

Chrysalis 1111

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Chapter 1111: Coming from the Centre of the Earth Again

I can feel it. I'm not sure exactly how, or why, but I can feel it. Far, far below where I stand, something has shifted. I feel as though I'm standing in a rail tunnel and somewhere out in front, the very first rumblings of the train coming my way can be felt.

My antennae tingle at the intensity of it. It's like a rush of blood to the head. I can practically smell the rush of mana building far below.

[Ever lived through a wave, Mr Odin?] I ask my new demon friend.

We've made our way to the border city where Sarah lives. I thought it would be useful to introduce him to another human survivor like himself, other than me of course. He seems to be someone who's struggled a fair bit in his time on Pangera, so he might get something from a meeting with Sarah, who similarly struggled.

I've been doing great here, so I can't really empathise as well as I'd like to.

Trying to teach Odin what he needs to know is a draining process. There's just so much that he doesn't know, and a great deal that I don't know either. Which are the greatest human kingdoms? Why would I know that? Why would I *want* to know that?

I can say which is the greatest *ant* kingdom in the Dungeon! Why bother with anything other than that?

[A wave?] he replies, acting cagey.

He's always acting cagey.

[Think of it as a period of intense monster spawning. The mana level rises throughout the entire Dungeon, which results in all spawns going absolutely nuts. The number of monsters being created every hour goes up by about a hundred fold. It's quite intense.]

The demon blinks. He has eyelids, dammit. I wish I could blink.

[That sounds... dangerous,] he says, narrowing his eyes.

I can't do that either!

[Of course it's dangerous. Things are going to get wild. What's worse is that monsters from deeper in the Dungeon are able to climb up, since the mana level can sustain them.]

[When is this going to begin?] Odin asks, and I can already tell he's planning how to profit from the situation. His brain is like a mess of gears, always turning, hunting for advantage, no matter what gets fed into them. The more serious the situation I describe, the faster the gears turn.

Just what kind of life has this guy lived?

Ah well. Who am I to judge? He probably had a much harder life than I did, I can cut him some slack. I feel the energy pulsing through the Dungeon beneath my feet.

[Couple of hours?]

[What?!]

Gears churn in the back of his mind like never before and I give him a friendly slap on the back with an antenna to help calm him down.

[Hey, no worries. You're in the safest place a monster could hope to be. Going it alone out there would be a nightmare, but here, me and the family can help support you.]

Odin shifts a little uneasily.

[When you say "family" ... what do you mean, exactly?]

I'm confused.

[Like, we're all related. A good number of us are born from the same mother. If not, then we're born from one of her daughters. You know... a family?]

[Oh. I was thinking about a different type of family.]

What does that even mean? I'm confused, but I don't want to ask him any questions about it, he has a far off look in his eye and I swear I can hear offers that cannot be refused being made. I'll let it go.

There she is!

[Heeeeey, Sarah! How's things going, you grumpy old bear?]

The giant bear trots over to us with a disgruntled expression on her muzzle.

[Don't call me that,] she complains. [I don't even like honey.]

[Sorry, I got carried away. I came over to introduce you to another human monster I bumped into out in the wild.]

I give Odin a nudge, but he doesn't introduce himself. He's too busy staring up at the intimidating ursine in front of him.

[Hey... you going to say your name? Or... anything?]

[Are you the most perfect killing machine the world has ever seen?] he blurts out.

You what, mate?

[Uhhhh,] Sarah is taken aback, blinking slowly as she looks down on the much smaller demon.

I sling a leg around his shoulder and pull him toward me.

[Don't worry about Odin, he hasn't been here long, still a bit miswired in the head,] I tell Sarah across a closed bridge.

[What the heck was that, man?] I admonish the demon over another closed bridge. [Sarah doesn't like fighting and you go on and call her a killing machine the first time you see her? That's messed up! Just

because she's an Asura bear, a nigh unkillable engine of destruction that feeds on rage and pain and destruction, doesn't make her a killing machine! You need to apologise immediately!]

Somewhat shaken by my words, and the fact that I'm shaking him, Odin manages to say sorry and things settle into a more normal rhythm.

[You poor thing,] Sarah says, shaking her head. [I couldn't imagine being born as a demon larva. It's terrible down there for them.]

The little demon seems stunned to have someone actually sympathise with him. He sits still for a little while and then nods.

[Yes, it was difficult. But I was prepared for such an existence. My life on Earth... wasn't simple.]

[Mine was!] I cheerily say and Sarah flicks me a baffled look. [By the by, Odin, you haven't mentioned what type of demon you are yet? Tier five by the feel of your core?]

He hesitates but eventually decides to answer me.

[I just reached tier six not long ago...] he says. [Assassin Demon.]

[So that means you feel a powerful urge to assassinate people all the time? That must be a little weird.]

[... Not really.]

[Cool. Well, welcome to the gang! What?]

The last bit is addressed to Sarah, who is staring at me horrified.

[Anyways, I've got to go. Wave breaking and all that. Sarah, can you help Odin get settled in for a bit? Thanks, byeeeeee!]

[Anthony! Get back here!]

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Chapter 1112: The Wave That Engulfed the World

The Colony is in a frenzy of preparations, still. There are over a million of us within range of the Vestibule now, and honestly, it's a little more difficult than I'm comfortable admitting to hold onto myself in the face of this vast, endless torrent of Will. Impressions and thoughts pour into me like a river dropping into a bucket.

I can't possibly contain it all, yet still it comes, and if I dip my toe in the stream, I risk being swept away in an instant. Were that to happen, who knows how long until I'd be able to find my way out again? The Vestibule grants many profound and powerful blessings, but it isn't without its drawbacks. Evolution has strengthened my mind, which helps me hold out against the influence of the Colony, but it's starting to feel like a race between my tier and the sheer number of siblings I have. I'm struggling in the face of a million, what would a billion do to me?

Better not to think about it.

Well, at least I feel incredibly refreshed and ready for action, which I expect is going to be coming my way very shortly. The wave is on the verge of breaking and the final preparations are playing out all around me. Thousands upon thousands of ants are working on construction projects, walls, defensive formations, training, farms and everything else I can think of. Somewhere within the nest, there's an enormous foundry pumping out armour and enchantments, forging equipment for our soldiers and preparing replacement parts for the inevitable damage that will come. I can feel them through the Vestibule, a thousand hammers striking the glowing hot metal in unison. Emergency hospital facilities are being created everywhere the Colony expects to be fighting, which is everywhere. Healers rush around in a frenzy, trying to prepare as best they can for the inevitable flood of wounded that will come their way.

Mana continues to fill the Dungeon until it feels like a balloon on the verge of bursting. Every surface tingles with contained pressure. My gravity sense is tingling all the time, reading the minute vibrations in the floor and walls. The level of energy flowing through the veins has reached the point where every single one of them has enough power to act as a spawn point.

Demon larvae are going absolutely nuts on the floor of the third stratum, a feeding frenzy the likes of which I hope never to see again. They spawn so fast they've created a layer of teeth and claws a metre deep on the bottom of the stratum. It's more than a little inconvenient since the density of larvae has made it impossible for them to move out of the way as they normally would. To traverse any distance, I need to wade through the mass of fangs who latch onto my legs the second I put them down. It's not so bad for me, my legs are thin and I can hold my body above the fray fairly easily. For Tiny, it's much worse, the poor ape gets his legs shredded every time he takes a step. Invidia has to apply a constant flow of healing magic to the big ape, who doesn't seem to mind that much, but I suspect that's because he's thick.

[Do you sense anything, Master?] Crinis asks.

She's latched onto my carapace, as usual, clinging to my diamond exo-skeleton with her fluidic shadow flesh. Actually... considering she has some immaterial limbs....

[Crisis... you aren't extending yourself *inside* my carapace, are you?]

Silence....

[I think I see something!] she cries.

[Crisis!]

[No, really! Look!]

To get above the fray, we positioned ourselves up on an outcropping of rock that thrusts upward from the stratum floor, giving us a good view of our objective, the path between this layer and the one below. Anything from below that's going to threaten the main ant nest at Roklu is most likely to come through that tunnel, so here we are, ready for a horde and tier eights to stick their noses out. At Crinis' insistence, I turn my attention from her *literal* invasion of my person and down to the opening below.

Much as I hate to admit it... there *might* be something. No monster or horde, I don't think I would have missed that, but something a little more subtle: the light. Normally a flickering, deep red from the many lava flows in the tunnels, the hue emanating from the entrance has grown thicker, more intense.

Then the vibration comes. So faint at first I can barely sense it, even with my incredibly delicate antennae, but I soon pick it up. Is it coming from below? No, not quite. In fact, it's hard to get an exact sense of where it's coming from. I spin my feelers in a wide, slow circle, basically the ant equivalent of rubbing your eyes and peering around. After a few seconds, I confirm my suspicion.

It's coming from everywhere.

[Get ready,] I tell the others tersely. [It's coming.]

As the vibration continues to build, I add, [And grab onto something.]

I may as well have told Tiny that Santa had dropped down the chimney and offered to wrestle. His grin is huge, splitting his face wide as his eyes burn with red light. He can't resist thumping his palms into his chest a few times, the impacts reverberating through the air, demonstrating his incredible strength. Bedecked in a new set of armour and enchanted rings that clip around his biceps, my ape friend is an intimidating sight, doubly so when he starts radiating battle energy like he is now.

Invidia rests on his shoulder, eye blazing with green energy. I'm not exactly sure what it is that he wants right now, but if it isn't a metric butt-ton of monsters to fight, then he's fresh out of luck.

From something only I could sense, the vibration continues to build until everyone can feel it, then keeps growing until the rock beneath our feet is shaking.

CRACK! CRACK!

Stone shatters and I panic, thinking our perch is about to come crashing down, but no, it's far worse. The shaking grows more and more intense until the roof, kilometres above our heads, fractures. Hundreds of tons of rock break loose and rain down, whistling through the air with a horrifying shriek before slamming into the ground, sending a spray of larvae and lava hundreds of metres into the air. I feel a chill, if that had happened overhead....

CRACK!

Aw heck! I snap my focus up and sigh with relief, it wasn't from there, but it was close... where did that come from?

The ground in front of us explodes. I mean... straight up explodes. A fountain of lava blasts into the air, carrying yet more stone high into the air with it, before raining down in a fiery hellstorm.

[Shields!] I snap to Invidia.

I work with him to snap together a defensive barrier to protect us from being cooked alive. Similar things are happening at every entrance to the caverns that I can see, plumes of molten rock jetting up into the air.

Holy... moly....

Then it comes.

Originating from far below, it rolls up and past us like the shockwave from an atomic bomb. A wall of mana, so thick that it's almost physical, sweeps up and vanishes into the distance in under a second, rising to the surface of the planet. With it comes the delighted howls of uncountable monsters, freed from the depths at last.

Come and get it.

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Chapter 1113: The Wave That Engulfed the World pt 2

Morrelia braced herself, though it likely wasn't necessary. Inside her heavysset Legion armour, she could be battered with a tree and barely feel it. Even so, she braced herself.

The wave, when it came, was almost *visible*. A ripple of ultra-dense mana rose through their legs and passed the tops of their heads in a thousandth of a second, sending her reeling. She felt as if she'd been punched in the gut, but a whine from her armour caught her attention. Lifting her arm to check the script on her forearm plate, she could see the enchantments *fizzing*, shortly before her back began to burn.

"VENT!" a nearby Centurion bellowed, sprinting along the front of the line. "Your armour is overloaded!"

She'd been drilled a thousand times on how to handle the more powerful armour and that training kicked into gear now. With practised ease, she triggered the mechanism in her forearm plates, then extended her hands in front of her. All along the line, her fellow legionaries did the same, and after a few seconds, during which the heat within the armour became absolutely unbearable, the excess energy was released through the hands in a blast of heat. With so many performing the vent at the same time, the air in front of the line shimmered with heat haze, but Morrelia didn't care. The cores mounted on the back plates of the armour no longer felt like they were going to melt through the metal and into her back, which was all she cared about at the moment.

What in Pangera was that?

She was desperate to ask, but knew better than to break discipline as they stood in line. If she actually thought about it, she was able to figure out most of it. The wave had broken, that much was clear, and the incredibly dense mana had oversaturated the cores, flooding the enchantments worked into the armour with far too much energy. It normally wouldn't be a problem, but these suits, Potestas armour, had been designed to pull in as much of the ambient mana as they could.

Designed as a halfway point between normal Legionary armour and the invincible Praetorian suits, Potestas armour was intended to help acclimate the wearer to a higher level of mana intake and output. Only those who could successfully utilise the armour to its full potential would have the option to progress to the next stage.

She'd been doing reasonably in training, but the wave had come and everything had to be put on hold, putting a halt to whatever progress she'd been making. Clearly expecting the wave to cause a major disruption, the Legion had pulled everyone who could wear armour and swing an arm to fight, which meant even officer training had been suspended.

Not that Morrelia minded. She'd learn more fighting in the armour than practising on the field, and she'd rather be helping than sitting on her hands in the fifth inside a sealed facility.

"Hold the line, Legionaries! Be mindful of your exhaustion, we won't be relieved from this position for eight hours. If you're too tired to fight, then you're dead! Now BRACE!"

Whatever training Centurions went through to strengthen their throats really worked. She'd never met one who couldn't shatter stone with their voice alone. It was an exaggeration, but not by much.

Mana levels within the suit were still too high, the cores sizzled away on her back, but within tolerance. Morrelia lowered her gauntleted hands to her waist where she pulled free her two swords. Made with the finest metals she could get her hands on, these blades should be able to stand up to the pressure exerted from the Potestas armour, unlike her old ones.

Before them, the tunnel mouth yawned wide. Down that passage lay a warren of caverns and tunnels that stretched for thousands of kilometres when added together. Deep down, if you knew where to go, you'd find an entrance to the fifth. All the monsters that spawned within had very few ways to break out into the open air of the fourth stratum, this tunnel being one of them, which was precisely why the Legion maintained a base here in defence of Goylin, a nearby city.

For the next eight hours, there would be no more drills, no more training, no more lessons, no more sparring, no more repetitive skills practice. For eight glorious hours, there would be nothing but fighting. She couldn't wait.

"I can't believe you're smiling," the Legionary on her right remarked.

She turned to face him. Ertan, she thought his name was.

"I can't believe you're not," she grinned fiercely.

He just shook his head.

"You're nuts," he observed, then looked forward into the chasm. The air was shifting in there, the roar and clash of monsters had become a constant barrage of noise. It was getting closer. "Having said that, I think we need a little bit of crazy in the current environment."

"Well, I'm happy I can contribute something," she replied, slamming her visor down.

Her hands practically itched to start swinging, but she had to be patient for just a bit longer. Only a few seconds later, her endurance was rewarded as the first monsters burst out of the cavernous tunnel mouth. Clawing and biting at each other, the two beasts, one a golden lion whose coat gleamed with a metallic shine, the other a sinuous jade dragon, ignored the arrayed soldiers as they battled against each other. That turned out to be a mistake as the lion was knocked backwards towards the line, whereupon it was slashed a dozen times in an instant. Deprived of its prey, the dragon hissed furiously and rushed forward to secure Biomass, only to receive a similar end.

Sadly, neither had come close enough for Morrelia to strike. She did her best not to bounce up and down on the spot like a jittery trainee, but her body was absolutely bursting with energy.

When the tidal wave of beasts burst forth and began to hurtle across the hundred metre gap between the Legion and the tunnels, she almost sighed with relief.

"HOLD!" bellowed the Centurion.

Oh come on....

"ATTACK!" came the call.

Finally!

She burst forward, dashing with all the strength her mana enhanced muscles could provide. As if shot from a catapult, she rocketed at the enemy, wind howling past her ears, a rictus grin frozen on her face. She planted both feet on the ground, steadied herself for a fraction of a second, then unleashed her Twin-Blade strike. Two arcs of pure light slashed through the air, cutting deep into any monster unfortunate enough to get in her way.

All the little details she'd struggled with in the training yard seemed to fall away as she fell into the rhythm of battle. The cores sucked in mana endlessly, pumping it into her muscles and reinforcing the armour itself. Where before, she'd struggled to regulate the flow of energy, drawing too much into her body, or too little, now it simply *worked* as she didn't even think about it.

"Come and get it!" she howled, activating her Berserk Skill.

The world instantly dyed itself a shade of red as she felt the fury bubble up in her mind. Air whistled through her clenched teeth as she stalked forward, blades twirling in her hands. It was time for the Legion to do what they did best.

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Chapter 1114: The Wave That Engulfed the World pt 3

Granin stirred as the wave washed over him.

"W-was that?" Corun asked breathlessly.

"It was," the triad leader stated.

Torrina sucked in a breath, letting the shock register on her face instead of her usual stoic expression.

"This is a lot sooner than we expected," she said after calming herself. "Are you sure?"

Her teacher shot her a slightly annoyed look and she looked down. Granin snorted.

"You're too smart to ask a question like that," he scolded her, "we just got punched in the face by a wall of mana. Of course I'm sure."

"I know. I suppose I just didn't want it to happen now. I don't think I'm ready."

"Nobody is ready for what's coming. They might have spent three thousand years preparing themselves, but they still aren't ready."

At least we won't be the ones to pit ourselves against the overwhelming strength of the Ancients. I'm happy to leave that to those with far more hubris than I.

Corun warred with the sense of excitement and trepidation. World shaking events would take place, and soon. A wave the likes of which the world hadn't seen since the Time of Rending was building. It was

possible the events of the past would repeat themselves, with the Ancients causing devastation on a global scale. Naturally, he was nervous.

"How long do you think?" he asked Granin and the old Shaper scrunched up his face. "Your best guess."

"As far as we know, Yarrum is yet to wake, so it stands to reason that there are others still sleeping. That being the case, the mana level isn't high enough, but it's getting close. If I were to guess, I'd say that those who aren't awake are stirring at the least, and those who are already risen are moving around, reaching out. This wave isn't going to be big enough, but the next one?"

He shrugged.

"Who knows? The wave after this, or the one after that? Less than a year is my guess. If we don't have a solution by that time, then they'll take matters into their own hands."

They all knew what it meant when the Ancients took matters into their own hands. Cataclysm, catastrophe, extinction.

"I hope Anthony makes it in time," Torrina said, and Granin chuckled.

"Not eager to meet the Worm in person?" he said, and she thought for a moment before she shook her head.

Coming face to face with one's god might be a happy occasion for some religions, but amongst the cults, it meant coming well within eating range of an all-powerful monster. Granin imagined it may be a very moving experience, to see Yarrum with his own eyes. A creature of legend and unfathomable might, capable of smashing all the golgari had built to nothing if he so chose.

I'd be awed, he thought, not for long, but I'd be awed.

The Worm was perhaps the second most ravenous of the Ancients. There would be little point keeping Granin alive, so he'd be food.

It might still be worth it.

"We can only hope so," he said, returning his mind to the current conversation. "Our only chance of staving off disaster is to present a new Ancient. That was the task laid on the founders of the cults, and we are running out of time to deliver. If we can meet their expectations, there's at least a chance they don't destroy the world."

"He's still only tier seven," Corun fretted, and Torrina raised a brow.

'Only' tier seven? Anthony was perhaps the first tier seven ant in the history of Pangera, and a mythic monster at that. Considering where he'd started, it was a remarkable journey. In fact, recalling he hadn't even been born amongst his Colony, but in the tunnels by himself, it was beyond a miracle he'd survived to this point. She understood what he was saying, though. Compared to what he needed to be, there was still a long way to go.

"You may not need to worry too much on that front," Granin said. "This wave is going to be like nothing we've ever seen before, and the next will be even worse. If you want to train a monster, you couldn't ask for better conditions than this."

He pointed down below. From their vantage point high in the fortress nest below Roklu, the three had a huge range of view over the plains below. Torrina and Corun leaned forward to see what he was pointing at.

Chaos. Utter, total, chaos. The Plains of Leng had exploded in activity, lava flooding across the landscape as demons rampaged endlessly. As they watched, it didn't die down, it only grew worse, and worse, and worse. Larger demons began to climb up *through* the belching streams of lava, fighting and tearing at each other the moment they met.

The air, a constant swirl of ash and smoke, *thickened*, to the point where the golgari felt their lungs burn when they breathed. Not from the smoke, but from the faint tinge of pure destruction in the air, now strong enough to begin to unmake their bodies from the inside.

"We may need to create filters in order to breathe," Granin harrumphed.

Corun slapped his forehead.

"Actually, the Colony already made some. I forgot to bring them."

"You'll be the death of me one day, Corun."

"Sorry!"

Torrina stared down, aghast. She'd heard that the third stratum was terrible during a wave, but *this*?

"It can't be this bad every time...." she said.

Her teacher shook his head.

"It isn't. And it's going to get worse. Things are just getting started."

The ants would be fighting on so many fronts against this wave that she wondered if even they could succeed. Despite all the preparation and thought they'd put in, could a young race, not even two years old, really fight back against odds like this?

With an Ancient on their side... they could. If they had one of them, they could do anything at all.

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Chapter 1115: Spitting in the Face of the Storm

Well ain't this something. Monsters and lava boil forth in equal measure from the tunnels below and an absolute free-for-all has broken out across the Plains of Leng. Well, a bigger one. Although, to compare this scene to the normal endless fighting between larvae is to compare a volcano eruption to a candle. It's to the point where I might have to rejig my plans.

My original thought had been to bottle up and annihilate all the monsters coming through the tunnels, but that's clearly impossible. There's too many of them, and more are just clawing their way out of the dirt at random locations across the floor. Plus, with all the lava bursting forth, who knows how many connections there's going to be between this layer and the one down. Some of the demons can swim through the molten rock like fish, so there's no hope of preventing access to this area.

[All right, gang... we might need to hang here for a moment as I adjust my strategy.]

A pause.

[M-master?] Crinis says.

A pause.

[Tiny's already gone, hasn't he?]

[Y-yes.]

DAMMIT.

I'd been looking down and forward, so I hadn't noticed him leap off the back of the rocky outcrop we're perched atop. How did he manage to be so moronically stupid, but also sneaky about it?!

[Where the hell are you going, Tiny? Get back here!]

My pet bat-faced gorilla roars gleefully, already neck deep in demons, flailing around with punches too fast to be seen with the naked eye. Weaker monsters simply explode where his fists connect, whereas stronger ones are catapulted by the force, collapsing in a heap dozens of metres away.

[Ah heck. Let's get down there then.]

May as well at this point. I *could* order him to come back, but he'd just sulk for ages, and I'm not in the mood to put up with his nonsense. Preventing him from going to a fight is bad enough. Pulling him out of a fight *after* it already started? Ugh. Terrible. I flex my legs and start walking down the face of the rock, gripping tight to the stone with my claws. Really need to train my Grip skill. I keep getting heavier, and not raising the rank of this ability. The loss of mobility is really starting to hurt my pride as an ant. I'm not even sure I could walk upside down right now.

I mean, I can float around with gravity magic, so I don't need to, but that's not the point!

I carefully make my way down and jump the final ten metres, landing heavily. Just from the force of my descent, a pile of demons is sent reeling, and then I'm on them.

How about a CHOMPI?!

Mandibles gleaming, I lunge forward, letting my jaws snap shut with irresistible force. Any tier four or weaker demons simply aren't able to stand up to that. They are cleaved, and I move on, looking for new targets.

[Come on, Crinis, time to get off my back.]

[... Are you sure?]

[Yes! Why wouldn't I be sure?!]

[What if you vanish or something? I need to be here to protect you!]

Not this again....

I reach back with one antenna and prod the black blob stuck to my carapace.

[Come on. Off. Shoo. I'll be fine. You're the one who needs experience. Get out there and find every tier five and six you can. Go on, get!]

Despite her reluctance, I continue to prod her until she finally gives up and peels herself off of me. Or from within me... *shudder*. Freed from her carapace hugging, Crinis almost despondently gathers her flesh and reveals herself to the monsters around. Three mouths, each a terrifying maw lined with glittering teeth that surround a void of disintegrating death, are only the most obviously terrifying thing about her. Once she gets going, a thousand tentacles burst forth, creating a forest of dark limbs that begin to snatch up prey, scooping them into her yawning maws or enveloping them and activating her barbed spines.

Even worse are the ghostly tendrils she keeps closest to her body. Whenever a monster draws too close, they dive straight into its head, passing directly through their flesh, and begin to work their dark purpose.

Crinis, despite everything, only grows more and more scary as she evolves. What on Pangera is she going to be like at tier seven?

For his part, Invidia knows his role well. He blasts any concentration of likely targets with his explosive magic, or lasers the hell out of any tier six he finds, whilst also acting as support to Tiny and Crinis. Mostly Tiny. The little demon has continued to diligently perform the role I had given him after he joined the group, healing and shielding for my offense-oriented ape.

Now that I've let him off the leash a little, he appears to revel in his freedom to unleash his devastating capabilities to their fullest extent. The noise, which was already catastrophic, rises to another level as his potent detonations rock the area every few seconds.

And yet, despite their incredible strength, the best efforts of my three powerful allies are like trying to push back the tide with a bucket. The third stratum has descended into complete and utter chaos. Every direction I can see (which is most of them) is absolute bedlam. Fighting everywhere, all the time, without pause. If anything, the level of insanity continues to *escalate*.

I clack my mandibles a few times in wonder. I knew it was going to be bad... but this? This is way over the top. The Colony has prepared meticulously for this wave, but I'm starting to wonder if all of that effort is going to be enough. Well, may as well do my bit here and now. I can offer some widespread firepower to the situation.

Time to see what my Gravity magic can do on a larger scale!

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Chapter 1116: Spitting in the Face of the Storm pt 2

I'm tempted to just start throwing gravity bombs out willy-nilly, but that would just make a chaotic situation even more absurd, so I resist the urge. Who knows what might happen if massive detonations started ringing out all over the place?

Besides, with my current form, I'm more than capable of causing plenty of destruction without relying on my most powerful spell. After all, there are hundreds of thousands, if not over a million ants within

range of my Vestibule right now. That means I can use the energy of the Altar a heck of a lot more liberally than before!

MUAHAHAHAHA!

Prepare yourselves, demons! You are about to feel my wrath!

Chuckling to myself, I draw deep on my gravitational mana, folding and weaving it into the incredibly complex forms required to utilise this powerful and rare energy.

The gravity domain flickers into existence and expands outwards from me. Fuelled by the power of the Altar, the crushing force is magnified multiple times, but just for good measure, I compressed the mana as much as possible to give it that extra OOMPH.

Naturally, every weaker demon caught within the range is completely flattened and forced to wiggle on their bellies like worms. The larvae are in an even more pitiful state; barely able to move, let alone fight, all they can do is try to escape the range of my spell. For the new ones being spawned on the floor, it's even worse, since they can't even rise out of the stone properly.

I'd love to sympathise, but it's kind of nice to be able to move around without having those little guys gnawing on my legs constantly. Which was my aim.

With the annoying things out of the way, I can get down to business! I draw out even more gravity mana and begin to compress and form gravity bolts. The most basic of all spell forms, the bolt is a simple ball of power that takes on the properties of the mana you use to form it. Normally, this spell will increase the force of gravity on any creature hit with it, or decrease it if I invert it. With the aid of the altar, though?

I pick out a target, a tier four demon rampaging nearby, just beyond the range of my domain. Looks pretty strong... let's see how well it can stand up to the pressure.

As it turns out... not that well.

After being hit with two bolts, the monster is still standing. Barely. Quivering in place, its whole body shaking under the strain, the demon is unable to defend itself and soon falls in combat to the other monsters swarming around it.

Dang. Looks like the gravity bolt has been enhanced several times over as well. Normally, it wouldn't work all that well against a monster as physically strong as that one, which is what led to me largely abandoning the spell in the first place. Clearly, it's back on the menu.

Time for another test! The good old gravity bola! A returning classic!

I've not experimented with the bola spell form all that much, it's pretty niche, but the gravity bola does have some nice effects.

The gravity bola doesn't really *impact* a target, but rather anchors it to the spot by using the gravitational energy contained inside to pull at the creature that was hit.

And when I enhance it with the Altar....

My target doesn't see the spell coming, too busy leaping at its prey, another demon already engaged in a duel. The bola, which I angle high to descend essentially straight down through the target, pierces directly through the demon and then smacks straight into the ground.

The unfortunate monster doesn't seem to notice, at least, not immediately, still flying through the air, jaws wide open. Then it appears to slam directly into a wall, in mid air. All momentum lost, the monster slingshots back to the spot in which the bola has anchored itself with incredible speed.

[You have slain...]

[You have gained experience.]

Seriously? Oof. Sorry, monster. I didn't mean it.

Still, it's nice to see these old spells coming back into use again! They don't use that much energy, which is nice, and are far easier to weave than the more complex workings I've learned recently.

Whatever the Altar is providing to the spells is giving the kick they need to overcome the stronger monsters down here, which means I can get the same effect I'm used to without having to pour in a much larger amount of gravitational mana.

So nice!

Of course, there are new toys to play with, too. Well, one in particular. With my newfound mastery of Gravitational Mana, I was finally able to select the specialisation Skill that gave me access to the gravitational mana construct, meaning I can convert ambient energy into gravitational energy whenever I want! Well... when I practise the construct, I'll be able to anyway.... For now, relying on my gland is fine!

Purchasing the Skill also unlocked the fundamental and foundational gravity magic spell, giving me the ability to create gravitational fields and bend them to my will!

Clacking my mandibles with glee, I reach deep into my gravity magic gland and call forth a tide of energy. With over a dozen mind constructs running assistance for me, my main brain expertly handles the dense flows of power, forming the gravity well just over my head.

It wouldn't be a proper test if I didn't do it at max power, right?

Gweheheheh.

Interestingly, some of the stronger demons, tier five and above, sense the power I've drawn forth and begin to flee, putting distance between themselves and the ridiculous, overwhelming mana that they sense.

Of course, it's too late.

Power floods into the Well until I tie it off. All that remains is a thin stream of energy connecting me to the ball of power distorting the light over my head. Until its energy is exhausted (or I supply it with more), the spell will respond to my command, applying its field to whatever and wherever I decree!

Powered by a huge chunk of Will from the Altar, the Well pulses ominously and I briefly wonder if I should even unleash it....

Ah, it'll be fine.

All I did was create a gravity well with the highest amount of mana, which I condensed to the highest point and then pumped it full of energy from the Altar. What could possibly happen?

The Well spreads out to cover a kilometre in all directions within an instant.

Here we go!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1117: I May Never Eat Pancakes Again

The power wielded by the Eldest, that of Gravity, was examined by the Mage caste many times. After all, it had shown incredible destructive power which could prove vital to the Colony, especially in times such as these, when the Eldest is asleep.

However, research was difficult to perform. Learning the Skill was difficult, so some mages were tasked with purchasing the Gravity Mana Organ and experimenting with its use. Despite our best efforts, pursuit of this magic was eventually abandoned.

To produce even the weaker effects that the Eldest was able to create was difficult for those who tried, and the more advanced spells were never replicated in any way. Even now, the Colony cannot simply produce high tier Mages whenever it chooses. The same amount of resources distributed over a wider number of ants will create a greater outcome in the long run.

For that reason, we believe the Eldest would support our decision.

- Excerpt from an internal memo of the Colony Mage Antministration. Written by Coolant

That was... disgusting.

Seriously disgusting. I mean. Giga disgusting.

I wasn't sure what to expect when I spread the Gravity Well out over such a large area. I mean, I'd packed it full of as much power as I could manage, but that's a massive amount of space to cover. From edge to edge, that's a circle with a two kilometre diameter! There must have been tens of thousands of demons packed into that space.

Forget that, probably well over a hundred thousand considering how many larvae there were.

I figured it might have turned out as a larger, weaker version of the domain spell I already had active. Maybe force the lower tier monsters down to the ground and hinder the stronger ones a bit. If that was all that happened, I would have been fine with that. Pleased, even.

Instead.

Shudder.

Pancaked. Just... completely pancaked. If you are wondering what, *exactly*, was pancaked. Everything.

The Well discharged with an almost visible burst of power, followed shortly by pretty much every monster within the radius getting flattened in an instant. After that, the tunnels below us began to collapse and I hurriedly shut the thing off before I was sent on a one way ticket to the layer below.

Which leaves me in my current position, surrounded on all sides by flattened demon-cakes. For some reason... I'm just not hungry.

[You have slain...]

[You have gained experience.]

[You have slain...]

[You have gained experience.]

SHUT UP! Dammit Gandalf! Are you going to carry on like that for an hour? Even stacking the announcements on top of each other isn't enough... they just keep on coming!

I haven't had to put up with the wizard's voice this much since the termite nest incident. Enough is enough already!

[Master?! Is everything alright?]

[Ah. No problems here Crinis. Just wanted to work on some things.]

[Work on some things? I was worried the floor would collapse!]

[Don't come back here! That's an order!]

I can already see a tentacle stretching toward me from a distance. If I give her a chance, she'll latch onto me in a heartbeat, dragging the rest of her Shadow Flesh behind to glomp onto my carapace.

The sneaky tentacle wobbles in the air for a moment before reluctantly retreating.

[I-if you insist,] she sulks.

Can't let my guard down. From what I can see, the three of them are doing well fighting as hard as they can. The endless demon swarm isn't going to let up... ever, so there's plenty of targets for them. The number of tier five prey in particular is much higher than I expected. That's some good experience right there. I mean, they lose half of it due to the tier penalty, but it all adds up!

Now, what am I going to do with this endless field of...

Never mind. It's full of larvae already. Oi! They're snacking on my Biomass! I'm sure there were at least a couple of stronger monsters within range. If a bunch of baby demons chow down on my tier six prey, I'll throw up in rage!

I quickly start to scurry around, looking for the best Biomass, and scoff what I can. Sadly, the bulk of it has already been consumed by the ravenous larvae who boil forth from the ground in an unending stream. Before long, they're a metre deep again and all signs of what I'd done are gone. Including all the Biomass.

Just too many hungry mouths!

Well, I got a little something out of it, but I can rule this kind of wide application of the Gravity Well out for Biomass farming purposes. Considering there were precious few higher evolution monsters around, I didn't get much in the way of experience either, despite the ridiculous numbers. I get the feeling larvae kills are basically being rounded down to nothing for me now.

Shame.

Well, as the demons continue to pile up, I suppose I should start to fight them in a more normal way. Time to apply the ol' chompers. Wading into the thick of it, I begin to lash out left and right. As a potent, tier seven monster, there isn't much that can stand up to me around here. At least at the moment.

We continue to battle against the wave, a futile endeavour if ever there was one. With so many ants around, I can't even get tired. Despite biting constantly, my face doesn't even get sore. The Altar is packed full of energy, my muscles are humming with energy, my core is brimming with power.

I could probably fight like this right up until I get bored of it!

Which... isn't that long. These monsters are just no challenge, regardless of how many there are!

Well, that's not true, if they turned around and fought me together, it'd be a pain, but caught up in the frenzy, they're chomping at whatever is closest.

Thankfully, it seems like my fears of boredom won't last that long. Something is going on around here.... Something to do with the mana. It always thickens as a wave goes on, but this... this feels different. The ebb and flow of the energy around me is weird. Almost like... it's being influenced or something.

The thought is preposterous, though. What could possibly shift mana on such a scale as that?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1118: Swirling Will of the Demon God

Strong monsters are known to have an 'aura' of power that affects those who draw too close. This can begin to manifest quite early on, as the key element in determining the strength of such an aura is the disparity in strength between the one producing the effect and the one receiving it. Even tier three monsters have been observed being able to suppress and terrify tier one monsters through this aura alone.

However, such cases are rare, and minor in the grand scheme of things. When scaled up to apply to the more powerful monsters in the Dungeon, such as Mythic level creatures, the suppressive effects of aura become that much greater. Not to mention easier to notice.

At this stage, a monster is able to dominate its weaker competitors through sheer force of Will.

An interesting question is: What could be the source of this Aura? Despite all of my study and expertise, I do not know the answer. My main theory is that it comes down to strength of core, as so many things do when it comes to monsters, but this cannot be replicated in tests reliably. Usually, a monster with a stronger core will produce a more domineering aura than one with a weaker core, but not always.

With this aura, a monster can achieve many things, including forcing weaker creatures to submit to its will.

Though of course, such submission is impossible when a stronger will is already in place.

- Excerpt from the personal notes of Granin Lazus.

As the mana picks up, so do the demons. Their frenzied battling only grows more intense as even greater numbers begin to emerge from the caverns below. Including a few bigger beasties.

I want to go and engage these new, tastier targets, but something is holding me back. Well, it's not hard to work out what it is, the giant, swirling currents of mana overhead are giving me the heebie jeebies.

Wait... was that an eye?

For a moment, it felt like the patterns overhead took a shape, but just for a moment, before it swirled out of control again. That's even more terrifying than before!

[Invidia, are you seeing this?]

He's got even more sensitivity to mana than me, despite being an evolution down.

[*I isssssss.*]

[Any idea what the heck it is?]

The little demon's eye blazes with green light. Clearly whatever it is, he doesn't like it.

[*It issss the Demon God. He whisssspersss to me.*]

This guy again?

[Tell him to get stuffed,] I snort, indignant.

Where does this Ancient get off thinking he can order my loyal allies around from within their minds? Certified, grade-A, bum-head if you ask me.

[*I sssshall.*]

Good. At least there's one demon out there who isn't afraid to tell Arconidem what they think of him. Seriously though, what on Pangera is the demon doing?

Overhead, the mana swirls more and more aggressively, an ocean of power right above my head, coalescing into a storm of energy. The currents twist in and around themselves, and for one terrifying moment, I think the Ancient is casting a spell... from the centre of the Dungeon.

[How is this possible?] I ask Invidia. [You can't reach out and grab hold of energy hundreds, if not thousands of kilometres away from yourself!]

At least, I hope you can't. If it *can* be done, then I'm a hell of a lot further behind the Ancients than I thought.

[*He issss working through the demonsssss,*] the envy demon hisses. [*Extending hissss Will through them.*]

As in... some sort of reverse Vestibule? An organ or some kind of evolutionary benefit that pushes his Will into every demon-type monster? That's disgusting!

All at once, the energy snaps into place and I find myself staring up into the horrifying visage of the Demon God himself.

At least, that's who I assume it is. If not, there's a demon larva out there getting way too big for its boots.

Four eyes, wide, many-toothed mouth, all rendered in particular detail by the gathered mana in the air above. To my eyes, there is nothing to see, but to my mana sense, an Ancient is glaring down at me.

I glare back up at him.

Rrrright up until I feel an overwhelming presence slam into me. I reel as if hit by a truck, my minds going fuzzy, all of them, all at once. I snap my mandibles together savagely, forcing myself back to awareness, and dig my claws into the rock below.

"You got a problem? Come down here and catch these face hands!"

I'm not sure if the Demon God speaks pheromone, and luckily, I don't have to find out. By the time I get my bearings about me again, the apparition is gone.

The gathered power begins to disperse, thickening the mana around us. No longer in the presence of their patriarch, or whatever, the demons go back to their normal level of chaos, which is still a heck of a lot of chaos.

I'm just left wondering what that was all about.

Arconidem stuck his nose up here to take a peek? At what?! Maybe just inspecting the third stratum, which is basically his stomping ground, I suppose.

Not for long, buddy. The hostile takeover by the ant empire is well underway!

The ground in front of me erupts in a catastrophic explosion of lava and stone, revealing the massive, burning demon beneath.

Oh... snap!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1119: Sudden Assault!

Advant told me I should "Preserve my thoughts for future generations of the family," so... I guess this is me... doing that? To be honest, she's been hassling me to do this for ages. Only after going on about the "immense value such a record will hold for the young" and how "inspiring such a document would be to the hatchlings" did I agree, but I'm seriously regretting now that I've started.

Is it really necessary to preserve my thoughts anyway? Everything I've ever done is depicted (somewhat) accurately in a stupid statue somewhere.

Actually, I want that on the record! I NEVER asked for all the murals and statues! In fact, I tried to get them banned! So much for respecting the wishes of the Eldest...

Alright, if you are smelling this scent recording, then here are the words of the Eldest, recorded to further the prosperity of the Colony and to motivate the youth!

Firstly, I want you to poke and bite Advant everytime you see her. Not hard, but enough to be annoying and to hamper her in whatever she does. Yes, that includes during Torpor. May she never know a moment's peace.

Second. Live freely, be true to yourself, and cherish the bonds of family that tie us together. That's the whole point, right?

- Excerpt from "The Recording of the Eldest"

Addendum: For the record, I believe the Eldest was joking. Please stop biting me.

- Added at a later date by Advant.

[I see you, little worm!]

[Excuse me? You calling me a *worm*? You wanna get chomped?!!]

A suffocating aura of power wells up as the demon rises from the layer below and I get a clean look at it. I kind of wish I hadn't.

Big, bigger than me even, with smoke and fire rolling off its shoulders in waves. Four arms that each end in thick, wickedly curved claws, and a face that not even a mother could love. Unless that mother was a similar-looking demon.

Something like a cross between a jackal and a flaming pit, the monster's appearance is... unpleasant. Let's go with that.

What's more, this powerful presence, battering against me... it reeks of violence and all-consuming flame. This dude has to be one of the tier eights. I've never met such a powerful monster before.

[The Demon God has led me to you!] The demon roars gleefully. [You and your kind will be excised from this place, in HIS name!]

[We kind of like it here. If you want to kick me out, come and try it.]

I push back against the demon with the force of my will, and I swear the air between us begins to crackle. Even crushed on all sides by so many scurrying little larvae, the little demons do their level best to get the heck out of our way.

All of my minds spin up to full activity, I'm holding nothing back. I seriously wish I still had a full tank of Gravitational Mana to work with, but I'll have to make do with what I've got. I call into existence as many mind constructs as I can support with my current abilities, dozens of the things. I reach out and seize control of the surrounding mana, drawing it into me in a constant stream.

Mandibles flex, legs brace. I start to channel gravitational mana and my carapace thrums to life. My Vestibule thunders with an endless river of power that fills the Altar to bursting. I'm ready to rumble.

[Gladly!]

I expect the demon to rush at me, those claws are clearly designed for both ripping, and tearing, but it doesn't happen. Instead, he heaves in a breath and I feel like the air pressure around me drops precipitously.

Then he breathes out.

My antennae go rigid as an image of a particularly crispy future blasts into my brain and before I can think, my body is already moving. Energy flows from the Altar as I dash, my ten ton body flickering to the side and reappearing a hundred metres away.

Just in time for what I can only describe as an explosion contained in a jet of flame to rocket past me, incinerating everything caught in its path.

[Master! Are you alright?!] Crinis cries in my mind.

[I'm fine! You stay over there. That's an order! This isn't someone you can tangle with. That goes for you, Tiny, and you, Invidia as well. Keep yourselves well clear.]

Ah.

"Protectant, get your squad the hell away from me. If you didn't get fried by that blast, you might be the next. Nothing for you to do here."

I hope they listen to me. If not, there won't be much of a future in store for them. This monster is serious business!

Fully upright, this demon must be standing over thirty metres tall. Each step is that of a giant, crunching into the stone with the force of the impact.

[Still alive, little worm? Good!]

[You're gonna regret that....]

Eat Gravity Bomb!

HOOOOOOOOOOWL!

A smaller bomb this time, thrown together as quickly as I could, but infused by the Altar, screams into life. The dark sphere rockets through the air toward the massive demon, who grins and blasts it with fire.

I mean... sure? Go for it, champ.

I kick my legs into gear and start circling around. If there's anything left of him when the bomb is done, I want to be in position to do some serious chomping. Too many have underestimated this spell. I'm sure this moron is the... same?

When my senses report to me what is happening, I tell them to go back and double check, but the second opinion turns out to be the same as the first. The dense mana contained within my spell... is being eroded by that fire!

Holy moly! There's something off about that demonflame, seriously off!

When the bomb makes contact, it's shrunk to less than half what it was when I fired it. Luckily, that's still enough to cause some serious damage.

I can't see exactly what happens when the dark sphere expands to cover the demon, sucking in and annihilating everything lost inside, but I imagine he ain't happy.

With all the power burned out of it, the bomb itself isn't as impressive as I would have liked, far weaker than the one I hit Grokus with, even accounting for the Altar. No way he's dead.

The flickering ball of doom finally fades away, and sure enough, the massive demon is still standing. What's more, he's still grinning.

That, is not good.

Chrysalis

Chapter 1120: Battle of the Titans

For a brief moment, I'm completely stunned. I've gotten so used to the Gravity Bomb being infallible that I expected even a half baked effort to do some serious damage.

Even after this big moron somehow burned the power out of it, I *still* thought he'd lose an arm or something. I might have been overly reliant on my trump card....

That's fine. I can still hit him with a bigger one. Or use my new mastery and summon a Gravity Well to squish this pest flat! Or... I would, if I still had a full tank of the sweet, sweet purple mana.

I grit my mandibles and peel off ten mind-constructs to get working on making me some more gravity mana. My main mind is far superior at handling this type of spell than the sub-brains and their constructs, but I need that main mind for casting right now.

Not for the first time, I kick myself for being too lazy to practise the mana construct enough. Working my way through a new mana producing construct is always a mind breaking exercise, and the gravity version is right up there with the omni-elemental construct in terms of complexity.

This is going to be taxing, but I don't see a way out of it. I pretty much always have an omni-elemental construct humming along these days and I crank it into action now, churning out ice mana which I start to condense. I'm sure I'll be needing it soon.

[An interesting thing, worm! Did you think that Torrifex, the herald of Arconidem, would be crushed by such weak magic?]

The haughty is pretty much dripping from this demon and his description of my bomb spell as weak is enough to grind my mandibles.

Weak, he says. You'll be getting served something a little more spicy in a minute. In the meantime....

[Let's see if you can keep talking when you get a taste of this!]

I check my spacing, then *dash* forward, drawing on the Altar as I do. The world blurs around me and I find myself standing not ten metres away from the enormous demon.

When I stretch to my full height, extending my legs to lift my body up, I stand around fifteen metres tall, enough to chomp this monster right around the waist, which is what I aim to do.

Void Chomp!

Empowered by the Altar, the Skill howls to life, dragging my opponent forward as the mighty jaws of black light close with inexorable force. Again, the demon doesn't act as I expect, and instead launches its own strike against mine.

Four demon arms glow with ominous red light, the claws flexing before he slashes forward, sending four slashes that scream through the air straight toward me. I can almost hear the air wail with despair as those claw marks streak toward me, visions of violence and fire trailing in their wake.

That may be a little impressive, but do you really think you can beat the Void Chomp with this nonsense? Keep dreaming!

My jaws slam shut with a deafening roar, everything before me consumed by the power of my Altar infused chomp. When the two Skills clash, a shockwave of power explodes outward, blowing my antennae back and sending larvae flying like leaves in the face of a hurricane. Rock disintegrates from the force of the blast, sending dust and stones flying into the air and smashing into my carapace.

Holy moly!

Still, I know that the Void Chomp won out. I could feel it go through, so the demon copped far worse than I did in that blast. Heh. Even if this idiot is tier eight, he's got to be missing a leg at least.

[How do you like them apples?!] I demand.

[You surprise me, worm. I am not often surprised.]

Before the dust can clear, my antennae blare a warning and I once again flicker to the side before two massive clawed hands sweep through where I had been standing.

Then the demon is revealed again.

Turns out I *did* do some damage! Which is good! But the demon looks seriously peeved. Which is bad. However, he's lost a chunk from his side. Which is good! The chunk appears to be healing, filled with a rapidly congealing mass of lava. Which is bad.

Aren't there two others, just as strong as this guy? That's going to be a problem! I kind of assumed I'd be able to explode them using the Altar. Considering how easily I dealt with the tier sevens, I'd thought that these would be a bit harder, but not overly difficult.

This is proving to be a heck of a lot more difficult!

[Can I interest you in a second course?!]

Void Chomp!

Energy thunders through the Altar, fed constantly by the unceasing and endless Will of the Colony. It's impossible that this demon would be able to stand against the power of my family!

Although I probably shouldn't tell him what I'm planning to do in advance....

Unwilling to go head to head with the chompers knowing he'll lose, the demon leaps above and brings four claws down in a savage strike that slams down into my carapace.

Or does it? Are you striking me, or are you striking my afterimage? In this case, mostly me.

My super-monstrous reflexes kick into gear and I adjust the angle of my carapace, but in that split second, the demon can't see that I've moved. The Black Hole effect! Gweheheheh!

Demon light streaks down and meets Gravity Compressed diamond. The sheer force of the strike buckles my poor ant legs, but the carapace holds strong!

Mostly.

A few long grooves are carved into my precious exo-skeleton, but the demon didn't manage to get even halfway through. Take that!

Unimpressed by my survival, the demon decides to have another crack, but I'm not standing still and taking it again. Stone cracks beneath me as I dash, reappearing a hundred metres away and staring down this massive demon.

He stares right back, boiling smoke and fire, a rabid grin fixed to his muzzle.

I agree, demon. It's time to get serious!

....

Is that gravity mana ready yet?!