point. I really wish I could understand the words coming out of his mouth, these people seem to be gripped by a potent religious ecstasy, as if the arrival of a monstrous ant from beneath the floor were the second coming of someone really important.

I'm not sure I'm ready for that sort of pressure!

As the priest once again begins to gesture at me the crowd focus their now uncomfortably hungry eyes upon me once again, all traces of fear gone. As I slowly pull myself out an older lady nearby begins to tear up and falls to her knees, hands clasped together in praise.

Uhh....

Are you misunderstanding something?

Out of nervous habit I start to clean my antennae, running my forelegs over them, much like a person would wipe sweat from their brow.

I'm really not sure how to take this!

My discomfort goes unnoticed by the congregation. The old lady seems to have started a trend as several more people are overcome with emotion and sink to their knees. That seems to settle the matter as within seconds the entire audience has fallen to the floor with an audible thump!

Fully emerged now, I stand in the center of the church, rows of pews on either side as all along the walls people are kneeling hands clasped in prayer facing towards me.

I mean... uh... err..... Hi?

I don't think this is what you guys think it is?

....

I really need to learn mental magic... I didn't think I'd need it this soon!

The priest has completed his sermon at this point. A peace seems to have fallen upon him, the tension gone from his body. He almost seems to radiate an acceptance of heavens will as he too clasps his hands together.

He doesn't kneel though. Slowly and with great dignity he turns towards the altar that stands before the statue. From behind the altar he gathers what appears to be some kind of ceremonial mace which he holds before himself, hands clasped around the haft.

Why a mace though?

Is it an incense stick or something? It does seem to be quite delicately made, too ornate to be a practical weapon. Curiously I flick on my mana sense but I get no response from the item. Doesn't seem to be enchanted or anything.... Is he going to knight me with it? Tap me on the shoulder as a blessing or something?

I'm starting to get more and more worried.

I don't want to offend these people or start a fight or something. Even if these people aren't able to defeat us monstrous ants, they might be able to go and bring people who can! Those soldiers I saw in the tunnels were no joke, I'm not sure I could match up to them even now.

Just play it cool Anthony, don't do anything stupid.

The priest continues to hold his apparently ceremonial mace before him reverentially as he slowly begins to walk down the center of the church towards me. With every step someone from the crowd is overcome with the power of the moment and raises their hands to call out powerfully before sinking back into respectful prayer.

These outbursts become more frequent the closer the priest becomes until he stands before whilst the shouts of the congregation rain down upon him.

Uh.. Hello?

I've grown large enough now that I am basically looking this person in the midriff, which is a great change from when I was born. The hatchlings would only be looking him in the knee. It really is a

ridiculous size for an ant, considering how much longer we are than tall. I would certainly be longer than this guy if he were to lie down.

I wonder how much I weigh these days?

Unknowing of my internal jitters the priest brings his mace before him, face filled with rapture. Slowly he raises it in offering to the heavens as the crowd becomes even more frenzied.

Then he brings it crashing down on my head.

Then I bite his arm off.