

Chrysalis 1121

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Chapter 1121: Battle of the Titans pt 2

My sub-brains are still struggling to put the finishing touches on the gravitational mana construct. It's fiendishly complex, so I'm not surprised. More practice is required, and I've been too lazy to do it.

Curse you, past Anthony! Curse your lazy carapace!

Having fully mutated would also be helpful for this. The Altar and Nave aren't mutated, and who knows what insane effects they might have available at +35.

I've been too overconfident, dammit! This massive demon is proving to be far more of a challenge than I expected. I'll have to do the best with what I have available and hope it all works out. Let's do this!

I harden the ice mana I'd prepared as much as possible before weaving it to form spears. Unless I pump these spells as full of power as I can, they'll just melt when they get close to him, his cloak of fire and smoke will take care of that. The rate of fire isn't quite what I was hoping for, but at least each spear packs a hell of a lot of punch.

The demon smashes them away with his fists, smoke and ash belching from his maw as he rears back and launches his inferno breath at me. My ice spears are gone in an instant and I leap to the side once more. Then I'm struck with an idea!

If he can't recover from that breath attack quickly, then I might be able to close the gap right now. In a contest of close range attacks, I win!

Dash!

Drawing deep on the Altar in such rapid succession is dizzying. The Will of the Colony thunders through me, transforming into whatever power the Altar uses to infuse my Skills and spells as quick as I can use it. The rate of replenishment is insane, but as I lock my mandibles back and activate Void Chomp, it dips precipitously low.

Going to have to lay off it for a bit, but will I get the chance?

Rather than cut off his breath attack and turn to face me as I'd expected, the demon extends it and whirls to face me as I charge in. Whoops! My vision fills with that destructive breath and I scramble to come up with a solution, my reflexes firing at insane speeds.

A wall formed of the thickest, densest ice I can produce is woven into existence right in front of me and I shoulder charge it forward, advancing behind it like a shield. It's awkward as heck, but I can't do much better in the time I have. Despite the absurd amount of energy I packed into it, the ice doesn't hold up long against that breath, but it doesn't have to.

The moment I'm in range, I give it one final push before turning the full force of my chomp on the demon.

Void Chomp!

Empowered by the Altar, this bite packs unbelievable might and it's difficult for me to see what happens in front of me due to the sheer amount of carnage. Rocks crack, dust billows everywhere and demons caught in the vacuum effect fly through the air to get caught in the crossfire. I feel a little sorry for those monsters, they don't even have a moment to lament their fate before they evaporate as my jaws slam shut.

[Surely you're dead this time,] I tell the demon.

Wait... if he's dead, he couldn't reply... so what was the point of saying that?

[Not quite, worm!] he roars in my mind and I feel a little relief I hadn't embarrassed myself by talking to nobody.

Four clawed arms slash through the smoke, red light screaming, but I dodge again! Almost!

The air is filled with sparks as the claws rake across my carapace and fail to penetrate, but the sheer force of the blow nearly crumples my legs. I hold firm, if only just, and fire back with more ice. At this range, the demon can't melt them in time and several stab deep into its flesh before bubbling into steam.

Holy moly this guy projects a lot of heat! If I was some sort of ice specialist, then I might be able to cause more damage with it, but this is ridiculous. This close to him, it feels like I'm sticking my head into a pool of lava.

I leap back as I continue the ice barrage to gain a little space and get a look at my opponent. The massive demon has another injury, larger this time, but again, already in the process of healing. Lava-like goop fills the wound, congealing and darkening into black demonic flesh before my eyes.

I mean, I can't complain about it, I have a regeneration gland myself, capable of restoring minor wounds with extreme speed as well, but when the enemy is this difficult to damage, it really feels unfair!

Shiver.

I just felt as if a thousand monsters screamed at me from beyond the grave. Alright, I'll reflect on my mistakes, I'm sorry! Now that I'm against someone who does the same thing I do, I can fully appreciate just how aggravating it is.

[Oi! Stop healing yourself and stay wounded, dammit! You took that damage fair and square!]

[You keep barking when you should be crawling, WORM!]

At his last words, the cloak of flame and smoke the demon wears explodes as the aura of fire, ash and pure violence magnifies tenfold. My psyche recoils from the overwhelming sense of demonic violence radiating from my opponent as his eyes blaze red.

Man, he looks mad. Like, super mad.

Good time to throw this Gravity Bomb at him then.

HOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWLLLLL!

And this one.

HOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWWWLLLLL!

The two balls of hyper-dense gravitational mana fly through the air, spinning around each other as they get caught in each other's pull. The demon bellows with rage, shattering the air and knocking away nearby demons with sheer volume.

Another inhale, then he unleashes a blast of flame like nothing that came before.

I leap to the side, but not quite fast enough, as the blaze rockets through my bombs and straight at me, burning one of my antennae.

That fire is serious business! Let's see if it can roast both of these black holes to nothing in time to survive, gweheheheh.

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Chapter 1122: Battle of the Titans pt 3

Two gravity bombs should prove even more devastating than one, at least that's my assumption. It wasn't easy forming two of them at the same time, and I didn't have enough gas in the Altar to empower them properly, but I'm hoping it's enough to get the job done!

Under the withering fire pouring from the demon's mouth, the two bombs lose strength the further they travel.

Spiralling around each other, my spells rocket toward the demon. The air around them howls deafeningly, as they draw in everything they pass near. Unwilling to sit as far back as I did last time, I try to judge just how close I can get to the demon while still remaining safe from my own magic.

As I run, I keep my mana sense tracking the rapidly dwindling power in the two bombs. He's really roasting the heck out of them! I'll keep my claws crossed they've got enough power to make the journey, because if not, I may be in for some trouble. I don't have any more gravity mana!

The construct is now done, thank goodness, but it takes time to crank out the huge amount needed for a gravity bomb! It's not exactly an efficient and cheap spell!

The massive demon continues to roar as those deadly flames pour from its mouth. I think he might have lost track of me, or is too worried about the spells flying at his face, since he doesn't adjust his aim and keeps burninating the landscape right in front of him. Suits me just fine.

HOOOOOOOOOOOWL!

The two bombs continue to circle each other until they finally reach the target and ignite. Both spells expand into howling maelstroms of horrific death, right on top of each other!

Holy moly!

I think I might back off a bit, I may have misjudged my positioning. Time to dig in with those claws! This is Grip training!

The two bombs rip at each other, almost touching as they continue to orbit faster and faster. Finally, they collide in a blinding flash, and the pull dragging everything in grows all the more powerful. Even I struggle for a moment as I slam my claws down into the rock below, gripping tight.

Once again, it's impossible to see what's become of my demon opponent, visibility just isn't very good when these big spells hit the deck. Even my mana sense is totally thrown off by the two bombs merging.

I've never tested the double bomb combo, but it seems to be pretty darn powerful! Just in case I need it, I continue to pump out gravity mana as fast as I can, compressing it for all I'm worth.

More and more demons vanish into the void, never to be seen again as the dark sphere rotates ominously, dragging even the light around it inside.

Surely, that big moron isn't going to be able to survive this, right? Despite his best efforts to rip my bombs apart, they still had plenty of juice left when they landed. Two gravity bombs? Nobody has ever been able to survive this kind of punishment before. I mean, they weren't the most powerful bombs I can throw, but they were decent!

I dig in and wait for the screaming wind to die down. When the storm finally calms, I see... nothing.

Did he get dissolved?

I rip my legs out of the ground and stalk toward the site of the detonation, ready and waiting for something fishy to happen. My mana sense sweeps over the area and I continue to pull in raw mana so I can convert it. I don't really sense anything....

Should I check my notifications to see if he died? I don't think there's any point... I got hundreds of them during that spell.

Wait! What was that?

[An interesting display, worm. I can see why the Demon God has taken an interest in you. I shall return, and I shall not be alone!]

Rapidly disappearing below me, I can sense a powerful monster descending through the tunnels.

I mean...

[Running away?! What kind of monster are you? Get back here and feel my justice!]

But it's no good. The mind bridge connecting us fades to tatters as the distance grows too great and my taunts are lost.

That... that's just rude.

[Master? Are you alright?]

Crinis?

[Wha? Yeah I'm fine. Why?]

[That battle was terrible to witness! The two of you destroyed everything around you....]

Taking in my surroundings, she's absolutely right. Despite the constantly spawning larvae, there are visible ruins around us. A molten streak of rock created by the flame breath. A crater over there. Several craters actually. I may have created those with the Void Chomps.

[Dang, you aren't wrong.]

I don't see how it matters, though. I'm super annoyed that the enemy escaped! There are three of those damn monsters, and I don't see how I can beat them all at once. I might have been arrogant enough to assume I could have before, but not now. That fight was way harder than I thought it would be.

I need to kick things up a gear. More practice, especially with my gravity spells, and I need to mutate ASAP.

[You and the others keep fighting, Crinis. You need levels and you need them fast.]

I might need all the help I can get soon enough. There's no way my three friends will be able to fight alongside me at a two tier disadvantage. Even tier seven against tier eight feels hard. Evolutionary energy doubles at every tier after all.

GAH! I'm still so mad! How the heck did he slip away? Was he in the tunnels below before the spells even landed? He must have been.... Once the bombs expand, the pull becomes far too strong to escape, especially that close. I can't help but feel like there was some sort of trickery pulled in that moment, some sort of Skill or ability was used that I should try to figure out.

Next time I see that demon, I'll make sure he doesn't get away!

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Chapter 1123: Reflection on Strength

Protectant, Guardian, Shieldant, Defendat, Armourant and the others stood silently as the Eldest collected themselves and settled to watch the three guardians fight. The purple sphere of mana had extended once again, crushing any weak monsters into the ground before they even had a chance to attack.

They felt... useless.

"Have you ever seen anything like that?" Guardian asked, her pheromones unusually hushed. "I can't even imagine being able to tip the balance in a fight like that."

She spoke what each of them felt, deep in their hearts. Protectant had been speechless as the Eldest had battled against the titanic demon. The creature had been like something from a nightmare. Over thirty metres tall, it towered over them, wreathed in flame and ash, any one of its strikes would have ripped all twenty of them to pieces.

Even now, the aftershocks of that battle rattled the land around them. Stone continued to burn, or shatter. A significant area had been destabilised by the spells the Eldest had cast and parts crumbled down into the lava below, taking thousands of smaller demons into the fire.

The Eldest had warned them, many times, that they needed to evolve lest they become unable to perform their task. As a group, they had acknowledged the reality of this, but they hadn't understood it fully.

Against a foe of that magnitude, they were worse than helpless. Even had they sacrificed themselves, all of them, it would not have swayed the battle in the slightest.

Shortly after their birth, the Council had tasked them with an important mission, critical to the future of the Colony. They *had* to ensure that the Eldest was kept safe, from *all* threats, even the Eldest himself.

As they were, it was impossible for them to complete their mission. Resolve hardened within each of them.

“Tier six is not going to be enough,” Protectant said. “Not even close. Tier *seven* may not be enough. We have to level, mutate and evolve, as fast as possible.”

“Isn’t that what the Eldest told us we were supposed to do?” Guardian asked, scratching at her carapace with a foreleg.

Nineteen others shifted awkwardly. Protectant sighed.

“This is simply another instance where their wisdom far exceeds that of the rest of us. Even the Council did not predict things would come to this.”

How could anyone have predicted that things would come to this?

“We will operate in reduced shifts. Our primary responsibility will be to level and move toward perfect evolutions. When all of us are tier six, the work will have only begun.”

The others nodded. This was necessary for them to perform their role. The Eldest must survive.

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Odin was shaking. Such power! Such unbridled, raw, power! When the two monsters had clashed, the ground shook, stone shattered, even the rock he had clung to had trembled, as if intimidated by the ferocity of the combatants.

What he had witnessed resembled the wildest fever dreams of a film director rather than something actually possible in physical reality.

Torrifex had loomed large in his mind as an unbeatable existence. The monstrous demon was overbearing in every possible way. Even standing close to the beast had singed him, despite his heat resistant demon skin. Of course, nothing matched up to Arconidem, but the Demon God was far away, whereas Torrifex had been right next to him.

Yet the ant had won. Anthony had won. That mighty, seemingly invincible demon had retreated, actually retreated, after being fought off by an opponent he couldn’t outmatch in strength, guile or speed.

After a life lived on the edge of life and death, the former assassin had thought he had seen everything, done everything, but now, an all new world of possibility had opened up before him. If Anthony was able to defeat the three demons who still haunted his dreams, then he would be free. Free! What could stop him then? What could get in his way?

If he progressed far enough, fought long enough, then he too would wield the strength necessary to stand alone. Unlimited power was there, all he had to do was persevere, then reach out and take it!

All he needed was time. He needed a shield that could protect him from the enemies that sought to control him.

Anthony could become that shield. The Colony could become that shield. He would throw all of his support behind the ants, do whatever it took for them to triumph over the demon uprising. That would buy him the time he needed to grow.

Once the Colony had succeeded, he would be able to strike out and make his own way, rising to the top.

Who knows? If he were successful enough, perhaps even the mighty Arconidem himself would fall. Odin the Demon God had a rather nice ring to it. Better than the nickname he had been given in his past life. Whoever had thought to call him “Odin the Black Wind of Shadow Who Reaps in the Night” had been trying *way* too hard. Odin the Demon God. Simple, clean, powerful.

Below, Anthony continued to rest, his six legs folded beneath him as he rested his carapace on the stone floor. The powerful gravity field he generated was so strong that the newly spawned larvae beneath him couldn't even show their faces.

*For now, you are the mighty one and I will hide in your shadow. But it won't always be that way. I, Odin Malum, swear it!*

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#### **Chapter 1124: I Can't Get No**

After brooding and swatting at demons who manage to draw close to me for a few hours, I call my three associates back and we start to make our way home.

It doesn't look like that big brute is going to be coming back anytime soon, so it's probably a good chance to regroup and refresh. Tiny, Crinis and Invidia each look worn out and battered in some way. Tiny has scratches and wounds all over the place, his fur matted with ichor, and I can tell he's exhausted, despite the grin of satisfaction on his bat-face. When Crinis glomps onto my carapace, her lack of weight indicates that a ton of her shadow flesh has been burned through. Even Invidia, whose core is usually bursting with mana, is dim in my sight, wearily pulling in ambient energy to replenish his stocks.

The three of them have worked hard.

[Good job, everyone. I hope you were able to get a few levels out of that. After a quick break, we'll be back at it, so make sure you don't waste your time. Mutate anything you need to, check for Skill rank-ups and get some rest.]

They each acknowledge me with a tired wave and we start the trek back to Roklu. I handle the overflowing demons by crushing them with my domain. It's so nice to have this spell supercharged by the Altar. The larvae beneath me are completely unable to rise up thanks to the gravity pulling them down, so they've no choice but to sit on top of the mana veins that birthed them until I've walked past. Of course, once I have moved on, there's a small explosion behind me as all the larvae who'd been smushed together are finally free to tear clear and start chomping on each other.

As we travel, I can't help but think back to my fight against the tier eight. Neither of us had gone all out in that contest, I'm convinced of that. If I'd had enough gravity mana, I could have used an empowered well to try and squish him flat, but at the same time, I'm convinced the demon didn't show what he had.

It feels like all monsters get a specific advantage as they evolve, and I'm no exception. My Altar, Nave and Vestibule combo makes me *far* more powerful under the right conditions, namely having a ton of my family around. The demon... Torrifex, I think he said his name was, showed overwhelming combat strength, but nothing much outside of that. Not until he managed to slip away at the end, at any rate.

I need more info on these tier eight demons. There are another two like Torrifex, and if I can learn what tricks they have up their demonic sleeves, I'll be in a better spot to counter them.

I know who I can ask as well, but for now, I have other priorities.

No more putting it off! I need to mutate my most important organs, the Nave and the Altar!

The plains outside of the ant fortress beneath Roklu are an absolute mess. Even here, in the heart of the Colony's power, the sheer number of demons is overwhelming. Dotted about the place, fortresses filled to the brim with ants fire down on the swarming demons, sniping the more evolved ones from the crowd and blasting the weaker ones when they threaten to surge against the walls.

The vast larvae-traps, designed to harvest stronger cores and higher tier Biomass for the Colony, appear to be working at full blast as well. Patrols march along the edges and guard the collection stations, ensuring that the enormous structures aren't damaged from the outside or from inside.

The fortress itself stands like an island amidst a sea of chaos. The mighty walls stand against wave after wave of demons as they throw themselves into the waiting mandibles of over a hundred thousand defenders.

We march through that tide until we are able to haul ourselves over the wall and into safety. There's a gate that they could open, but the demons would just pour inside the moment they did. I need the training for Grip anyways.

Not Invidia, though, he just flies. The punk.

"Welcome back, Eldest!"

"Not slacking, are you?"

"Resting? That's... a good and sensible idea which we all should do. Right?"

I wave back to my siblings as they welcome me back, exchanging a few antennae slapping high-fives as I banter back and forth with them.

"Me? Slacking? I've been out there fighting tier eight demons! Don't compare me with you lot, sitting up on a wall, nice and safe!"

I don't acknowledge the poor mage who commented on resting. She's already gone, sucked into the shadows. Rest in peace. Then get back to work, shiny and massaged.

I try not to get in anyone's way as I head deeper into the fortress. It takes ten minutes for us to find a nice isolated chamber I can plonk myself down in and prepare to mutate.

[Alright, gang. Hit the menus. Although I'd appreciate it if you could watch the door for me, Crinis.]

[Yes, Master.]



No point mucking around, I'm going straight for the big stuff. Altar! Show me what you've got!

I punch through the menu and confirm my intention to mutate. I've got a bit of Biomass stored away, but the tier penalty is really kicking me straight in the gaster.

The wave will eventually produce a massive surplus of higher tier monsters, the ones who manage to survive, then thrive in the madness, but for now, it's an endless tide of weaklings. It doesn't help that what counts as a weakling to me is so much stronger than before. A tier five monster with perfect evolutions would have scared the lights out of me not that long ago. Even Garralosh, as monstrously strong as she was, would be weak to me now. Though her core and Biomass would be welcome.

No, a tier five monster gives me precious little in terms of experience or Biomass. I need stronger prey! I have a feeling I'll find lots of them down below, in the fourth stratum, but I can't get down there yet. Not with Torrifex and his ilk lurking about.

Come on, Altar, give me something good!

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#### **Chapter 1125: Satisfaction**

As always, the list is excessively long. Like, does anyone want half of these options? Actually, most of them seem pretty good... but far too niche! The Altar has a greater effect empowering fire abilities. The Altar has a greater effect empowering ice abilities. The Altar has a greater effect empowering physical abilities....

On and on it goes.

I quickly identify the basic upgrades before I start flicking about to see if I can find something that might take my fancy. I mean, it's hard to go wrong with improving the capacity of the Altar, and improving its efficiency converting Will into... whatever it converts it into.

Both upgrades give the Altar a lot more bang for the buck, so to speak. The capacity upgrade is almost mandatory, since I already have several abilities that drain the entire stock dry when I empower them. In fact, considering the sheer amount of energy the Vestibule funnels into me, I may not even need the efficiency upgrade. I could take capacity at +5 and +10, reinforce it at +15 and then see how I feel after that.

It may even prove necessary to repeat the process again from +20 to +30. More power stocked up will allow me to go ham with my most powerful spells and abilities. Against the three super demons, that may prove crucial. If I can't throw out empowered wells and Void Chomps willy-nilly, then I'll struggle to go toe to toe with them.

I continue to trawl through the many, many listings in case I find something I might consider interesting, and I do.

[Starborn Altar: Increases the effect when empowering gravity based abilities.]

DAMMIT.

That's so tempting! That's super tempting!

I thought I could dismiss all the specific, nice upgrades and just go with utility, but this one could be super good! The Gravity Bomb, the Gravity Well, the Gravity Domain, perhaps even the Void Chomp, would all get extra OOMPH from this selection.

I'm leaning so heavily into gravity based power now that I have it, further investment pays me back in all sorts of ways in other areas as well. Gah!

No! Snap out of it, Anthony! You *must* select capacity at +5 and +10. It's a requirement!

I lock those two choices in and commit to reinforcing them at fifteen. Then feel myself drawn irresistibly back to the gravity enhancing mutation.

I should carefully consider the pros and cons before making an informed decision... there's likely no chance I get to reforge the Altar, so these mutations are going to stick. Think about it. Think carefully.

Lock it in! +20, +25 and then reinforce, baby! Whoo!

Phew, what a rush. Alright then, onto the Nave. I'm still not entirely clear on the function of the Nave, but I think I've gradually pieced it together over time.

I mean, it's a bit obvious at this point, but the Vestibule, Nave and Altar are all parts of a church or cathedral. The Vestibule is where people are welcomed inside, the entrance, I suppose. Which makes sense, that is the organ through which the Will of the Colony flows.

The Nave is the biggest bit, it's where people sit. Usually filled with rows of pews... or chairs... or whatever.

Then the Altar, which is what the people show up for, I suppose. Its purpose is to give shape to the Will that is flowing through. I chose to dedicate the Altar to empowering myself, so that is what it does.

But the Nave, where does that fit in?

The energy comes in through the Vestibule, flows through the Nave, then is given purpose by the Altar. My previous mutations for the Nave were simple and generic, effectively purifying and concentrating the Will that passed through it. Without an Altar for that energy to flow to, it wasn't easy to see the difference that made. All that happened was that the things that Will already did for me, keeping me fresh, refilling my stamina, acid and regeneration glands, all happened faster.

But now, I wonder.

The Nave in a church is where the people sit, and I think I may have misunderstood its purpose all along. By constructing it, I made a place for the Will of the Colony... to come in and sit down.

Which explains a few things I've noticed ever since I reached tier six. Ants seem to know what I'm thinking sometimes. Or they know when I'm coming, even if I conceal my core. There are times I know things I shouldn't, or they know things they shouldn't, as if we'd sat down and had a long conversation, except we never had.

Or perhaps we did. *Inside.*

I often dip my toe into the flow of Will to see what's going on, but I never did for the Nave.... Now I'm a little scared to. Alright, let's check it out.

With a flicker, my mind is suddenly within, beyond the flow of power, contained in another area. I can feel the Will of the Colony thundering past nearby, but here, it's a little more quiet, more serene.

And sure enough... there are ants here. Well, not actually ants, but small little bubbles of Will. How and why these specific members of the family are here, I don't know, but here they are. Perhaps they've contributed the most Will, and over time these bubbles form within the Nave?

Who do we even have here?

I shouldn't know, but I do, which confirms some of my earlier suspicions. That ant there is the nameless one, for example. That one is also the nameless one. So is that one.

Dammit! How many of the torpor police are in here?! Sheesh!

Aha! This is Cargant, a worker from the second stratum who specialises in transporting cargo. Hence the name. She's a beast, hauls ore and minerals all day every day, only stopping for mandatory torpor. What a good example of diligence for the grubs to follow!

Speaking of grubs, over there is Attendant, a Brood Tender. She's been taking care of grubs since not long after I arrived at the Colony! How many have grown up and graduated under her gentle leadership? Too many for me to count, I wasn't in school that much....

And over there we have...

ENID?! What the heck!?! Since when were you an ant?!

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### **Chapter 1126: Within the Self**

I know I don't always devote the most thought to my mutations, but I think I'd remember letting humans contribute Will through the Vestibule. Yeah, I'm sure I would remember that! And yet, here sits a little bubble of Enid, here within the Nave.

What the heck is going on here? Spiritually, I approach and poke at the bubble, but try as I might, it doesn't disappear. Instead, it stubbornly sits there, existing, no matter how much I try to logic the darn thing from existence.

I bring up my menu and try to confirm the reality I believed I had been living in, only to find that I'd been wrong all along. The restriction on the Vestibule to Formica Sapiens is gone. Gone! Vanished into the mists! Like a smaller, less bat-like version of Tiny!

When in the name of all that is chitin and shiny did that happen? That's a thorax scratcher. I double check my mutations, just to ensure I'm not completely lost and bewildered, and it turns out that I'm not. I can only assume that this occurred during the reset.

Which explains a few things, I suppose. There's been a few times that things have popped into my head that I likely shouldn't have known otherwise. And I mean, alongside the amount of ants I receive energy

from, the humans who are able to provide me with Will can hardly compare, causing their thoughts to be lost in the mix.

That doesn't mean they haven't been there, chugging along, providing energy. The proof is in the pudding, or amorphous blob of Will, as the situation decrees.

Even here, within my own psyche, I feel a chill run over my carapace. Enid being here, I can deal with. I've spoken to her a bunch of times and always found her to be a good egg. In fact, Enid and I go way back to shortly after the Colony surfaced. She was one of the first people I ever communicated with! No, I have no issue with Enid being here. But... if she has been providing enough Will to end up in the Nave... that means....

Aaaand there he is. The mad priest.

Because of *course* he is! This moron takes every opportunity to declare his devotion, often screaming it directly into my head whenever I form a bridge with him. How could he *not* be here in the Nave?

Staring at the little ball of Will that was formed by Beyn, I can't help but feel a little depressed. Then I feel bad about being depressed.

I don't want this guy in here. I also bit his arm off, only for him to turn around and start worshipping me for some weird reason. The ebb and flow of life, I suppose.

Ah well. It is what it is. Now that I know a little more about what the Nave does, I should investigate what function these little balls of Will actually have.

I approach the one that represents the Nameless One. The first one. The first Nameless One.

...

Nameless One 1. Let's go with that. I approach the little glowing orb and... for want of a better term, poke my consciousness inside.

*The Nameless One halted her approach, sinking back into the shadows as she felt a slight disturbance. After a moment of trying to determine its source, she shook it off and resumed. Soon, another who snubbed their antennae at the Eldest's wisdom would learn a very important lesson....*

Whoa there! Is that... what she's doing *right now*? If so, that's super useful!

I wander over to the ball that represents Enid and stick my antennae in.

*She sighed in satisfaction as she lowered her cup down to the table. Even here, on the frontier of their territory, the hospitality of the Colony was not to be denied. Still, she was a little disappointed. She'd come all this way to see Anthony, only to learn he was now above her head!*

*No matter. She was sure he would be back down here before too long. It would be nice to see the big ant once more.*

Hang on, is she in the *fourth*? What in the name of great googly-moogly is she doing down there?! I guess I learned that; she wanted to see me for some reason. I'll need to make sure I check in with her the moment I get down there.

A little confused, I wander over to Beyn's orb.

*"GLORY TO THE GREAT ONE! PRAISE HIM! PRAISE HIM WITH GREAT PRAISE!"*

Ack! How does he still manage to be so freakin' loud!? It never ends with this guy....

Still, it's amazing what the Nave can do. I can drop in and check on everyone in here whenever I want to. I suppose it was already possible to do that, in a smaller way. As long as an individual is within range and providing me with energy, I can find them and work out what they're thinking. It just takes... a long time. There's hundreds of thousands of people in there most of the time! Picking out a specific one is a serious pain!

The Nave is waaaay more convenient for that purpose, but I'm not sure that's all it can do.... I mean, the purpose of the Nave is for people to sit and listen, right?

I approach Beyn's orb once more.

*"PRAISE THE PRAISE WITH GREAT PRAISE"*

**Hey, Beyn. Shut up!**

A moment of silence.

*"I WILL SILENTLY PRAISE YOU, GREAT ONE! SILENTLY PRAISING UNTIL I CAN NO LONGER SPEAK!"*

That defeats the purpose, you moron!

That confirms it, though, I can actually talk to people through the Nave!

Holy Moly! To think this has been sitting here for ages without me taking a serious look at it!

That makes me feel... a little stupid. I *really* need to start checking in with Granin and the others. I should probably start being a bit more honest with them as well. If anyone has earned some trust, it's those three.

Well, now that I know what this thing does, it's time to look at some mutations! How can we gas this thing up?

[Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1127: Within the Self**

*How deep does the Dungeon really go? It's possible that only the Ancients truly know. Certainly no human, golgari, ka'armodo, brathian or any other old race has plumbed the greatest depths and returned.*

*Of course, it's possible an empire or organisation has managed to find their way down and has kept it a secret for all these years, but this researcher doubts it.*

*Instead, we can apply ourselves to examining what information is public and making inferences from there.*

*To many who toil on the surface, living within the Dungeon is nothing but a legend, a myth or fairytale for children. Little do they know that many of the goods they create and crops they harvest find their way down into the depths, supporting cities and fortresses they do not believe exist.*

*Of course, the seats of power for almost all the great kingdoms and empires on Pangera are found in the fourth stratum. Filled with abundant life mana, this is a dangerous yet wondrous place to live.*

*Beyond is the fifth, and it's unfortunate, but many records end there. A world of poison, decay and toxin, the fifth stratum is a hellscape, inimical to life. However, there are some who are prepared to admit that they have gone beyond this point and into the sixth.*

*Sometimes, I wonder if those of us in the fourth are similar to those on the surface. There could be a whole world beneath us that we refuse to believe exists, cut off by dangers that we believe insurmountable.*

*- Excerpt from 'The Musings of Dai'*

Just when I was hyping myself up to do some more mutating, I realise I don't have the points to invest. What a let down! I was hoping to power up some key organs and look at pushing others to +35, see what sort of nonsense I can mutate with the more powerful options I can get at that level.

Sadly, not to be. Just taking the Altar from nothing to +30 has cost me a whopping 465 Biomass. That ain't cheap. So it looks like I'll have to hold myself back for now and try to get some more food packed into my face. Good news is, there's no better time to do that than during a wave. As long as I can get high enough tier enemies, I'll have points to spare.

...

Get back here, Torrifex! How dare my precious meal-ticket run away in the middle of a fight?! A demon that size, that powerful? He must have been worth well over a thousand points by himself. If he's a fully mutated tier eight, then the Biomass density would be off the chain!

Then again, it might be better if I don't run into him in the next little while. I've got a lot more work to do to finish powering myself up before the next showdown. And not just on the mutation front.

With my selections done, I commit them all and then immediately start flailing around as the Altar within me is consumed by that hated itching sensation.

Somehow, knowing that I'm the only one suffering from this makes it even worse.

WHY, GANDALF?! WHY HAVE YOU CURSED ME IN THIS MANNER?!

Honestly, being as large as I am, this is starting to get dangerous. Thankfully, structural integrity was maintained in the chamber. Mostly.

Phew.

Time to poke at my Skills and see if there's anything I can rank up, then look at the lists for juicy new options.

Well, my Gravitational Magic Affinity has reached level 10, which means I can bump it up to the third rank, which I do immediately. That's not nothing. Considering the changes I made to the Altar, Gravity Magic is going to be my most powerful offensive weapon going forward, even more than in the past, so I need to pump levels into this as quickly as I can.

Barrier Magic has also reached a new rank, which is nice. I need to keep working on this as it's proven useful and not just as a defensive tool.

Sadly, there isn't much else I can improve. Most of my key offensive Skills are in tier five or six now, which means they need a ton of levels before I can improve them again. Void Chomp is still a long way from the halfway point, needing almost a hundred levels before I can improve it again. Even so, just thinking about what lies beyond the Void Chomp is enough to set my carapace a'tinglin'.

Then infusing it with the altar... just what sort of result would that produce? Could I become the first insect to produce an atomic explosion when I chomp my mandibles? Even the Ancients would have trouble dealing with that, surely.

Speaking of getting to work.... I prod all of my mind-constructs and get them working on Gravity Magic. Half of them are tasked with constructing and taking apart the mana construct. I'll have them practise it until I'm confident they can whip it together in thirty seconds or less. Having to wait for more of the purple mana while I'm getting my butt kicked is not an option!

The other half start whipping together Gravity spells as fast as they can. Inverting them, condensing them, and testing in a variety of ways before firing them off at walls and other safe targets.

The training won't stop until rank five is achieved, so keep at it, you lazy bums!

My sub-brains seem to grumble a little in the back of my mind, but really, it's just me yelling at myself, so who the heck are you getting mad at?

I open up the menu and start trawling through, looking for new Skills that might prove useful going forward. There isn't much there, really....

I mean, there's an almost infinite number of Skills. I could pick up fire-starting if I really wanted to, though I'm not sure how critical that might be in the future. There's another one here for bridge building. Another one for grooming? Who needs the grooming Skill?! Actually, I wonder if the Nameless Ones use this....

Ah, no. I found a Carapace Polishing Skill. They probably use that instead.... There's a Skill for everything, that's what I'm trying to point out. Finding the useful stuff buried amidst all the generic dross is the hard part. There could be an almighty 'Ant Meteor Carapace Smash' somewhere in the list and I'd have no idea.

Actually... there is a bodyslam Skill.... I wonder if that would work for me? I have a ton of mass now, so jumping on opponents could become a valid strategy. I might shelve that one as a 'maybe'.

Actually, you know what? I've decided I'm going to go and talk to Granin and his triad anyway, so I may as well get some advice from them. If anyone is going to know about awesome Skills for monsters, it's going to be that crew. Me sitting here and rolling through the lists until I get bored (which won't take long) isn't going to achieve nearly as much.

To the advisors!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1128: Change of Pace**

*My time amongst the Colony taught me one lesson more than any other, and it was an important one to learn. I always considered the pompous attitude of the Cults to be undeserved. After failing to produce an Ancient for thousands of years, what right did we have to be arrogant? None at all. Yet so many of my fellows believed the accumulated knowledge of the cults to be complete.*

*Complete? We had barely scratched the surface of what was possible! Hubris blinded too many of my colleagues, and only a few possessed the frenzied drive required to push our understanding further.*

*The ants showed me that the amount we still had to learn was far more vast than even I had believed. What they, a 'weak' and overlooked species, became capable of, the evolutionary paths and abilities they unlocked, were far beyond what anyone had imagined.*

*Beyond that, the Colony possessed a relentless, almost fanatical drive to complete their understanding of the System and its intricacies. If the Cults had possessed a fraction of that energy, they would have completed their task a millennium ago.*

*- From the personal notes of Granin Lazus.*

I end up having to wait a little while for Tiny and the others to finish their own powerup sessions, but when they're done, we group up and I march off to find Granin, Torrina and Corun.

Apparently, the three of them have been holed up in their offices through the start of the wave, and I don't fit in there anymore, so I have to send a scout to run a message for me.

When the triad eventually emerge, I can see the surprise on Granin's face. That's saying something. The man has a layer of solid granite over his features, so it isn't always easy to register his expression.

He's literally stone faced.

[What's happening, Granin? Taking some time to relax?]

The big golgari blinks at me. As large as I am now, it's easy to forget that he's about eight feet tall.

[I wouldn't say we've been relaxing,] he rumbles in my mind, [I don't think anyone is relaxing in the third, given the,] he waves vaguely out the window toward the chaos, [goings on.]

[Fair enough....]

I trail off, not really sure how to continue. I've been hiding stuff from these three for so long it feels kind of awkward to open up.

[Spit it out, Anthony,] Granin frowns. [Seeing you hesitating over what to say is creeping me out. It's like watching water run uphill.]

[You make it sound like I have no tact!]

[Yes] he says bluntly. [Now talk.]



[Fine,] I grumble. [Although I didn't expect to get all this *attitude*. I figured it was about time I came clean about what I can do and get some advice regarding Skills you might know of that I haven't seen.]

Now he's *definitely* surprised, as are Torrina and Corun.

[Are you sure, Anthony?] Torrina asks. [We didn't think you were ever going to tell us the specific details of your species. And that's fine,] she hurries to add. [You don't have to share those details if you don't want to.]

[I think you three have earned some trust. You've been cut off from your people for a long time, and been nothing but helpful to me and the Colony. I'm often bumbling my way forward and that seems a little silly, considering I have literal experts waiting in the wings.]

Although he tries to hide it, I can definitely see a twinkling in Granin's eye. I'm not sure if it's tears, or just eagerness. Yes, Granin, you finally get the full details on your Ancient candidate.

[Let's find some place a little more comfortable so we can work,] he says and we shift to a spot where the three of them can sit down.

I just lower my carapace to the ground and flop my legs out. I'm not sure the Colony has built an ant-chair my size yet. I'll have to ask.

[Alright then, why don't you start from the top. Unless you're willing to let us see your core?]

I hesitate.

[I think I'll just tell you, if you don't mind.]

[Perfectly fine. Let's hear it.]

Granin may be doing a good job at hiding his eagerness, but Torrina and Corun aren't. The latter is bouncing in his chair like a puppy. At least Torrina manages to maintain her dignified look.

[With my last evolution, I finished a three-stage series that started with Juvenile Colony Paragon,] I start. [The feature of this evolution was that it provided me with an organ that allowed members of my family to provide me with energy in the form of Will. It's called the Collective Will Vestibule. It was handy, more than handy, since the energy would keep me fresh, wipe away fatigue and replenish resources like acid or my regeneration gland. The more Colony members in range, the more energy I received.]

I look at the three, who seem enthralled.

[Clear so far?]

[K-keep going,] Granin coughs.

[Right. That was followed by the evolution at tier six to Mature Colony Paragon, which gave me a new organ called the Nave, which connects to the Vestibule. At first, I thought it just purified and concentrated the Will I received, but after a while, I discovered that it creates a connection with those who provide a lot of Will over time.]

No way in heck I'm telling them I only *just* figured this out.

[With me so far?]

Corun nods rapidly.

[Then lastly, I completed the path with my current species, Perfect Paragon. This gave me an Altar.]

Granin *squeaks*.

I stare at him.

[You okay?]

He doesn't say anything, but tries to give me a reassuring nod. It's not easy to tell with the golgari, but the man looks like he's about to have an aneurysm.

[So, I had a few choices on what I could dedicate the Altar to, basically determining what the energy would ultimately do. I picked the Altar of Self...]

Granin seizes up and falls out of his chair.

[Holy moly! Are you alright, man?!]

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 1129: On the Road Already**

It takes a few minutes for Granin to come back to himself. Torrina and Corun fuss over him as he lies on the ground in a catatonic state, only to break out of it with boisterous laughter.

Which goes on for way too long, by the way. I'm about to nope out of the situation and creep out of the room when he suddenly sits up and returns to his chair, still chortling away.

Judging by the looks on his students' faces they haven't seen him laugh this much, probably *ever*. I have to admit, even though I haven't known him as long as they have, seeing the normally stoic shaper with a grin on his face is creeping me the heck out.

[Granin, I honestly thought if you smiled, your face would crack.]

[Hey, that's a rude thing to say to my people. We're very sensitive about cracking and chipping,] he says, still smiling.

I give him a ten thousand lens stare, an intimidating glare which only those with gigantic compound eyes can perform.

[You need to pack that grin away or I'm out of here,] I warn him and he immediately wipes his expression clean. [That's better. Mind telling me what is going on in that head of yours? That was quite a reaction you had there.]

The other two nod, still standing close to their mentor, worried for his health. They should be worried for his sanity, more like!

Folding his huge granite-coated hands beneath his chin, the old golgari sighs and shakes his head.

[I wanted to put you on the path to being an Ancient so badly. We don't know much about their species, organs, abilities or mutations, but we know a little. More for some of them than for others. Your Vestibule, Nave and Altar have put you on a path to become a demigod, thriving on the energy of your followers. And you did it by accident. Before you even met me.]

Granin quickly buries his face in his hands and his shoulders start to shake with silent laughter. I feel a little insulted. He holds up a hand in apology and collects himself.

[Hurrump! Anyway. N-No wait.]

More silent laughter as he slams a stone-covered fist into his knee.

[Are you *done*?]

[Hooo. I think so. W-wait... I think I'm good.]

He exhales a long, slow breath, gathering himself.

[I'm good. So anyway. We, and I mean the Cults, have stumbled across evolutionary options like your Paragon before, offering similar abilities that draw on belief, or Will, or some other intangible force to empower the individual, but usually at tier seven or eight, and only as Mythic evolutions. I'm assuming this chain started as a rare evolution?]

I nod and he blows out another breath.

[Which is... insane. Just another thing that separates you ants from other species of monster, I suppose. You two wouldn't have learned about this stuff yet.]

The last is addressed to his two students, who both shake their heads.

[Well. I suppose I should have told you about it. Normally, this sort of information is restricted to those who've proven themselves within the Cult, but we're a little cut off at the moment and our work is too important for keeping secrets. Anthony, your path sounds similar to that of Arconidem the Demon God.]

[That jerk?]

I'm not pleased to hear that at all. Of all the Ancients I know about, that one seems like the worst. What he's doing to the demons is downright nasty.

All three gulgari react like I just farted in church.

[Don't say that!] Corun hisses at me.

[I didn't... we're talking via mind magic.]

[Don't think it, then!]

[The Ancients are powerful beyond measure,] Torrina warns me, worried. [We can't know what they are and aren't capable of.]

[Who cares? That guy is getting thwacked, no matter what,] I grumble. [I think I saw him, actually. His face formed out of mana out on the plains and he looked at me. Creepy looking thing... what now?]

All three of the golgari before me look utterly horrified and deeply reverent at the same time. They appear as if they can't decide whether to slap me or kneel before me.

[His visage formed from mana before you?] Granin asks slowly.

[Ye... no?]

[Don't lie, Anthony. You suck at it.]

[Fine. Yes. Then one of his tier eight followers jumped me. That was a heck of a fight.]

Granin buries his face in his hands. The other two look at him with sympathy.

[Seriously. Can you slow down for a minute? Any other revelations you want to drop on us?]

I think for a moment.

[I think that's all of it?]

[I hope so. I'm centuries old, Anthony. I can't take much more of this.]

Torrina pats him on the shoulder. Corun is still staring at me, wonder and horror mixed in his eyes.

[Well, if we didn't know the Ancients had their eyes on you before, we for sure know it now.]

I shrug my antennae.

[I mean... I don't really care about that. If anything, I'd be much happier if they ignored me.]

[I know, I know. Unfortunately for you, it seems like you were destined to draw their attention well before we met. All the time I've spent trying to push you down this road,] he shakes his head, [you were already on it. I'd laugh some more but...] he glances up at my antennae, [... it's unhealthy.]

He's not wrong.

[So, this type of organ that you have, gathering Will from your own species and putting it to a purpose, we know a little about it, *very* little. It doesn't make sense for most monsters to use it, since you would need a large number of compatible beasts to feed enough power to make it worthwhile. You seem to have created the ideal conditions for this evolution without even trying. Arconidem did the same, binding himself to the demons and the demons to him. It's one of the reasons why the demons are so unreliable as allies. They aren't always able to control themselves, especially when the Ancient is awake. Though not many outside the Cults are aware of that.]

[I'm not just tied to the Colony, though. There are humans who provide me with Will as well.]

[Dammit, Anthony! You said you were done!]

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 1130: What Can You Do?**

*The variety of ways a monster can develop themselves is essentially infinite. The number of known Skill fusions is always growing as more and more variations are explored. Of course, there are standard*

*options, things that have long been known and recognised as strong, but those who are willing to explore and delve for new combinations are often rewarded.*

*In terms of mutations, the possibilities are again, endless. The number of organs that can be added to a monster is vast, to the point where, after thousands of years, the combined Cults still haven't explored them all, not even a fraction. How those organs interact and function with each other can have a huge impact on performance as well. And that's before they become modified with mutations.*

*Some members of the Cult spend their entire lives exploring a particular niche, one type of monster, one subset of organs, and in this way, they are able to grow our collective knowledge, one step at a time.*

*- Excerpt from "Designing Monsters" by Torrina Laksham*

[So the species requirement of your Vestibule is gone?]

[Yes. Ages ago,] I state confidently, though I only figured it out a few hours past.

[Must have happened when you reset the organ,] Granin shakes his head. [What's it formed from now?]

[Soul Crystal. Same as the Nave. Same as the Altar.]

[S-Soul Crystal?]

The big rock-coated golgari stumbles again.

[That stuff is... extremely valuable. You may want to keep to yourself that you have... did you say three? By the Worm, you're going to kill me here today. Are you *sure* there aren't more shocking revelations?]

I hesitate.

[Probably just the Gravity Mana thing.]

[What about the Gravity Mana thing?] he asks, cautiously.

[I learned the Gravity Magic Skill, so now I have access to a pretty damn powerful spell.]

[Just one?]

[I mean... it's all you need.]

I explain to him how gravity mana functions and what the gravity well is capable of. He absorbs this in silence.

[I can take that. I suppose this explains a lot of your mutations and resets at the moment.]

[Right. I've been trying to rebuild myself into a Gravity Ant to take advantage of my most powerful ability. My Carapace is Gravity Compressed Diamond, as are my mandibles. Incredibly hard and super dense. I'm talking *dense*. This stuff is thicker than Tiny.]

The ape gives an approving thumbs up.

[What else have you done to synergise with your Gravity Mana?]

[So... when I'm actively using it, my carapace absorbs a little of that energy to continue hardening and compressing itself. It also magnifies and boosts any gravity spell I cast. Lately, I pushed it to +35 and now the carapace holds on to light a little bit, making it harder to see me move.]

All three of them frown and I realise they don't really know how gravity works. Possibly light, for that matter.

[Basically, you can't see me move until a little *after* I've moved,] I explain. [It's subtle, but strong.]

[Fair enough. What else?]

[My inner-carapace plating has gotten some work. The material it's made from is gravity reactive, so it works better and faster with more gravity applied to it. After mutating, it increases the density of gravity mana around me, and helps regenerate the carapace if it's damaged. After that is the Gravity Magic Gland, which put me on this path in the first place. It's made from Resonant Well Stone. The material transforms gravity energy back into gravity mana, replenishing its stock faster. For my previous mutations, I mostly just increased capacity, since you need a lot for most spells.]

[If you have the Skill, then that may not be necessary,] Granin grunts as he leans back and rubs his chin. [What else have you got going on?]

I explain to the three my antennae, which can detect a very short time into the future, along with my hyper-enhanced reaction speed that lets me dodge things before they come close to hitting me. Then I go on to detail my healing gland and the array of organs that function as the business district.

[You sure as hell put a lot of effort into your acid gland. It's not even that strong, is it?]

I feel a little defensive. I may not be using my acid much anymore, but that doesn't mean it isn't important!

[Hey, my acid gland was all I had after I spawned. Show it a little respect! The organs I purchased for it were all cheap, and I wanted it to continue to be useful for as long as possible. Shooting acid is a big part of being a Formica Sapiens. If possible, I want to find a way to reset the organs and utilise them going forward.]

[We may be able to do that.... Is that all?]

We go over my leg mutations and the other basic things I can do, including my multiple brains and all their mutations. After that, we go back into detail about exactly what the Altar can do and how it functions, as well as how I chose to mutate it.

When it's all said and done, Granin, Corun and Torrina look impressed, and a little intimidated.

[I knew you were a promising monster, Anthony, but I really didn't expect it to be to *this* extent. If you survive and continue to evolve, the road to Ancient is going to be laid out at your feet.]

[That's not really what I'm after....]

[I know. It's just...] he shrugs helplessly, [I can't help but be excited. You're the best prospect I've ever heard of. The things that you can do are already extraordinary. You're fighting off tier eight

monsters and you haven't even finished mutating your most powerful organs. It's... difficult for me to offer advice. I'm quite literally terrified I'll end up saying the wrong thing.]

And he does look worried. I suppose I can understand it. His life's ambition has never been closer than it is now, and he's filled with the knowledge that he might stuff it up.

[Look, all I'm after is a bit of advice. I got this far with your help and a bit of luck. Anything you can say will be useful. Mutation ideas, Skill suggestions. Anything. Especially for the Nave.]

[Give us a little bit of time to put our heads together. We need to think about this carefully.]

[You got it.]