

## Chrysalis 181

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#### Chapter 181: Unexpected company

My mind snaps back to its regular housing and I take a moment to reorient myself. I'm still where I was before, partially buried in a mound of workers with the Queen standing in front of me, quite close.

"Are you alright child?" she asks, seeing me suddenly look so fatigued.

"I'm completely fine!" I gasp out as my brain continues to melt into sludge, "how are you? How did it all go?"

I'm anxious to know if there was any pain or discomfort during the process. I could have tested it on my pets but there is a chance that the skill would have a different effect on them since they have a different relationship with me than most monsters. In the end I went ahead and worked on the Queen hoping that it would all be fine.

"I am fine" the Queen assures me, "it tickled a bit"

....

Tickled?

So having the fundamental makeup of your being tinkered with only results in a tickle?

Thank goodness!

"That's great!" I cry, "excellent! The whole process has been a success! Hopefully from now on our family will experience a great gain in strength!"

I stick around to counsel the Queen about spending some Biomass to mutate her egg production organs. She is quite reluctant at first but after trying several arguments I eventually tell her that by upgrading all three organs to +5 it will greatly increase the effect of the changes I've made to her core. This isn't really a lie. If she upgrades those organs and chooses some good mutation advancements for them the rate of egg production will increase as the overall efficiency of the system goes up. I don't know for sure what advancement choices will appear but it isn't hard to guess that almost all of them will be based around speeding up the process, reducing the cost of each egg or improving the stats of the offspring, any of which would be fine!

Once I'm certain that the Queen has agreed to upgrade all three organs before beginning to produce the new workers I drag myself back down to where Tiny is waiting and take a quick nap. The relentless battering my mind has taken has pushed even my newly evolved self pretty darn hard. Using the Core Surgery skill in particular was exceptionally draining. If I'd attempted to do it with my old self I'd have had absolutely no chance of getting anywhere at all. My respect for the Sophos only increases the further I walk down the path of core manipulation. Just how powerful are their minds to create the things they do? Are their brains filling their heads and extending down into their torso? Where do they fit it all?!

When I awake it isn't because I've rested my fill, but rather because my antennae are picking up something strange. Emergency pheromones from the workers!

Gah!

What is it?! What's happening?!

[TINY! Come on man! Action stations!] I blearily shout.

For once my pet ape is actually awake and when he sees me stumbling about drunkenly as I struggle to get my bearings he reaches out with massive paw and grabs hold of me firmly before picking me up and placing me on his shoulder.

I clutch onto his fur to avoid falling flat on my face and just like that he's up and moving, carrying me along for the ride. With his massive arms he reaches out and takes hold of the tunnel walls before dragging his massive frame upwards as if climbing on a jungle gym.

When we reach the Queen's chamber it is buzzing like a hive, the workers jittering this way and that and some of them stream upwards to the peak of the hill. The majority of them seem to want to remain and defend the Queen albeit in a highly agitated manner. Buried somewhere in that nervous mass of the workers the Queen seems content to stay still for the time being. I don't try to talk to her since it would be difficult to get a pheromone message through what is essentially hundreds of workers screaming "Emergency!" at the top of their lungs.

Being careful not to crush the ants as he moves Tiny continues to carry us to the surface one handhold at a time. By this stage I've mostly sorted myself out. My headache hasn't fully receded but it's much improved from when I began my rest. I've managed to notice Crinis and Vibrant are relaxing on my person as per usual, which is something of a relief. I'd rather they be where I can see them that off gallivanting somewhere when there might be a potential attack...

When Tiny makes his way out in the light at the top of the anthill I can finally take in the situation. Hundreds of ants have already appeared in response to the threat, aggressively postured to defend the colony from all directions.

Beyond them I can see something I truly did not expect to see.

Several hundred dishevelled looking humans are clustered around a number of wagons pulled by extremely poorly looking horses. At the lead is a figure that I sadly recognise all too well.

The priest, his robes stained with dirt and potentially dried blood becomes ecstatic at the sight of me and runs forward, spooking the workers considerably. They gnash their mandibles at him and I reluctantly ask them to settle down as I advance forward to meet him.

My life might be significantly simplified by this guy vanishing but I don't really want to kill him of anything. Besides, judging by the look of all of these people something rather serious has gone down. I recognise a few others in the group as members of the village that had rallied around me and the Queen during our short lived cooperation. In fact, the old lady I had captured before is here before... Enid!

As soon as the priest reaches me he falls to his knees and begins proclaiming in a loud voice, turning to indicate that the villagers behind him should do the same.

....

This guy really wants to feed the dark one's ego, doesn't he?

I still have no idea what the heck he is saying so for the time being I have to leave him to his own devices. It's a darn good thing I've evolved and actually have a chance to pull off the mind magic transformation, otherwise I'd be forced into some kind of interpretive dance right now.

Turning my attention inwardly and ignoring the prostrating human in front of me I summon the combined power of the brains and begin to painstakingly work on the transformation structure.

Not daring to allow myself any slips this time I double my focus and take everything slowly. This time I manage to make it all the way to the end of the process without stuffing it up but so careful and painstaking was I that it takes a full ten minutes for me finally complete it. During this time the humans have started to grow increasingly fidgety but the priests' capacity to extol my virtues seems to be endless.

Success! Finally complete! I admire the fiendishly complex final product in my mind. I've no idea why it's so outlandishly difficult to construct but it's done! Now to put the darn thing to use.

Along with the knowledge of how to construct the various mana transformers, the way to use them was also granted to me with the purchase of the skill. The construct itself doesn't do anything special, it's simply the magical mixing bowl that changes regular, attribute-less mana into the desired type.

In this instance, what I do is maintain the finished construct with one of my sub-brains and get the other to draw out raw mana from my core, which is then fed into the shape in a specific way. As soon as the raw mana enters, the construct leaps into life, surprising me momentarily. I didn't know it moved!

The entire construct begins to spin and whorl, different sections moving at different speeds and in subtly different directions. The entire effect is like a beautiful dance, like an engine but infinitely more intricate.

Then finally, FINALLY, out the other end of the construct a thin thread of glittering golden light emerges, Mind Mana!

With my main mind I eagerly seize this new mana and begin to replicate the spell I'd seen Formo cast so magnificently and the human Queen cast so poorly.

Mind Mana can do a heck of a lot more than this, I'm sure, but from what I've gathered this spell, which effectively enables universal communication between any two organisms smart enough to think, kind of overshadows the rest of the kit.

The Mind Bridge.

Hesitantly at first, then with growing confidence, I reach out and connect to the best Human for the job.

[Enid, what are you people doing here?]

The old lady leaps a foot in the air and drops her basket, spilling its contents and drawing the attention of the people around her.

"ME?!" she squawks.

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**Chapter 182: Rumour has i**

[Yes, you] I snap.

Enid immediately stumbles forward until she reaches the side of the still sonorously praising one-armed priest.

I see her concentrate and then her voice appears in my mind.

[Wouldn't it be more appropriate to communicate with this man?] she indicates the priest, [it was he who led our people to this place].

This priest?! How the heck did he find me?! Does he have some sort of tracking device on me or something?! More likely he was able to follow our trail somehow but the bottom line remains, what the heck are these people here for? They certainly don't look as they've come to fight, judging by the number of women and children in the crowd, not to mention the sheer lack of arms.

[I will speak to you since I have had dealings with you before. Make it clear to the others I am speaking to you].

I don't want to talk to that guy. He makes me a nervous.

Enid take a moment to gingerly touch the priest on the shoulder and indicate that I am communicating with her using mind magic. Rather than disappointed, the priests face is overcome with enlightenment and he bows low before me, head nearly touching the ground, before he backs away to speak animatedly to the crowd. Nothing phases this guy...

[Enid. Tell me why these people have followed my family here to the wild lands]

She hesitates a moment before she speaks. [Our homes have been destroyed. After you vanished following the assault on the castle things settled down at first. Many of the villagers wanted to know where you went but we weren't told anything. Things were calm for a week but then...]

She shivers then, her recollections are apparently still terrifying.

Enid draws a deep breath before focusing her mind once more. [Then the capital caught fire. We could hear the roaring of beasts from our houses and flames reached the so high it was sky was burning. We were terrified, nobody knew what to do. Then monsters burst out of the Dungeon and into the church, dozens of them. Some of the villagers fought for a time but they were never ending. Then the big ones came...]

She pauses for a moment, unable to go on. I'm not as good at reading human expressions as perhaps I was before but she seems overwhelmed with sadness and tears are streaming down her cheeks.

[Giant crocodiles came out. The children of Garralosh. They killed so many... Only thanks to Father Beyn did we survive. He rallied the survivors and organised a retreat. We ran from the town with nothing but what we could carry on our backs or throw onto a few carts. With the capital burning we had nowhere to go].

She gestures to the broken and desperate people behind her. [Without food or supplies, without knowing what was happening we decided to flee south. We heard word of the colony's passage as we travelled. Father Beyn believed that perhaps you would be able to help us as you had in the past and so we came here looking for you].

Looking me in the eye I can see she doesn't hold much hope. Having interacted with me directly and taken part in the deception to save her village from themselves she knows that I am not an altruistic saviour from the Dungeon as the priest believed.

[I just hope that you will let us settle nearby and leave us in peace, that's all we can ask. If you aren't willing then you may as well eat us] she says bitterly, [we've lost everything and have nowhere else to go].

I don't think I'll be eating anyone here, even if I do need Biomass. I'll be getting that from the Dungeon in short order, I need to prepare myself before the future generation of ant workers is born! This is a critical time for me and the colony! I don't want any of this crap to interfere with me raising the future workforce!

[Tell your people to go make camp at least one kilometre in that direction] I point with my antennae in front of the shocked woman, [tell Beyn I want him to get them settled make sure they don't interfere with the workers or approach the nest, he's in charge. I want you to stick around so I can ask more questions].

Surprised and joyful, Enid passes my words onto the others. The people appear glad to some extent, a little light returns to their dark and dull faces. With a little more energy and spring in their step they turn as Beyn, delirious with joy at being entrusted with this task begins to lead the others across, helping them to their feet and urging them with his persuasive voice.

[Enid, sit there] I point the tired old woman to a nearby stone and she gladly hobbles over to it and sits. I have no idea how she managed the journey at her age, trudging by foot over such a large distance. It was tiring enough for me and I'm a monster!

[What has happened Enid? Tell me what you know].

She shakes her head, grey hair swaying around her ears. [I don't know much. I think the monsters have invaded the surface. The capital got the worst of it, I can't imagine any other reason for the whole city to be torched like that. Those poor people...]

There would have been thousands of people trapped inside those walls. It isn't hard to imagine the chaos that would have occurred.

[I know a little about the Dungeon] Enid continues, [my husband taught me a lot about his work. It isn't normal for monsters to approach the surface like this. Something strange is happening].

I have no doubt about that. To me, strange stuff has been happening ever since I arrived here, so I'm not too fussed by it.

[You mentioned the Croca-Beasts? I mean the Garralosh Infants? Why bring them up in particular?]

[There were a lot of them. More than you would normally expect. You usually only find those things around here when their Mother has been past and lain a clutch of eggs somewhere deep but these ones were young. I have to think they were lain somewhere close to the surface, which would mean...]

[Wait a moment] I interrupt, [their Mother?!]

The older woman looks at me somewhat confused. [Of course, didn't the Queen tell you about Garralosh?]

[... not really].

[Garralosh has been around this area, deep in the Dungeon for hundreds of years. A century ago the beast decided to try and raise its own young. Ever since then it's hateful offspring have filled the Dungeon under Liria].

So all of those damnable Crocs actually DID come from a single parent? Like.. ALL of them? I know how that process works now, unless there is some crazy variant of it. That Garralosh monster would have had to have eaten an absolute mountain of Biomass to produce so many large and complex creatures.

Enid breaks into my thoughts with her mental voice. [I think Garralosh must have risen up in the Dungeon and assaulted the surface. It sounds insane, since something like that hasn't happened for thousands of years but it's the only thing I can think of that fits. Just... How? WHY?]

[Oh, that's easy] I say absentmindedly, [the mana level in the Dungeon is still getting higher is all].

First shock, then horror overtake Enid's face before her eyes roll back in her head and she passes out.

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#### **Chapter 183: Inconvenien**

Once Enid wakes up and manages to gather herself I speak to her a little longer before sending her back to her people. Then I lay a heck of a big pheromone marker around their campsite encouraging the workers not to eat them.

If they run into a worker outside of that ring.... That'll be a little different. Although I'm inclined to trust these people a heck of a lot more than I ever trusted their Queen I'm not prepared to let them run around willy nilly. They've been given a very small hurdle to jump over as the first action towards building trust, let's see how they go.

Job done I wander back over to the anthill, collecting Tiny on the way and we descend down to our little chamber, snacking on a few monsters once we get there.

....

This is the last thing we needed right now!! The changes to the Queen's core have only just been made, it'll be a week, two at the most, before she's ready and laid the first batch of the new wave of workers. I cannot afford to have anything go wrong! Those ants will be a heck of a lot smarter than the previous hatchlings but they are also significantly weaker! These ants are going to be like human infants, without someone to help guide them and raise them in the beginning they won't be able to reach their potential!

If I've got giant Croca-Babies and their Mother burning the Dungeon tunnels and the entire surface to the ground then it's hardly going to be an idea environment to raise ant hatchlings!

What a pain in the thorax!

What the heck am I going to do?

I can't just leave it as is... Enid made it perfectly clear that there would likely be more refugees from Liria heading south over the next few days. She seemed to think that the destruction was centred on the capital and then expanded outwards. There were a whole lot of panicked people in the towns and villages they passed, getting ready to flee at the first sign of danger. Those people are probably already on the road in this direction.

Even if I don't do anything about it the problem will reach me eventually. If those Crocs and the other monsters are running about on the surface then there's no reason to believe they won't come here.

Only one thing for it then. If I'm going to get the peace and quiet I need to change the destiny of ant kind then I'm going to have to clear up our little Croc problem.

First things first!

[Tiny! Crinis! It's time to go smash stuff and eat!]

"Vibrant! Where did you get to?!"

"Here-here!"

She's on top of Tiny's head for a change, I should encourage that.

"We're moving out into the Dungeon, we need to clear it at high speed and stuff ourselves with Biomass as we go. You coming?"

"Yippee!"

Of course she is.

I've already done what I can to organise the humans for the time being. They know where to go and were not to, they have access to water from a nearby spring and they'll need to sort themselves out food-wise to some extent. It isn't as if we have a heap of ant bakers churning out fine baguettes or anything.

The first order of business is to go into the Dungeon and check out the situation there, whilst power eating. I need more Biomass and Crinis needs to grow up as quickly as possible! I send a quick message to Enid letting her know that I'll be in the Dungeon for the next few days and to make sure her people and any newcomers stick to the rules I've lain down in my absence. I'm not worried about these humans overpowering the colony at all, they're mostly farmers and craftsmen, but I do want to avoid unnecessary casualties on both sides. We have bigger crocs to fry.

I break off the Mind Bridge to Enid and immediately my Sub-Brains relax into little balls of goop. It was damn hard maintaining it over that distance but I wanted to test my limits. Formo managed to weave one over a distance of kilometres without breaking a sweat but I'm still a mile away from that level. Even maintaining it over a distance of one kilometre was about all I could manage.

I also allow the Mind Magic construct to collapse at this time, further releasing the burden on my brains. Now that I succeeded once I'm sure I'll be able to reproduce it easier the next time.

Once my brains have had a rest I'll need to get to testing some more combat oriented transformation constructs. Probably the water one.

Into the Dungeon!

The gang advances down into the Dungeon at a rapid pace. Tiny is able to quickly slap to death any of the regular customers we see as we rapidly descend through the upper tunnels. We take a few detours here and there to make sure nothing is slipping past us as we travel, fleshing out my tunnel map a little more and pushing the skill to level 5.

Any time we encounter an evolved creature we get the little ones to stuff themselves with it to mount up that Biomass. There is one problem I have though.

[Crisis] I ask.

[Yes master] she responds quickly this time, perhaps sensing I wasn't going to tolerate silence on this one.

[Are you actually growing? You're the same size as you were when you were born] I point out.

[....]

It's true. She's still roughly the size of a tennis ball. Sometimes she appears a bit larger and certainly anytime she's eating she looks much bigger but when at rest, such as now, she reverts back to a handy tennis ball.

[Well?] I prod.

[... I am growing master] she finally responds, sounding embarrassed.

[... and?]

She clearly doesn't want to be talking about this. [I can compress the extra mass master, due my nature as a shadow beast. I have been growing properly].

[So why do you choose to be such a small size all the time?] I ask, baffled.

Wouldn't it be more impressive to be larger? Display her strength to the world?

[... I think it's easier like this] she suddenly gushes, [I fit on masters' back much more comfortably!]

Well... that is true I suppose.

[If you want to stay small you can stay small Crisis, whatever floats your boat] I say, [just let me know the second you're ready for combat, we need to power level you in a big way].

[Yes master! It won't be long now!]

[Oh? Good!]

The sooner she can turn into the blending tentacle orb of death she was before the better. She's seriously taking a lot longer to grow than Tiny did. Is it because she's a more complex creature? Or at least she was at the time of her reconstitution. I'm starting to see how that skill that increases the speed of pet growth might be desirable.



We continue our way down the tunnels. So far everything appears to be as normal, dumb plants, the occasional pig, various other little bits of nothing. Other than dashing about every now and again to train the skill I leave most of the fighting to Tiny. I need to let my brains rest before I start testing new magic constructions. I do manage to put my new mandibles to work however. The Savage mandibles have much more impressive cutting strength than the regular mandibles, the bites are nastier, wider and look like they'd be more difficult to heal as well. All in all I'm quite happy with this upgrade.

Time to go deeper.

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### **Chapter 184: Ape slap**

We make much more rapid progress in our descent this time as opposed to the first. Tiny is much stronger after his second consecutive special evolution and he smashes his way with extreme speed and a strangely casual attitude through these small fry. I don't think I've even seen him throw a punch, he's just squashing monsters flat underneath his palms for the most part.

I really have no idea exactly what he gained in the evolution. Perhaps some new organs? Something related to his lightning? Maybe a boost to his sonic scream? I'm more tempted than ever to take the skill that allows me to look at a pet's status, simply for convenience sake but I resist. Now that I have the core surgery skill I can take a look at his information using that, it's just a bit more difficult to do so. I have a lot of skill points saved up at the moment so the thought of casually spending one or two to make life a little easier is extremely tempting.

As Tiny keeps slapping his way through the upper layers we pause every now and again to let the little ones eat. I've told Crinis to exercise as much as possible to aid her digestion in order to allow for maximum food stuffage in the shortest period of time. What this means is that she is frantically waving tentacles all over the place whilst riding on my back. She can extend a lot more limbs a lot further than she could not that long ago so I'll take that as evidence that she is fact growing properly.

Whenever we take breaks I flip open the skills menu and flick through it, looking for anything new that has appeared or anything that might be useful. There are a few skills I hadn't seen before that I'm considering purchasing, especially these few:

[Water Magic affinity, Increases the users comfort, speed and efficacy when using mana of the water attribute]

[Fire Magic affinity, Increases the users comfort, speed and efficacy when using mana of the fire attribute]

[Earth Magic affinity, Increases the users comfort, speed and efficacy when using mana of the earth attribute]

[Wind Magic affinity, Increases the users comfort, speed and efficacy when using mana of the wind attribute]

The appearance of these skills seems to answer a few questions in my mind. It appears that once an intelligent creature has mastered the transformation skill to some extent then they will be able to choose an affinity to make it easier to advance onto the next step. I'm guessing that with higher levels of

the Mana Transformation skill, or perhaps when the skill advances to the next rank then other, more advanced affinities will become unlocked.

It makes sense that these basic elements are the first to become available since of all the mana types these four have the most basic transformation constructs, meaning they are the most simple attributes of all.

After some consideration I eventually purchase the Water Magic Affinity. I know that the Croca-Beasts have a fire magic gland, despite being based on an aquatic creature. Even if water magic doesn't prove to be too effective offensively against them, I'm sure it'll be more than a little handy defensively.

That thought leads me in an interesting direction. Is it possible for a creature to have poor compatibility with certain elements? Or good affinity? A water based lifeform like a crocodile doesn't seem to have good synergy with fire magic on the surface... maybe I'm overthinking the whole Crocodile thing. Just because they dwell in water on my world doesn't necessarily mean that they do here, or that the Croca-Beasts are better in water than anything else in the Dungeon.

I decide to poke through a Garralosh Infant core the next time I get one. My skill level is much higher now than the last time I looked at one and I might be able to see something I couldn't before.

We continue for about an hour, stopping every now and again. Eventually we make our way down to the location of the short cut we had previously dug. Whilst Tiny smashes everything I continue to charge about like crazy, delighting the little ones, until the notification springs up in my mind.

[Dash has reached level 5. Skill advancement available]

Nice!

[Dash - > Rapid Dash. Like a flaming horse the user will be able to dash faster and with more precision]

I'll take it!

Even with this I still have ten skill points saved up... I'll leave it for now but I really ought to be spending these. Skill points in the bank do nothing to increase strength! I do need to a few points in reserve so I can advance key skills when they hit the cap but ten is really pushing it.

Once the local tunnel has been emptied out then we excavate the entrance and start clearing the shortcut of spawned monsters. By this time the Dungeon has extended its veins all the way to the top. Beasties and plants have spawned all over the place and started ripping into each other with gusto. It's all over very quickly once we arrive. I go into high gear just to help take care of things quickly and bite the heck out of everything I see. Once finished we pile up the more evolved species at the top of the shortcut and I spray food pheromones all over the place. This tasty meal should find itself in front of the Queen fairly shortly.

Next order of business! Brief rest!

....

Okay! Back at it. In order to ensure the Dungeon beneath the colony is safe we keep moving and mapping out the branching paths as much as possible. Every tunnel Tiny can fit in is explored to some extent, those that he can't I scurry into myself and snap everything I find to bits.

...

This is exhausting! On the plus side my Tunnel map is becoming more and more complete. This is something necessary for the defence of the colony.

After we spend another two hours clearing out the tunnels we reconvene once again back at the shortcut for another rest and feeding session. Tiny and I are getting very little Biomass from the food at this point. I scrounge together five points after stuffing myself, but at least I get the benefit of having my various nicks healed.

I spend the points straight away on upgrading my new supportive skeleton to +2 and my coordination cortex to +1. The most efficient play will be to upgrade these new body parts to +5 before resuming the journey to all +10. Technically I take a body part to +15 at this level of evolution....

I really need to get my eat on. I've evolved too quickly for my stomach to keep up!

I send Tiny up the shortcut with another shipment of food for the Queen. She'll get even less than I do out of these monsters but it's much better than feeding on the piddling surface creatures. The sooner we get that egg production system upgraded the better. The new generation must be as strong as possible.

I'll have to check in on her when I get back actually.... If she's storing Biomass to produce eggs without upgrading herself....

Let's just say I wouldn't be surprised.

When Tiny returns we settle in for a brief nap and then gather together into the main tunnel, sealing the shortcut closed behind us. It's time to delve a little deeper. We still have over a day of exploration time before we are expected back on the surface and I intend to be sure there aren't any threats coming from below before we return.

At this point I hear something echoing up the tunnel towards us. A faint wail, the fading sound of bone on bone.

Something is coming.

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### **Chapter 185: The Surge**

Almost as if the air were rushing towards us I can feel a wave pressure roll up the tunnel and press against my face.

It... isn't comfortable.

["Something is coming up. Get ready to fight"] I warn my crew.

Vibrant and Crinis huddle carefully on my person. Tiny stands to his full height, his head brushing the roof. He can also sense something is coming. His silver fur starts to rise off his frame as electrical sparks begin to shimmer and zap across his frame.

Ohhhh he's pumped up! I'm also keen to see what he can do now that he's evolved. That massive frame isn't for nothing, I'm sure I'll see something interesting when he goes at it. Now that I think of it I should also start making some preparations.

My two sub brains are well rested now and ready for action. It's time to put them to work. Wanting to test their strength I task each of them with a separate spell, one Gravity Bolt each. Best to begin with the basics and work their way up.

As the pressure continues to build and roll against us like waves from the tunnel before us I sense internally as my two little helpers get busy shaping the spells. Independently they draw on the gravitational mana stored in my gland and begin to shape the spells.

Gweheheheheh.

Excellent!

Chuckling to myself with glee I then begin to shape a third spell with my main mind. Not double the spells, TRIPLE the spells! This is the true, awesome power of my Divergent Mind! The sub brains are not as quick nor as capable as I was in my last evolution. They lack the force of will to shift the mana as rapidly and the cunning to weave the shapes as deftly, but even if it takes them twice as long, being able to independently cast their own spells makes these sub brains so damn useful!

Now to unleash the fearsome might, the unparalleled force and the extraordinary dexterity of my newly upgraded main brain!

After all, most of the extra juice I pumped into my mental faculties was spent on this, in terms of will or cunning I'm nothing like I was before! Behold!

With force and precision I draw on the gravitational mana to rapidly weave it into a Gravity Spear, the long body of the spell with its surrounding intricate engraved circles take shape at record pace. Incredible!

My ability to use magic in combat situations has absolutely shot through the roof! I'm more than satisfied! With my next evolution I may spend a little of my budget neatening up the edges but I don't think I need much more juice in the mental department. I'll be ramping up my physical stats until the same size as Tiny!

Once the spells are formed I hold each of them ready, one mind for each, and prepare myself to face whatever is coming up the tunnel.

Tiny is so excited he's practically fidgeting. Calm down, oi!

Gradually the sounds from the tunnel build in volume. From a whisper to a murmur and then rising into a crescendo of sound. Roars, screams and the pounding of feet fill the air, rattling my nerves. I STILL can't see anything coming?! Where the heck are they?!

This sounds like a freaking stampede of monsters!

Just when I'm starting to reconsider our frontal approach the edges of the horde come into view. My first impression is a wave of teeth rushing towards us at full speed. The second and third impressions are much the same.

What the heck is this?!

Dozens of monsters, hundreds even, are charging towards us with mouths gaping and claws rending the air! What's going on?! They aren't fighting each other at all.. This is weird! Gandalf? Any advice?!

....

Dammit you beardy faced pile of senility!

[Tiny! This is going to get rough! Go all out!]

Why the hell didn't I get a Gravity Bomb ready?!

I see all sorts of monsters mixed into the onrushing horde. Shadowy monsters, Imps, pigs and even some of the mobile plant types are in the mix! I just can't understand why they are all cooperating...

And the formless pressure is still building, pressing down on us like an unseen hand.

No time to hesitate, let's do this!

Experience the power of my ant soul!

Gravity Spear! Gravity Bolt! Gravity Bolt!

All three spells are launched simultaneously, streaking through the air like glittering purple arrows. The monsters have no capacity to dodge, as packed together as they are. The leading shadow beast is speared directly through the chest and the creatures around him are instantly wrapped within the expanding circles as the spell activates.

The second the pull is applied over ten monsters are dragged towards the target. Not expecting the sudden force they are thrown off their feet and stumble, only to be smashed into the ground by the pounding feet of the creatures behind them. Some other monsters trip and fall, only to meet the same fate as the others under the heels/claws of their brethren.

[You have slain...

[You have slain ...

No time for that!

The two Gravity Bolts smack into another two monsters and drag them down to the ground. These are also quickly crushed. With five or six monsters dead the size of the coming monster wave hasn't even diminished!

Going to need to bring out the big guns!

I spin up the backup singers and task them with preparing the much more complex Gravity Domain. With the two of them working in tandem they should be able to handle it! I don't want to chip in with the main mind right now, I need my wits about me!

Tiny is getting increasingly riled up, the electricity is crackling all over his frame by now, stinging the air around with frequent flashes of light. In the face on the onrushing monsters he doesn't flinch but rather

smashes his chest with his mighty fists and roars! His powerful bellows and shrieks are so loud they even rise above the cacophony of the beasts coming at us!

He doesn't stop there! Having issued his challenge the ape begins to charge forward, smashing the tunnel floor with his knuckles as he picks up speed! He's not content to wait at all, he's going to take the fight to the enemy!

Dammit Tiny!

["We're going in with him! Hold on!"]

Dash!

I spring forward with Tiny, hurtling ourselves to the onrushing horde. As I get closer the thousands of teeth and claws grow larger in my sight until there is nothing else I can see. This is madness! What is happening here is sheer madness!

How's that domain coming?!

Still not ready?!

CRASH!

Like a cannonball Tiny smashes into the front ranks of the wave, fists flying. Monsters are catapulted into the air and smash into the walls as he continues to propel himself forward, bellowing his challenge as he goes.

The enemies are endless! As Tiny moves forward he is quickly surrounded, the monsters latch onto him with claws, mouths tentacles and whatever else they have available, lashing the ape again and again.

Oh no you don't!

SHATTERING BITE!

CRUNCH!

Pouring out my stamina into the bite I manifest jaws of light over two metres long and rip them closed. The Savage Mandibles display their ferocity, tearing my enemies apart and crushing them in the same breath.

The horde of monsters is endless. Is this the true Wave? I feel like I'm battling the tide!

SHATTERING BITE! SHATTERING BITE! SHATTERING BITE! SHATTERING BITE!

I lash out at the monsters closing in around us but as quickly as I crush them they are instantly replaced by more. Tiny doesn't seem to care, he keeps pushing deeper, sending waves of monsters flying with every lashing of his fists. The electricity on him is still building! It's started flashing out and lighting up the monsters around him like Christmas trees but it doesn't feel like it's going to stop there!

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**Chapter 186: Dire lightning Storm Kong**

Electricity rippling across his body endlessly, Tiny's fists continue to flash out and devastate his opponents. None can stand up to his blows. That doesn't shock me much. We're talking about a ten foot tall Gorilla monster here. If I'd seen a Gorilla on Earth that was ten feet tall I'd have fair browned my downstairs department. Physical strength is something he has in spades.

What is really impressive is the lightning strikes flashing from his body without him having to think about it, blasting creatures around him who draw too close. Problem is they have no choice but to get too close since they are a mindless mass of monsters that pushes forward no matter what.

We are still taking damage he and I. As fast as we can destroy the enemies they are replaced just as quickly. It only took a few seconds of following Tiny's charge for the two of us to be completely surrounded, buried amongst the monsters. They lash at us from all sides, battering me with their limbs, trying to bite through my tough carapace and raising sparks between their teeth and my shell. I'm losing Hp here!

Thankfully my defence is holding up pretty well but Tiny is suffering more, he doesn't have a nice handy outer skeleton and his fur is only a little protection. I feel as if his physical stats are inordinately slanted towards Might as opposed to Toughness. As the claws and teeth of our foes rain down on him he is continuously taking damage.

Not that he slows down any...

Is that Domain ready yet?!

My two sub brains have been frantically working together to weave the far more complex spell as quickly as they can but it's still not done. Unwilling to wait any longer I focus with my main mind and ignore the rain of blows that fall on me the moment I grow still. With every ounce of my mental strength applied to the task the spell takes form rapidly, layer after layer of complexity added to the construct until it's finally complete.

Not hesitating in the slightest I open the sluice gates and pour in the Gravitational mana like it's going out of fashion. Get! This! Spell! Done!

There!

The instant it's ready I unleash the domain and the glittering purple dome of energy rapidly expands outwards, encompassing the entire width of the tunnel it expands ten metres out in all directions.

THROOM!

With an audible noise the massive Gravitation pull kicks in and the monsters around me are immediately effected.

[Tiny!] I shout.

The ape instantly realises what has happened and turns back towards me. These monsters are made of sterner stuff and won't collapse to the ground just because of the Domain but their ability to move and contest us has easily halved. The shadow beasts are probably holding up better than the rest, their strange elastic flesh is far stronger than it appears.

But now we can manage.

"K!!!"

Tiny opens his mouth wide and unleashes his ultimate bat scream, the ultrasonic wave! The ear shattering sound is even stronger than before, piercing straight through my ear holes and stabbing into my brain.

That stings!

I manage to resist the stunning effect of the scream thanks to my over tuned Will but most of the monsters around us aren't so lucky. Those caught inside the Domain have it the worst, hit by double debilitating effects but those on the outside don't look so flash either.

[Get em!]

The two of us immediately start flailing about madly, Tiny with his fists and me with my jaws. I use shattering bite over and over again until my face aches and exhaustion creeps in whilst Tiny lashes out with his fists endlessly. Even now the monsters keep coming! They are walking straight into the Domain but they don't seem to care. What is driving these creatures?!

[Tiny, retreat and eat something, restore your strength!]

The limiting factor here is our stamina, I might have taken less damage than Tiny but his robust physique will provide him a lot more energy. After constantly using my advanced physical skills I'm beginning to run out of gas.

My two sub brains are currently tasked with maintaining the Domain, a constant flood of Gravitational Mana flows out of my gland and into the construct powering the spell. Thanks to the bottomless upgrade I don't need to worry about running out of mana in the short term. My feet are sucking up energy from the floor every passing second but the rate of transfer into Gravity mana is still painfully slow.

Tiny shakes his head at me but ultimately can't refuse my order. He throws himself behind me and starts stuffing his face with the plentiful Biomass littered across the Tunnel floor. The food will help accelerate the healing of his wounds and give a little extra fuel in the stamina fire.

[Crisis! Go with him this is going to get dangerous!] I yell as I flick the little ball of dark rubber at Tiny as he runs past.

With all of these attacks raining down on me I don't want the little one to get squashed by accident. She's still not grown and combat ready after all. Vibrant at least is a proper monster, with a carapace to protect her from any glancing blows .

With Tiny gone the monsters descend on me like locusts. I can't even tell how many there are or if we are whittling down their numbers even slightly. My impressive, nearly 360 degree vision is giving me a wonderful 360 degree view of monsters mouths trying to attach themselves to my person!

I continue to absorb the battering, laying out with my mandibles at every opportunity. In an effort to avoid complete exhaustion I stopped using my skills and instead started channelling mana into my mandibles to add a bit more punch to my bite.

Crunch! Crunch! Crunch!



The horrific sounds of my jaws at work mixed with the howls and savage cries of the beasts. I felt like I held on for hours but it was probably only a minute before I heard Tiny's furious voice ringing in my mind.

[FIGHT!]

Sounds like he's had enough eating! I turn and bolt towards his location at the rear of the fight as he charges forward into the fray once more! I try and stay close behind him as I start stuffing my face with Biomass and activate my healing gland to recover from the battering I'd just received.

I hope Tiny can hold on for a while, I'm knackered. This is the weakness of my body right now, mental power for days but not enough combat effectiveness to take from it yet. I need to start practicing the water transformation construct as soon as possible!

Tiny re-joins the fight with relish and pounds his opponents into the dirt with rising glee. The electricity on his body is still crackling away, blasting the occasional monster into a deep fried version of itself. Does he ever run out of electricity?

Apparently not! With a mighty bellow Tiny raises both his hands over his head, bringing them together for a slam. Once his fists rise into the air all the electrical energy crackling over his body floods up his arms and concentrates on his fists, causing them to shine so brightly I wish I had eyelids.

As the electrical energy intensifies I can hear a static whine rising in pitch ever moment until it rises above the register I can hear. I can still feel it though, causing the hairs on my antennae to shake violently.

The monsters around him don't seem to know what is coming as they continue to charge forward, leaping at Tiny, desperate to take a bite out of him.

Then those fists come down and the tunnel is filled with lightning.

The entire tunnel shakes when those fists impact the ground, knocking most monsters off their feet, but it isn't over. The electricity contained in the strike erupts explosively, rolling outwards from the point of impact in a forward arc. Crackling over the floor it slides over the ground like a wave and every monster it touches gets thoroughly cooked. Dozens of monsters fall to the ground as the tide of lightning rolls through their ranks, decimating the foes in a blinding flash.

That. Is. Hot. To. Death!

Tiny you the ape!

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### **Chapter 187: Crinis Unleashed**

I hadn't even finished celebrating Tiny's spectacular lightning wave technique (named it myself) before my joy is quenched by more monsters rushing up the as the ones in front of them collapsed from being overcooked.

Dammit!

How many of these damn things are there going to be?!

I hurriedly make use of the room Tiny has bought us by stuffing my face as full of Biomass as quickly as I can. Every bit counts! I also snap up my status for a moment to check on any skill changes. Every edge I can get in this critical fight!

Hmmm.

I've gained a level of Shattering Bite and two levels in Advanced Exo-Skeleton defence. Letting myself get battered by a horde of trash seems like a good way to train that skill, if painful. It looks like I'm going to get battered to hell all over again in a minute, the next wave of shadow beasts will be on us in a few seconds!

Seems I also managed to gain two levels from the conflict as well. Not too helpful at the present moment but nice to know!

[Master!]

[Crisis! What's up?!]

[I'm ready!]

....

Those monsters are closing in quick! I don't have time for a chat!

[Ready for what?!]

[To fight!]

[Fight what?!]

I really need her to get to the point here.

[... I've finished my growth phase] she slows down to explain to me clearly [If you point me at the enemy I can fight them]

Oh.... Ohhhhhh! AWWWWW!!

[Quick grab on!]

I shift an antennae over in her direction and the little tennis ball sized glob of dark rubber reaches up and latches on. She's still the same size as she was before..

[Are you sure?!] I ask.

[Positive, Master]

[Ok then.. Here you go!]

I flick her into the air directly towards the onrushing beasts. Tiny watches as she sails over his head, tracing a graceful arc through the air. As she travels something remarkable happens. She starts to grow. From a little tennis ball she expands, by the time she reaches the apex of her arc she's inflated to basketball size and as she descends she continues to become larger. Just before she vanishes into the

crowd of monsters the central sphere of her body unfolds and dozens of powerful, barbed tentacles appear surrounding a horrific, open maw.

'Dis gon be good!

Almost giddy with anticipation I skitter up the wall to get a better view of the action.

Just in time too!

Once that inflated ball vanished from sight, sunk into the middle of the onrushing horde, a few seconds passed and then.... Chaos!

Tentacles began flailing wildly as Crinis unleashes the true power of the JellyMaw! Mowing down monsters like a scythe or gripping them, lifting them into the air and crushing them before they are tossed into that endless mouth.

Monster after monster vanishes into Crinis' gullet and she doesn't seem to change size at all! Whatever dimension they are travelling to I hope their end is a peaceful one! The monsters do their best to fight back, slashing at her tentacles or dashing forward to bite at her. I'm sure their doing damage but I can't see it.

At the rate she's eating them she might just be healing it right back up anyway!

Between myself and the shredding, Tiny stands quite still, squishing to death any monster that gets close enough or tries to slip past him. I think he might be enjoying the show just as much as I am!

[How is it going Crinis!? Do you need help?] I enquire.

[No need Master, you don't need to sully your mandibles with this trash]

....

That's a bit harsh on them isn't it?

Releasing my Domain spell I start weaving a few Gravity bolts and fling them into the fight whenever they're ready. Trying to do a little bit to ease the burden on my youngest pet but it doesn't seem like she needs it...

When it comes to cutting down weaker creatures like chaff she is surely the most suitable out of herself and Tiny. The big ape is more specialised as a big hitter, though his new area lightning strike certainly helps him out in this department.

This is why I chose to make Crinis my second pet, she counterbalances Tiny extremely well!

Watching her shred through the endless waves of monsters is almost enough to bring a tear of pride to my eye. If she seems deadly now, just wait until she evolves!

Her main disadvantage of not being able to see is totally irrelevant to her at the moment. No matter what direction she extends a limb there is going to be an enemy there! Like a relentless machine those tentacles reach out, snatch up a monster and crush it before snapping out to seize another victim.

It's endless!

In the end I just leave the casting of the Gravity Bolts to my sub brains and chill out on the wall. It's kind of nice to be so unneeded.

[Ah... Crinis can you not eat so many, we could send some of that up to the Queen]

[Oh! Sorry Master! I.. I'll control myself]

[Thanks]

....

She really is a hungry thing isn't she?

Eventually Tiny gets bored and wades back into the fight, making sure to remain a minimum distance away from his fellow pet. He throws and slams monsters to his heart's content whilst I just continue to watch.

So peaceful here in the Dungeon....

After another twenty minutes of monster splatting there finally seems to be none left and we are able to spend some time picking through the battlefield. Looking at the heaped piles of monster remains I try and estimate just how many there were in this ravenous swarm. The Biomass is piled high even though Crinis probably ate almost a hundred monsters on her own. Just where is her stomach?!

When I finally come up with a number I feel a chill rush through my carapace. There must have been almost a thousand of them! If Tiny and I hadn't evolved... if Crinis hadn't suddenly been able to fight...

What would have happened to us if we tried to face down that many monsters?!

It's chilling to think about. I have so many questions now as a result of this... Why has this happened now? The Queen certainly never mentioned this sort of phenomenon, though it does seem reminiscent of what Enid told me happened back in Liria.

Are these monsters being controlled or threatened? Are they being chased out of their territory and sent up the Dungeon?!

I'll have to answer these questions another time. First we all eat until we are full, not that Crinis had any more space... I manage to gain eight Biomass, then I pick over the battlefield to find any monster cores using my mana sense whilst Tiny piles up a feed for the Queen over at the hidden entrance to our shortcut.

I manage to find twenty cores amongst the wreckage which I give to Crinis who promptly sticks them into the multi-dimensional folds of her person and then shrinks herself back down to a tennis ball which I place on my back.

....

HEAVY!

SO DAMN HEAVY!

She might be able to hide all that Biomass but she still carries the weight!

[Is everything alright Master] says the innocent little murder blob on my back.

My legs are shaking!

[I'm ok!] I wheeze.

"Crisis was so awesome!" cheers Vibrant, rushing over to her mini friend and rolling her about with her antennae.

["Look. Let's take this food up to the surface and then do a check of the nearby tunnels. I want to make sure no monsters made it past us and up to the Queens chamber"]

["Ok!"]

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#### **Chapter 188: Playing with water**

After delivering the Biomass to the surface and marking it with pheromones so the colony will pick it up we return back down to the entrance, making sure to conceal it once again. I feel good knowing that all of this Biomass is going to bring the Queen closer to upgrading all of her egg production organs and laying the first generation of the new workers!

For that happy occasion to come to pass we need to work hard! Get to it Anthony! Protect the colony! Kill the invaders!

Once we get back down we backtrack up the tunnel check out the branching paths off this main tunnel. After two hours of meticulous searching we come up with nothing... no tracks, no monsters no nothing.

It seems like that deadly 'wave' of monsters only came up the tunnel we were in... it seems like too much of a coincidence to write off as luck. There must be something about this tunnel in particular...

After resting briefly (I get Crisis to hop off briefly so I can stretch my legs) I decide that we will venture further down and explore this tunnel a little deeper. We aren't that far down here, if there is any serious action happening it's surely going to be deeper than this.

The four of us gird ourselves and begin to venture deeper into the Dungeon.

As we descend I can really feel the difference in the mana. It's certainly more dense than it was when we fled the Dungeon at the start of the wave, no doubt about it. I think the wave has clearly moved into a new phase as stronger monsters with longer gestation periods are forming in the walls now. On the one hand it means they aren't popping out every few minutes but on the other it means a stronger fight when they are finally formed.

All in all its slightly better than it was before but not by much.

Still, this change leads me to conclude that something weird is going on in the Dungeon, and I don't like it. The monsters become tougher as we descend, even if they aren't necessarily a higher tier of creature. Something I've noticed during my time is that even creatures of the same species are often found lower down if they are a higher level. Perhaps it's a natural instinct of monsters to move lower the stronger they get?

Certainly I have a good reason to be inside the Dungeon, with my core draining until I die if I don't have access to the sweet, sweet mana.

Whilst we travel I start practicing the formation of the water mana transformation construct. It's far simpler than the Mind Magic one so it doesn't take long for me to start making progress. I wonder if this is how human mages train, by repeatedly forming these constructs they get good enough to form them at high speeds so they can cast spells?

It makes sense I suppose. I'm cheating in many ways, since rather than improve my mind through exercises and repeated practice I simply upgraded my brain during the evolution process...

Ha! This is the advantage of monster kind! This is my consolation for having to eat guts and bones all the time without any seasoning!

I let Tiny resume his monster slapping role as we explore, filling in my Tunnel map and tracing the side tunnels a ways when they appear. I wonder if there is an expanse down here somewhere? From what I've been told of the Dungeon they appear fairly regularly at various depths. The forest expanse was only unusual for how close it was to the surface. The various expanse are almost like the organs of the Dungeon, the vital ecosystems that keep it running. The connecting Tunnels are like the veins, allowing monsters and mana to flow between them. At least that's how the Queen phrased it.

It isn't really a question of is there an expanse down here somewhere but where it is. It may be straight down or off to one side of us. No matter what, all main tunnels will eventually connect to an expanse, so as long as we trace them out we are going to find one.

About twenty minutes later I finally succeed in forming my first water mana transformation construct!

Whoo!

So much easier than the mind magic one... My upgraded brain has already succeeded! Perhaps this is the effect of the affinity skill as well?!

I can't wait to try out some spells!

Eagerly I start feeding some raw mana into the construct and it begins to perform it's intricate dance, working its special alchemy on the raw mana from my core until it finally emerges from the other end as shimmering blue water mana!

So exciting!

I leave on sub brain in charge of holding the construct in place and task the other with feeding a constant stream of raw mana from my core into it whilst I take the mana and begin testing some of the known shapes to see what works.

First.. The bolt!

Following much the same principles as the gravity bolt I begin to use the mana to weave the familiar shape until a shimmering blue bolt is formed within my mind. Nice! Let's test this sucka!

Fire!

Fwoosh!

Filled with blue mana a dense ball of water is formed that blasts forwards and impacts against a nearby rock formation where it explodes! Water flies everywhere and the stone partially crumbles under the impact of the pressurised water ball.

Holy heck!

So nice!

Let's try the spear!

I gather together a new mana thread and start trying to form the spear shape but the spell doesn't seem to want to come together. The more I try and force it the more it pushes back until the whole thing snaps and comes apart.

....

Wha?!

Why the heck did that fail!?

I try again, a bit irritated this time but the same thing happens. I get to a point where the spell simply won't come together and if I try to force it then it just breaks and dissolves to nothing.

GAH!

Let's put the spear aside for a moment and try something else.

I could try the Domain spell I guess... but I don't want to use that much mana and exhaust my mind so randomly... what other shapes are there? I haven't looked at the others since I haven't really used them in so long.

..... Hmm...

I flick through a few different spells in my mind before settling on one. This'll do!

The shape I've chosen is similar to the spear but more open ended, kind of like a cylinder within a cylinder and both are engraved with elaborate patterns and signs. Not the worst thing I've ever seen let's give it a go!

With my powerful main mind on the job I work patiently through the process of forming the construct and ten minutes later it's finally complete! I may have had to remake a few parts but for my first go that isn't too bad!

Let's power it up and see what it does!

Fire!

FOOM!

A solid jet of water appears from above my head and blasts forward as if shot from a fire hose! Holy Moly! The potent stream of water sends spray fountaining everywhere as it smashes into the wall of the tunnel!

Ah, It's still drawing on my mana! Turn it off! Turn it off!

So, a water cannon?

Tiny is looking at me, irritated, dripping wet from the spray.

... Sorry about that buddy!

I wonder which other shapes will work. There are a few I still haven't tried, even with gravitational mana. Since my raw mana is being replenished quite rapidly through my feet I may as well try and experiment.

I think of the various shapes that have been implanted in my head when learning my magic related skills and find one to my liking. This one is sort of a curved arc with a cloud-like base. I don't know why but I feel like it will be impressive.

It's a bit more difficult than the last one so I take my time to carefully construct it as Tiny slaps to death the various monsters we come across. Eventually its ready and I start powering it. The moment I do, I realise that this one is going to need quite a lot of juice before I can cast it.

[Tiny? Come and stand behind me]

The giant ape stop and immediately moves behind me, carefully positioning his lumbering form to avoid possible splashback.

Still thinking about that eh?

Being careful I continue to feed the water attribute mana into the spell as it comes out of my transformation construct, drawing the reserves in my core lower and lower. Just how much is this spell going to take?!

Aha! Ready at last!

Eagerly I activate the spell and then stumble a little as the potent magic activates.

With a colossal BOOM water EXPLODES out of the ground in front of me with a deafening roar and thunders down the tunnel in a mighty tidal wave!

Stone pillars shatter and get washed away by the sheer kinetic force of the wave as it froths and foams forwards, eventually following the tunnel around a bend and out of sight.

...

Then we hear a chorus of angry roars echoing back up the chamber towards us.

... Whoops?

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**Chapter 189: The Croca Army**



Looks like we might have hit something by mistake?

Although, considering everything down that tunnel is sure to be hostile, I'm not sure I would call it a mistake?

I wonder what I even hit with that wave...

The mystery is soon solved when a gang of angry and damp looking Croca-Beasts come swaggering around the corner looking for trouble.

So it's you guys!

Are you the culprits chasing all the other monsters up the tunnel towards the surface just like Enid said you damn thugs! Acting all tough now that your momma is in town, how sad is that?!

You stupid Croc Biped might have been scary and threatening when I was a hatchling but you're small fry now!

And it's true. The Croca-Beasts that once upon a time loomed over me like giant croc faced messengers of death don't seem nearly so large anymore. Whilst I'm not quite tall enough to look them in the eye I probably have a similar overall mass to them since I'm much longer than I am tall.

Their sharp claws and powerful, snapping jaws are not nearly as impressive as once they were. My own Savage Infused Mandibles look far more deadly to be honest. These guys just don't hold any fear for me anymore!

"ROOOAAAAAAAAAOOOOO" Tiny bellows.

Well sure, he's even less scared of them. Without waiting for my orders Tiny lumbers forward and starts smashing Croc face in with his massive fists. It's almost sad. He towers over the little crocs and his fist is probably the same size as their entire head. With every swing he one shots a Croca and it isn't long before the posse of toothy monsters has been smashed into paste.

[Good job Tiny! Show 'em who's boss!]

The big ape slaps his chest and a wide grin appears on his bat face. This takes me back to when I first saw Tiny, battling against his rival, a massive Titan-Croc. I get the feeling even after being reconstituted that he still has a special hatred for the Croc monsters, at the very least he seems inordinately pleased to have punched this particular groups' faces in.

Since they are unevolved monsters we don't even pause to eat them before preceding down the still soggy tunnel. As I climb over the fallen Crocs I begin to sense something strange tickling at the edge of my awareness. Like a sound that I can't quite hear.

[Do you hear anything Tiny?] I ask.

The ape tips his head to one side and listens for a moment before frowning and slowly nodding his head. So there is something....

["Be on guard everyone"] I advise before we continue to advance.

With every step the faint feeling at the back of my mind grows more distinct. The pace of its increase is so slow that I wouldn't have noticed at all if I wasn't watching for it. As it grows the sensation becomes more oppressive, threatening even. As we continue to travel I feel as if I'm being watched by a ravenous beast.

HOGAAA!

Feel weird!

I can tell Tiny feels it as well, he's been restless and smacking monsters with even more force than usual.

["Crisis, Vibrant, are you picking up on this feeling?"]

"Yup-yup" the usually energetic Vibrant seems a little subdued under this pressure.

[I can, master] Crisis too is feeling the pressure.

Whatever is causing this, we need to be careful.

["We need to proceed with extra caution team"] I inform my crew, ["it's possible something really nasty is nearby that we can't necessarily defeat. I want everyone, including you Tiny, to be prepared to run away if get into trouble. We'll flee back to the shortcut and make our escape from there"].

It goes to show how this mounting creepy feeling is weighing on us that even Tiny seems inclined to agree, just to be sure I order him directly.

[Tiny, if I tell you to run, you will flee to the shortcut entrance. Got it?]

He reluctantly nods, his bat face pinched with a combination of distaste and unease. He doesn't have to like it he just has to do it. No way I'm going to allow him to die charging headlong into some unwinnable fight. When we get right down to it he cannot deny a direct order from me so I'm satisfied he'll be ok.

The others are still riding on my back so they'll probably end up where I do. I have to be careful not to leave Crisis behind, she has a very limited capacity to navigate her way around after all. Perhaps I should advise her to take tunnel sense and Tunnel map? That'll give her a solid idea where to go without having to see after all...

We continue to advance downwards, the monsters growing tougher with every step. More shadow monsters and the larger, more difficult beast types are becoming common. We even run into a few nasty plant types that are clearly evolved versions of the others we've seen and some others who are from a superior base species.

A particularly nasty plant appears as a young tree, the first tree looking plant monster I've seen. It attacks by swinging its branches but also seems capable of using earth magic. I didn't get a good look before Tiny crunched it to nothing with a two handed slam. Still, it seems as if the plant type monsters are still spawning in this part of the Dungeon.

Something odd seems to be going on with the monsters we come across though. For starters there are far less of them. Ever since that formless pressure began to weigh on us the number of monsters we've seen active in the tunnels has gone way down. Secondly we notice that there are quite a few monsters

moving away from us and down the tunnels. Every now and again we catch glimpses of newly spawned creatures shifting along the walls and vanishing down the tunnels.

Where are they going? Is there some sort of party that we aren't invited to? I'd love to chase after these shadows but with the invisible weight pressing down on me I simply don't have the confidence to be rushing around corners blindly. For the first time in a while I'm starting to feel real, actual fear.

If this is a monster causing this pressure, when I can't even see it... just how powerful would that creature need to be?! Is it Garrolosh itself?! I thought that Croc was meant to be over in Liria! That's like a week away over the surface... what would it be doing here?

To be honest, if I actually thought that the parent of all these croc monsters was kicking around down here I'd rush straight back up to the surface immediately. I don't see any reason for Garrolosh to be around here so I'm prepared to proceed, but cautiously.

So we do, creeping forward very slowly. The tunnel continues to wind its way deeper into the ground, as we proceed the tunnel grows wider and I notice that other branching tunnels are coming together here. It feels as if we are getting close to something. We make better progress than I expected considering our careful pace due to the lack of monsters in our path. It's almost unnerving to see the tunnels this deserted during the wave.

I know the monsters are still being formed in the walls, I can sense them. They are just rushing off somewhere the moment they come out.

Eventually, I estimate about ten kilometres down according to Tunnel map, the passage opens up and a strange light illuminates the rocks ahead of us. Is it an expanse?!

The pressure is crushing now, as if death waits for us after every step. Vibrant is extremely nervous, clinging fiercely to my head and shivering in place. As we step forward the tunnel walls slowly drop away and a vast, open underground space appears before us. Dark swampland stretches as far as my eyes can see, mist covered marshes studded with drooping trees and vibrant, vine shrouded flowers.

And crocs. So many crocs.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 190: The Marsh Expanse**

Are there gods in Pangera? Scholarship in this area has been largely suppressed since the Church of the Path rose to predominance, their inquisitors have been most active in their pursuit of those willing to explore this scholastic line of inquiry. Despite their efforts though the centuries there has been a small but industrious cadre of truth-seekers who are keen to bring the light of wisdom to our own history.

Records do indeed suggest that there were numerous religions in the time before the Descent, when the system changed our very understanding of the world. In many lands and across many races there was a wide variety of ways in which people practiced faith based organisations. Whether those divinities were real or imagined is hard to determine now since only a smattering of writings from that time remain and no doubt these religious organisations were shattered during the Cataclysm and then purged by the surging Church of the Path.

There have been curious reports from those who have pressed deep into the World Below that they have at times felt the presence of an otherworldly spirit, a powerful feeling of reverence. Other writings which the church attempted to suppress have been unearthed detailing the experiences of those who claim to have actually met divine beings within the Dungeon, come face to face with them, even spoken to them.

Whether such tales can be taken seriously or not is difficult to say, at depths such as these where the mana saturation is at suffocating levels the mind has been known to play tricks. It can also be speculated that such creatures may well have been highly intelligent and powerful monsters. Though some would argue there is little difference between a supremely powerful monster and a god, that way lies the true heresy. Those mortals who fell into the worship of the beasts who ravaged this world during the Rending were exorcised from society at its conclusion and their monster worship most likely ended with them.

"The banned writings of Jivani the faithless" from the secret library of the Path

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Throughout the marshes and on the humps of land that rise up out of the murky waters there are Croca-Beasts at various stages of evolution almost everywhere, including a number of varieties I haven't seen before. Some of them are freakin' massive, hulking brutes of creatures that look like they seriously mean business.

What really hits me, the most intimidating thing, is that the invisible pressure I've been feeling has sky rocketed the moment we laid eyes on this expanse. Holy moly! I feel like something has a knife at my neck, except that I don't have a neck! I can't see anything that might be the cause of this feeling, but I'm sure. Somewhere in this expanse there is a truly frightening monster.

I can see other tunnel entrances to this expanse nearby and periodically a monster will emerge and head immediately deeper into the expanse. The Crocs don't attack them, curiously the plants don't seem to either. It's as if this entire ecosystem of monsters is being suppressed by something, not obeying their own monstrous instincts to hunt and fight in the endless pursuit of prey. It can only be whatever is creating this oppressive aura. I personally don't feel any desire to rush into the expanse and high five the beast creating this pressure, quite the opposite, but clearly it's having some effect on the other monsters here.

Perhaps this is the source of the wave of monsters we battled in the tunnels? Are the monsters being gathered here and then sent out in huge packs to brutalise the surface and other creatures? For what purpose? For what design? Purely for destruction's sake or for something more?

I mean, if I were a giant Crocodile monster, centuries old and filled with an endless hunger to produce tiny crocs... what would I do?

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I mean.... Eat?

Come on Anthony! You can do better than this! Think! Think like a Croc!

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Grrrr... GRAHHH!

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How am I supposed to know what a stupid Croc thinks like?! I never had pet reptiles dammit! Let's just go with the mindless massacre scenario, they are sending out waves of murderous monsters in order to kill stuff because Garralosh is mad at the world or something.

There.

The real question is what are we going to do about it? We've found a huge, juicy expanse here, placed relatively nicely for the colony to exploit. If I can connect up the shortcut to this area then it'll be a relatively short trip for the workers to take advantage of the resources here. Only problem being that some huge murderous beast is sitting in there somewhere creating this aura of death. I really don't want to charge headlong into this place.

So we compromise! We still have a day before we are expected back on the surface, there is plenty that we can do in the meantime without rushing headlong to our deaths. If there is something that Tiny is reluctant to fight then I'm all about avoiding that thing.

I'd like to get a visual of it so that I know what I'm dealing with but I feel like getting that close is going to take some effort.

Let the work begin!

We happily back out of the expanse and busily get to work constructing a new shortcut that will connect to our already existing sneaky tunnel. What better way to relax the mind that has become tense under formless pressure than by indulging in the fantastic world of ant zen? Digging is truth! Truth is digging!

We make incredibly quick progress, even though we need to make the tunnel larger due to Tiny's massive size. The reason is all thanks to Crinis! Now that she's fully grown she's more than capable of helping. Where she excels isn't really in the digging of the dirt but in shoving the loose soil down the tunnel and out the entrance. By unleashing the power of her tentacles she can shift huge amounts of dirt at a time and since the tunnel is so easy to navigate she can't get lost moving back and forth. This allows me so much more time to get my face hands into the dirt that we are flying through it!

It's so nice when the team comes together!

Every now and again we take a break and try to lure creatures out of the expanse and into the tunnels to fight us. Every time a group of Crocs walk past I get Tiny to throw a rock at them. Trusty pebble! You worked hard for me in Yarnham, and you perform your function here as well!

When the Croca-beasts notice they are being pelted with stones from a tunnel they predictably get mad and charge into the tunnel angrily whereupon we descend on them with furious vengeance and snuff them out before engaging in vigorous snacking. It only takes a few times doing this before the wandering groups of Crocs aren't coming past our tunnel anymore and we have to start creeping a little further into the expanse to find monsters to lure.