

## Chrysalis 401

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#### Chapter 401: Heat is Rising, heat is falling

A hundred of the most highly trained and powerful warriors within the Liria Bulwark sat in the tunnels, sweat and grime covering their forms. Each of them was exhausted. They'd battled for hours here, on the edge of the defensive line. Wave after wave of shadow beasts had assaulted their position. Even the odd demon had been mixed in, something that Myrrin had never thought she'd see.

A tap at her shoulder caused Myrrin to turn and then raise her head to gaze up at the monstrous auxiliary soldier beside her. Unable to talk with a grotesquely fanged muzzle where his mouth had once been, he raised his claw tipped paws instead and gestured to her in the simple but effective sign language she'd learned at the fort.

She watched his hands intently for a moment before she shook her head.

"No idea. I've heard stories, but I've never seen anything like..." she gestured helplessly toward the scene that held them all captive for the last twenty minutes. "... that."

Head cocked to one side, the auxiliary listened carefully then nodded politely and turned back to watch the spectacle. Mirryn kept her eye on him for a moment longer before she turned back. It had taken her some time to grow accustomed to the auxiliaries. Half human, half monster, they were not a pretty sight to see. Not to mention, no two were ever the same. The twisted mutations they manifested depended in part on the monster flesh they were fed, and in part on the human being, she'd be told. Still, after fighting alongside them this last week, she'd gotten over her reservations. Condemned criminals they may have been, down here, they were Legion.

A blinding flash of light from in front caused her to shut her eyes and a deafening crash followed by a hail of stones and debris announced the use of another rock shattering skill. The constant howl and scream of monsters was dimmed for just a second before it rose once more to fever pitch.

It was hell, down here. Day in, day out, they'd fought and battled until they could no longer stand, until their hands no longer worked and they needed to be pried out of their armour, scrubbed down by workers and thrown into a bed for a few hours of nightmare plagued sleep. Then back into the action. Mirryn had fired so many arrows, slain so many monsters, she was sure the Dungeon would have been empty by now. But it didn't make a dent. Nothing did. This was only one fort along the Bulwark and hundreds of thousands of monsters had met their doom here. But it was never enough.

Mirryn turned to her other side and laid a hand on the scarred runic metal of her new partner. The Abyssal armour she'd been issued, a fine example of the medium sized 'Ranger' pattern that she'd been wearing throughout the conflict. Since they'd been relieved at the front she figured she may as well take it off and rest for a moment. It wasn't exactly heavy, but wearing the armour was taxing on the mind and spirit.

BOOM!

Another impact pierced the shriek of monsters and another shower of dust and rock battered into the tunnel walls, drawing her attention back to the battle still taking place not even fifty metres from where she sat.

Encased in his oversized, rune inscribed Abyssal armour, the commander held the tunnel, by himself. The great axe in his hands hummed with delight as each swing sent red blades of light tearing through dozens of monsters at once. Every now and again, he would stomp down with one armoured foot and the tunnel itself would shake, which forced everything in front of him to stumble, which allowed him to wind up another swing.

He'd been at it for twenty minutes already.

They'd been fighting as usual, when the commander had just shown up, pushed his way to the front, and started tearing monsters apart with those wide, impossibly powerful swings. They'd tried to help at first, but the commander had gestured them to move back and kept going. So they had. It felt surreal, to be here at the front and not fighting. She could tell from the bemused expressions of those around her that they felt the same.

Mirryn sighed. Every muscle ached. In fact, she could barely remember a time when they hadn't ached. What had life been like, before she'd come down into the Dungeon on this delve? What did the sun even look like? It hardly mattered, it was bright enough down here, the tunnels had blazed with light constantly ever since the wave had started.

As she pondered the glare of the Dungeon her eyes flicked towards the veins that lined the tunnel. She thought for a moment, a frown creased her face as she tried to register what it was that she thought she saw. She stood slowly and began to walk toward the closest wall, her attention fixated on it to the point even the horrific sounds of battle faded from her mind.

There was something about the walls. Something about the mana veins. She stared straight at one from only a few metres away. Since when had she started to be unable to stare straight at one? But now she could. Now she could. Because... the mana ... was decreasing?

In one motion she turned and sprinted back toward where her fellow Legionaries were resting, shouting at the top of her lungs like a mad banshee.

"The mana is decreasing! The wave is ending! The mana is decreasing!"

At first they looked at her as if she were mad. What did she think she was doing, but gradually they realised what it was she was saying, what it could mean if it was true. One by one they turned to the walls and looked for themselves. It didn't take long for them to confirm with their own eyes what she had said, and with delighted roars of triumph the Legion leapt to its feet.

There was jubilation, hugs, even the monster auxiliaries were howling and snarling with glee.

With spirits renewed and joy in their hearts, the Legionaries suited up, readied their weapons and charged into battle alongside the tireless commander. One last push! One last push and then it would all be over!

Five hours later, Mirryn lay flat on the ground of the tunnel, still in her armour. The flow of monsters had begun to decrease at last, and when the relieving force had arrived from Raileh, her squad had chosen to stay on for an extra hour to help beat the last of the enemy back.

In truth, with the commander there, it had been the easiest shift she'd had across the entire wave.

The man wasn't human. Mirryn understood that in some ways, neither was she, but Titus was so far beyond her own limits he simply couldn't be the same species anymore. Just what did a Legionary have to go through to get that strong?

She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

With a grimace, she sat up and took stock. The battle still raged, but at a reduced cadence, some two hundred metres away. She'd retreated back to the fort proper and most of the Legionaries on her shift were still here, taking a brief rest before they hit their bunks.

The commander was still on his feet. He walked from soldier to soldier, a word here, a pat on the soldier there. His eyes gleamed with fierce energy all the while. He didn't even look tired. When he saw her staring, he said a final word to the Legionary he was speaking with and moved toward her.

"Finally getting my mana levels back to where they used to be," he told her quietly. "Taken quite a while to get my motor running again."

It was clear he'd seen what she was thinking and Mirryn couldn't help but blush at how easily she was read.

"I've never seen anything like it, commander. I didn't mean to be rude."

He waved a hand to dismiss her concern.

"Don't think much of it. Those of us who've served the deep, are a little different than most. You haven't met any Legionaries who've been that low other than me. We rarely come back up at all."

"Why did you then, commander?"

He paused for a moment, a little of the light went out of his eyes.

"My children. My wife became pregnant and I requested a transfer to the surface."

"I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have pried."

"It's fine."

A tussle behind them at the entrance to the fort broke the awkward silence before it could truly settle and a haggard-looking messenger burst forward.

"Commander, sir! The Dungeon Seers have reported. Garralosh has been slain!"

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### **Chapter 402: Food Coma**

It took two days to clear the battlefield. Two whole days of the entire colony working around the clock, hauling, cutting, storing and generally stuffing their faces at every possible moment. Even with so many

ants eating so much, the nest was still stuffed to the brim with Biomass that needed to get consumed yesterday. The Queen had consumed the most, from the moment she had recovered until she's been forced to rest by concerned members of the twenty. Well, the nineteen now, I suppose.

Grant's core had been recovered, but nobody suggested we reconstitute her. Having a member of the family, a sibling, start following one of us around as a pet was too weird for any ant to consider. This did mean there was an opening on the council, which I suppose would need to be filled at some point. I have no idea how they plan on going about that, try and find the next oldest soldier? Raise up a new council from scratch? I don't want to be involved, whatever they decide.

I mean, believe me, I've got my own problems. Tiny, Crinis and I had started consuming the Biomass that had once been Garralosh and it didn't take us long to realise a few things. One, it did feel a bit strange to be consuming the monstrous remains that had once housed a human being. Two, as expected of the old monster, she was Biomass rich. And three, there was no way we were going to be able to get through all of it before it dissolved to nothing. Garralosh was one chunky croc. She must have weighed around twenty tons! Even after a good chunk was lost to the Gravity Bomb, we couldn't handle it at all. Not to mention the core we dug out of her. I don't even want to think about that massive thing.

And since this food was the most rich of all, I decided it would make the most sense if it was consumed first. After we had filled ourselves to the brim, and all of my stomachs were packed, I told the surrounding ants to dig in, eat some for themselves, take some to the Queen, take some to Victoriant and her sister as well.

Spread the love, you know?

The next thing I realised was that I couldn't stay up on the surface for nearly as long as I could before. The mana in my core flooded out at a truly disturbing rate. By the time I finished eating, I was practically running on fumes and had to roll my swollen abdomen back into the nest. It was a lot harder to manoeuvre in there since my evolution, quite a few tunnels were too small for me to even consider entering. I was able to make my way down to my old resting chamber and rested there.

And so, for the last two days the ever ongoing cycle of eating and resting had repeated themselves until the surface was somewhat back to normal, the carpet of Biomass had been consumed, and the colony was able to return to business as usual. Brood production went back into overdrive, the Queen now producing three hundred eggs per day. Not satisfied with this rate of growth, the colony sought to take advantage of the fading vestiges of the wave and took Victoriant and Antionette out of the nest and into the Dungeon for a power levelling spree.

By the evening of the second day they returned to the nest in triumph! Both of them settled in to evolve to the fourth tier where they would begin their lives as egg producing Queens of the colony. There was quite a lot of energy amongst the nest at that, I have to say. A great deal of excitement and anticipation. It felt as if the very first Formica Sapiens colony had reached a major milestone of producing our first home grown egg laying Queens.

As they were evolving, Tiny, Crinis and I have a small opportunity to take stock. I'm super happy that the wave is receding, obviously. Far less danger, the ease of exploration is opening up again. There's a ton of stuff I want to do in the Dungeon after all. I've been hoping to check in on the Sophos for ages, for example. I know they can't be too far away, beneath Liria somewhere, for sure. I really want to go

deeper and see how things work down there, forge a path for the colony and all that. But more to the point, as the mana levels are falling, my little hidey hole, so close to the surface, isn't providing me with enough juice! I have to go deeper in order to live!

Stupid Dungeon.

The Queen has it even worse than I do. Her chamber has been relocated to a much deeper location, forcing the colony to expand down toward the swamp expanse. With spawn rates returning to normal levels, we are easily able to handle such a project. The colony has grown strong, and from here out will only explode in capability.

I also have a ton of skill points and Biomass I need to deal with, I picked up a heap of levels from my fight with Garralosh, as I expected from a battle with a creature so far above me. I'll have to deal with that sooner or later. For now though, I'm not too bothered. I'm looking forward to a more relaxing existence where I'm not stressing about dying every second of the day.

No existential crises! No imminent doom! I feel as if I just slip into torpor and stay there for a few weeks. I don't want to do a thing!

Of course, I can't do that. The nest is positively buzzing with activity and energy. Brood Tenders are rearing and teaching, mage ants and core shapers are experimenting, carvers are building and studying. Even the soldiers and scouts have gone nuts, hunting and exploring in the Dungeon without pause, eking every little bit of experience and Biomass they can get before the wave is over.

It seems as if once the surface clean-up was complete, I fell in a heap whilst the rest of the colony just kept on going. The guilt is overpowering! Or perhaps that guilt is just the constant niggle of whispers and tugs that filter through the Vestibule. I don't want to think too closely on that though, instead, I ignore it with all my strength!

So I finally pick myself up and head up and out of the nest. I may as well pay the humans a visit before I wander off, just to make sure they aren't doing anything too stupid. With Crinis riding on my now much more spacious back and Tiny following behind, I make my way out of the nest only to pause when we crest the top of the hill and come across a team of carvers working on something that appears to be shaped from solid earth.

"What are you guys... oh my god."

The dozen workers jump at my words and pull back to reveal that the massive project they are cooperating on is an earth carving of me, post evolution. I appear to be standing watch over the entrance to the colony, my steely eyes and noble antennae are matched by my fierce mandibles and aggressive pose. The statue manages to convey a sense of protectiveness and dignity that I'm fairly confident I don't possess.

The carvers are frozen as if they were naughty children caught with their hands in the biscuit tin. For my part, I have no idea what to say and can only shake my head in disbelief.

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After a minute, I turn to walk toward the human village.

"Make one for Grant," I tell them.

The carvers each look at each other before they nod and begin to shape the soil next to my own effigy.

I have to wonder, where the hell did they get the idea for that?

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#### **Chapter 403: The Church of Anthony**

[What in the name of all that is good on Pangera, has infected your minds?] I said.

Enid could only grimace next to me before she tried to justify it, dropping her in my esteem a few points.

[People saw what you did during the battle. From our wall we were able to watch the whole fight. Not to mention the healers who appeared during the battle to cure our wounded. There isn't a single person in the village who could say they don't have at least one family member who was directly saved by them.]

[Gratitude I understand. Gratitude would be completely fine! This isn't gratitude! What the heck is this?!]

Enid shrugged helplessly.

[With sentiment running high before the battle took place. It's obviously going to be overflowing now that it's done, considering what happened! These people have lost everything, Anthony, they need something to cling onto. Something to give them hope for the future.]

[I cannot believe you okayed this. Did you fall on your head or something? A monster clock you with a rock? It blows my mind that anyone at all thinks this is a good idea!]

My frustration is starting to bubble over and I can't help stabbing forward with my antennae toward the monstrosity that we are currently discussing.

Enid hesitates before she speaks again, but speak she does.

[You have to admit that you aren't much like a normal monster. Or... Anything like a normal monster. Are you sure there wasn't anything unusual about your creation?]

[Of course not,] I deadpan, [pure ant right down to my claws.]

I have no idea if the humans on the surface know about monsters inhabited by humans from Earth like the Sophos are, but I'm sure as hell not going to be the one to tell them.

Enid frowns at me as she adjusts her shawl. I say nothing to appease her suspicions.

[Don't distract from the subject at hand, Enid! That ,] I stab one antenna toward the construction, [is going to cause a lot of problems.]

She could only shrug helplessly.

[I don't think even you could convince them to take it down. I'm not sure that I even want them to.]

[You've fallen to the dark side Enid.]

[The what?]

[Do not give up hope. There is always another chance to walk in the light.]

[I have no idea what you mean.]

I'm not happy about this situation, but I'm not sure what I can reasonably do about it.

Enid and I stand on a slight hill as we gaze at the feverish construction taking place not twenty metres away. Men and women sweat in the heat as they work, digging, flattening, squaring stones. The foundations are already starting to take place of what will certainly be a far too large a structure of imposing stone.

To one side, a worker is going to town on a granite boulder. Already the ant-like features are starting to take shape of what I'm told will eventually be a mighty statue of me. Ant observers are about the place as well, members of the colony who've snuck over for a sticky beak and see what the humans are up to. Turns out a couple of mages have even managed to unlock the mind magic skill. It's difficult for them to use it with any level of proficiency, or for very long, but already early communication attempts have been made.

For the most part, they've been asking the villagers how they do stuff. Tungstant is over at the forge right at this moment, along with a mind mage, hassling the smiths about their craft.. It started yesterday apparently, but I have a sneaking suspicion that it will continue for a long time to come.

Even Beyn is down there working! The priest is still wearing his now tatty robes and is working with his one remaining arm, clearing rock and jovially encouraging the people around him. Not that they seem to need a pick me up. Ever since I've arrived their faces have been lit with joy and they've been working at a furious pace.

It all leads me to one, sincere conclusion: these people are very sick.

[This is a literal temple to a monster, Enid.]

[To you, Anthony.]

[And what exactly do you think I am?!]

[I'm not sure, why don't you tell me?]

[A monster!]

[Really?]

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[YES!]

[Hmmp. Not like any monster I've ever heard of.]

Gawd. Even Enid has been infected. It's contagious. Do I need to isolate this community? Set up a containment? It would be irresponsible to allow others to be exposed. Or indeed, if the wider world

found out that these people were worshipping monsters, would they just get wiped out? Perhaps I need to isolate them for their own protection...

[You haven't sent anyone out of the village at this point, have you Enid?]

She nods decisively.

[Oh yes. There are more survivors out there, I'm sure of it. We also need to get far enough north to check what the damage was like to the neighbouring kingdoms. If they're fine they may be able to send aid. We also want to keep an eye on the main Dungeon entrance where the capital used to stand. Just in case anything comes up. We've had dozens of volunteers ride out, most of them yesterday.]

[Dammit! I was too slow!]

[To what?]

[... Nothing.]

As frustrating as this is, I'm happy to see the ants and humans coexisting in a peaceful, non-eating each other way. It seems as if the council has taken my message of trying to learn from our neighbours and have been pushing forward even more rapidly than I had expected. My shock just goes to show that I've underestimated the colony's appetite for work once again.

The village itself saw remarkably little damage during the assault. The people had wisely set their defences alongside ours, away from the established buildings of the village. As a consequence, the monsters left them alone. Garralosh wanted to destroy the people, she didn't really care for their irrigation system.

As I look across the village, the people seem happy, industrious. Farms are springing up, the houses are starting to get a little more of a permanent vibe to them. Even the kids seem happy.

[Looks like you've come through the crises okay then.] I said to Enid.

[Thanks to you,] she replied.

[Not this again.]

[I'm just being honest. None of us would have survived if not for you. I don't understand why you would be so against humans giving you such respect.]

[This isn't respect. You don't build a temple, to show respect. How can you not think this is weird?! Am I going to lose my cred as a monster over this?]

[I don't follow.]

Haaa. These humans are so tiring. I should get out of here before Beyn tries to speak to me.

[I'll be heading into the Dungeon for a while. Plus it's a lot harder for me to be on the surface now, so you won't see much of me. Maybe this temple situation might blow over if I don't show my face for a bit.]

Enid's snort speaks to what she thinks of that idea.



[Looks like the colony is going to keep hassling you guys for knowledge anyway. If you keep teaching them, I'll make sure that we keep protecting you.]

[Sounds fair,] she observed.

[I need to get out of here.]

I broke the contact with her and turned to walk back to the colony. These people are nuts.

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 404: Unexpected meeting**

In an effort to return to normalcy, I think it's best that I get back to the colony as quickly as possible. With Crinis and Tiny in tow, we make our way out of the village. Before long my thoughts begin to wander toward the Common Will Vestibule. It's powerful, there's no doubt about that. The constant flow of energy that trickles from the gem-like organ and into my system is nourishing in an all-encompassing way. It washes away my fatigue, refills my other glands, heals me and perhaps does other things as well. If it was able to provide me with mana it would be an all-singing, all-dancing provider of everything I could possibly need.

As it is, it's immensely powerful. The only issue I have with it is the strange whispers and thoughts that pop into my head. I'm finding I get an urge to do stuff at random and I have a sneaking suspicion I know what's causing it, and why, and the connotations are a little disturbing to me. I don't intend to set myself up as some sort of king, but the colony feels like it's trending that way at the moment. I'm not sure I like it. I'm really looking forward to breaking out on my own for some Dungeon exploration. Just put some space between the family and myself for a little while and let things settle down. I'll need time to adjust to this new evolution and Tiny and Crinis need to evolve and build their strength if they're to keep up with me.

Before the wave is gone completely, we need to push deep, maybe even try and find the second strata. Do some fighting, level up a few skills, clear the air a little. After all the excitement of the attack by Garralosh, I can't wait to get back to a simpler life.

Muddling along like this, I walk for twenty minutes before I wake up to the fact that I'm nowhere near the nest.

[What the heck?! Where are we?!]

[I - I'm not sure, Master!]

[Hurrn?!] Tiny grunts.

It seems as if we've wandered into the forest. I immediately get suspicious. There's no way I would've gotten lost, I'm an ant! I follow the pheromone trail when I walk. I could walk along the path whilst I was asleep and still manage to get there! Someone has been playing with my mind!

And I can think of one likely suspect...

[Uhh. Hello, Mr Kaarmodo. I hope you've brought me here for a friendly chat. No hard feelings about me killing Garralosh right? Or for murdering your attendants? Uh. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that. I mean, they did try to kill me first. Self-defence is a thing, right?]

I babble within my own mind as I nervously watch the surrounding trees for any sign a large, vengeful lizard is about to charge forward and attempt to bite my head off.

To my chagrin, there is only silence in my mind after my words and I don't see any movement around me. Doubt begins to creep in. Did the Kaarmodo drag me out here just to play funny buggers? Is he just messing with me?

With caution, I turn around to orient myself back to the nest.

[GAH!]

And out of nowhere the Kaarmodo has appeared! Flanked by six of his Setsulah attendants with their hoods down for once, the Lizard Wizard is standing only three metres away! I leap back in shock as Tiny and Crinis move to take an aggressive position, ready to come to my defence.

[What the heck are you doing?! You'll give me a heart attack! You've been there this whole time, haven't you? Playing tricks on me?!]

The Lizard shifts his weight slightly as his eyes stare unblinking into mine. Something tells me that's as close as a Kaarmodo gets to laughing out loud. When I calm myself a little, I take a good look at this manipulator and his attendants. I haven't been able to see them this close before and it's interesting to see them now. The Lizard himself is bedecked in finery. I hesitate to say it, but for a giant lizard, he is rolling in bling. Woven tapestries with gleaming golden thread tassels lay across his back, the colours are rich and deep, purples, greens and yellows that depict mountain scenes and deep caves filled with magic. On each of his legs he wears at least one golden ring and his neck is positively covered in them.

The servants are similarly well dressed. With their hoods back for once I get to see their faces properly for once. I'd thought they would look more human, but they are definitely more than a little part lizard. Their faces are heavily scaled, whilst still maintaining a humanoid shape. Eye colours vary from deep gold to emerald green but each are vertically slit as a reptiles. Golden nose rings, necklaces and torques, each intricately carved and decorated with jewels adorn each and every one of them. Pretty darn flashy for slaves.

[Perhaps I should have made my presence known earlier.] The voice of the Kaarmodo resounds in my mind. Very notably, that was not an apology. [Please be at ease, I have not come to destroy you.]

Ouch. Very aggressive choice of words there.

[So... no hard feelings about the.. Uh... unfortunate loss of your slaves then?]

Why the hell would you remind him of that, Anthony? Not smooth! Opposite of smooth!

A spike of pain jabs into my brain across the mind bridge that I have only just begun to sense, causing my legs to spasm. I let it roll over me, probably well deserved to be honest, as I consider his spell weaving. How the hell he's able to hide them like this I have no idea.

[These are not my slaves, and you are lucky that they did not hear you describe them as such. They are bonded to me, and I am bonded to them. Our relationship is one of mutual respect and dependence.]

[Okay. Sure.] I shrugged my antennae. [Doesn't really matter to me. Since you brought me out here, without the intention to annihilate my atoms, what exactly would you like to say?]

I don't feel particularly comfortable talking to this ancient wizard. The sooner he lets me get on my way, the happier I'll be.

[There is no need to rush, young one. It wasn't easy getting close to form this mental connection without your colony mates detecting us. Depending on how much you know, we may need to converse for some time.]

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[Know about what?]

[Hmm.... Do you know ... where you are?]

My antennae twitch a little at the odd question. What's he getting at here?

[You mean... Pangera? The planet? The smoking ashes of what was once the kingdom of Liria? The uncivilised wilds? I'm not sure what you mean.]

The Kaarmodo shifts his legs slightly which causes his attendants to glance at him for a moment. Once they are certain he's comfortable they return their flat, unfriendly stares to me.

[Hmm. This may take some time.]

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 405: Conversations with a wizard lizard**

[I do not wish to burden you with knowledge that you may not be prepared to understand. My order has spent much time plumbing the mysteries behind this place and despite centuries of effort, we have only been able to learn a portion of the whole truth. Even that limited understanding came largely through the intervention of an outside influence.]

I have a feeling I should pull up a chair and whip out my spiral bound notebook as the teacher is about to launch into lecture. So naturally did the lizard slip into a lecturing tone that I presume he's actually well practiced in it.

[Master! What is happening here? Do we need to fight?] Crinis breaks into my thoughts.

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[I think we're okay. He seems to want to explain something to us. Stay alert, just in case.]

[Of course, Master.]

[I do have a name,] the Kaarmodo drawled.

[Well... if you never tell me what it is, you can hardly complain that I don't use it.]

[That... is true. Hmmm. We tend not to share our names with outsiders, but this may be a special circumstance. It is truly rare for one of my order to have such an opportunity. Hmmm. My name is Ivran'tep, second scholar of the tower at Gold Peak.]

[Nice to meet you champ. My name is Anthony.... I'm an ant.]

[Hmm... Indeed. You are.]

An awkward pause develops as Ivran'tep examines me slowly, his large angular head turning slight fractions this way and that.

[Hmmm... As I say, we don't tend to have the opportunity to talk with those such as yourself, especially when you are in fit state to speak coherently back. Too often, the process of being inserted into the Dungeon and left to fend for themselves is too much for your minds. Garralosh herself was almost completely lost by the time we became aware of her. I have been with her for many years, but I was rarely was she able to speak with me.]

I'm taken aback by how up front he's being with me.

[So you know all about us then? Humans from Earth, inserted into the Dungeon as monsters to spice up the place?]

[Hmm. The records of my order go back over a thousand years and we have encountered less than ten of your kind across the entire globe. We have heard of this 'Earth' before, but we know precious little about it. We also do not know why your kind is brought here. Do you have some clue?]

I think I might keep the fact I can talk to the Dungeon itself quiet for the time being.

[Who knows? Maybe the Dungeon gets bored.]

[Hmm. Perhaps so. Perhaps so. There may be some merit in this suggestion. I will ponder on it later. For now though, are you in possession of Garralosh's core?]

HUCK!! I don't want to think about that stupid gem. Don't even want to remember it exists!

[I am. Not here with me, obviously, but ... yes.]

[That is a rare treasure. I would be very careful that the knowledge of what you have doesn't travel far. A core of that type is exceptionally rare and exceptionally powerful.]

I can't help but shrink back from Ivran'tep at those words.

[Your saying you don't want it?]

He blinks slowly.

[I do not. We are not interested in the core, we are interested in those with the power to absorb it.]

[You say 'we'. I presume you're referring to your order? Is this a Kaarmodo sorcerous cabal of some sort?]

[No. My order is not limited to the Kaarmodo, although we are quite accepted in the mountain empire. We are found across the face of Pangera among those with great knowledge of this world and the courage to face it.]

[Does this collection of esteemed scholars have a name?]

[The conclave of the Red Truth.]

[That doesn't sound ominous at all.]

[Hmm. It does sound ominous. Deliberately so. We bear dangerous knowledge and must act as such.]

Well that makes me nervous.

[Look. I'm not sure I want to have any part of this 'dangerous knowledge'. Please tell me what it is that you want to say, but try not to... you know... unleash any eldritch truths on me.]

[I can do this. Hmm. You have heard of the Ancients...?]

Thinking back, I do know that Formo the Sophos mentioned something about them.

[Vaguely. Very old monsters that live very deep in the Dungeon. That's about all I got.]

[It is sufficient. There are many old monsters who live deep but the true ancients number only nineteen. They seek to make that number whole, they wish for another to join their ranks.]

I do not like where this is going.

[My order seeks to assist them in this endeavour, indeed, it is our sole purpose. There are many who would prefer that such a thing never came to pass. There is conflict, of a sort.]

[So that's why you were following Garralosh around? Keeping her alive when others were trying to bottle her up and kill her?]

[Yes.]

[And when you met me you decided to back off a little because... You feel you might have found a better prospect?]

[Yes.]

[Nards.]

[I do not know what this word means.]

[It's uh, never mind. I don't really think I'm down for this. I'm happy just doing my thing.]

[It is not intended that we would force this arrangement on you. There are many candidates for the final seat at the highest table. I am but one agent, and the charge with whom I worked has now fallen. I will return to my people now, it has been many years and we yearn for home. Should you choose to make use of that core, then perhaps, there will come a time that we meet again.]

There's a note of finality in the communication from Ivran'tep. It's clear he wants to leave. He said as much, but also left many questions.

[Just one thing,] I break in before he can turn to leave, then I hesitate. [I-If I were to reconstitute her core. Garralosh's core, then would ... she ... come back?]

The narrow eyes of the Kaarmodo blink slowly as he processes my words.

[No,] he responds. [I do not know where your souls go, when you die here. But they are not contained in the core. She is gone.]

[Alright... Thanks for that.]

[Farewell. Good luck to you, Anthony. I hope that you find it within yourself to ascend. Only then will you have a chance to break free.]

With that, the Lizard and his entourage turn and walk into the forest. It isn't long before they are gone completely from my sight. Mind abuzz with concerns, I begin to walk back to the nest. I have so much to think about, I'm not even sure where to start. I can't wait to go hunting in the Dungeon.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 406: Let's get back to business**

Finally! Back in the nest and away from the crazy! The Kaarmodo is gone (hopefully) and I have nothing to worry about. Let's go get it!

Full of energy, I barrel into the nest and charge down the main shaft. I'm heading for that Dungeon and nothing's going to stop me! Lumbering behind, Tiny shares my enthusiasm. He missed the entire battle and I can tell he's sour about it. The closer we get to the Dungeon, the brighter the big ape's eyes become. By the time we make it to our old resting place his ears are twitching with excitement. I'm with you Tiny, it'll be great to get back to the simple life!

[Eldest.]

No. Pls. Don't do it to me like this. I was so close. So damn close!

[What is it Victor?]

The now much smaller than me general crawls out of a side tunnel to appear in my line of sight.

[I was hoping to have a quick word before you left.]

[Okay, Victor. Hit me. What's happening.]

[The council wants to elevate Vibrant to the position left vacant by Grant's passing. She's the logical choice as the next eldest soldier in the colony, even if she probably won't be around all that much. What do you think?]

[It's fine with me,] I say, a little exasperated. [You don't need me to okay these things. Just do what you think is best.]

[Of course. We just wanted to make sure you approved.]

[It's fine,] I repeat. [Is there anything else?]

I'm itching to go here.

The general hesitates for a brief moment before she shrugs off her concerns.

[I think we'll talk to you when you get back. This time is important for the development of the colony. We don't want anything to go wrong.]

[What could go wrong?] I laugh. [There's nothing here to stop us right now.]

Even I feel the slight chill in the air that descends in the face of my brazen overconfidence.

[Okay. I'll check in with you guys when I get back. Just keep it simple. Everyone needs to keep learning, keep growing the colony and secure more territory, but slowly. No need to complicate things.]

[As you say, Eldest. That's what we thought also.]

[Alright then. I'll drop in to see Mother when we get down there. Catch you later Victor.]

And finally free!

Tiny, Crinis and I burst out into the Dungeon at last! Muahahaha! Time for these stupid monsters to become my stress relief!

The last vestiges of the wave are beginning to fade now, monsters no longer spring from the walls fully formed, mana levels are sinking back to what I got to experience for a brief time just after I was born. It hasn't fallen to that point yet though, and spawn rates from normal spawn locations are still higher than normal. The colony has been busy cleaning out the tunnels around the nest as fast as possible in order to make use of this. Even the farms have largely been abandoned now, left to try and develop their own ecosystems, hopefully a few spawn locations develop and they can still be used, albeit in a reduced way.

It takes a little while, but we eventually find some action away from the nest where the colony hasn't been able to clear away all the monsters and we smash them like a bowling ball hitting some very brittle pins.

With savage glee Tiny unleashes his frustration through his unstoppable fists. As he goes to work, a grin splits his face and lightning dances across his mighty shoulders. Crinis also lets her... tentacles... down, and the cold fury of the JellyMaw is once again unleashed on the poor denizens of the Dungeon. I can almost see Crinis' cold smile as her writhing limbs perform their dark dance, tearing limb from limb and cutting monsters to ribbons.

I let my pets do most of the work, they need the experience far more than I do and it's soothing to me in a curious way to watch my two friends go to work. A bit of acid here and there is the extent of my contribution. More to let myself grow accustomed to my new range and aiming capacity than anything else. Being able to shoot in front of me without having to turn around is such a boon I can hardly describe it. Especially now that I'm this large. As an insect, I'm not especially flexible, there isn't a whole lot of twisting that goes on, I just have to turn my entire body around to orient my business district. Now I can just lift my commercial interests high, lower the front of my body and POW! Acid time.

The concentrated acid has increased damage, duration and sticking effect thanks to the concentration gland as well. And since it regenerates faster, I can fire it for days! Very happy with my acid system overall. And with new organs comes new opportunities for mutation! I need to play around with my new abilities a little more before I decide on what to do there. If I make a hasty decision before I've had time to consider what I want to do with my acid network back there, I'm sure I'll come to regret it.

Just like this, the three of us happily smash the pitiful and unfortunate monsters that we come across, pausing to eat Biomass occasionally when we find something of a reasonable tier. None of us is

particularly struggling for Biomass right now, after consuming Garralosh we have a mighty hoard, but it never hurts. Before we left I quickly purchased the mutation the ants in the colony had been using.

My Efficient Stomach +5 reduces the penalty for consuming Biomass of a lower tier monster. Doesn't eliminate it, but every little bit helps!

Without much dallying, we make our way down to the Marsh Expanse and find the satellite nest where the Queen is currently residing. Dug into the shortcut I'd constructed earlier, this large and spacious chamber is, for the moment, the beating heart of the colony in the sense that all egg production is occurring here. Even Victoriant and Antionette have moved in.

Considering its importance, it's only natural that the place is bristling with soldiers and brood tenders.

[How goes it everyone?]

As I enter, hundreds of ants turn from their tasks to face me for a moment before they return to their tasks. A constant stream of Biomass is being brought into the space and taken to one end where the three Queens are currently residing.

After their evolution, Victoriant and Antionette have progressed from Juvenile Queens to Young Queens! Each of them is able to lay fifty eggs a day. It might not seem like much, but over time it'll rapidly add up. The Queen, post evolution, is now able to produce three hundred eggs per day, bringing the weekly total numbers to two thousand eight hundred new brood each week.

Which is many.

[Hello child,] the Queen greets me warmly.

I almost brace for a solid thwacking out of habit, but she doesn't attack me this time, but rather turns to give me a pat on the head with one antenna.

[Hi there, Mother! How are our new Queens doing?]

[Greetings, Eldest,] Antionette answers. [It's wonderful to be able to contribute something at last.]

[Finally! I can't wait to see my children at work,] Victoriant says happily.

[They are doing very well,] the Queen assures me. [And yourself. What are you planning to do?]

[Going to hit the Dungeon, level up some skills, explore a little. Hopefully get Crinis or Tiny to evolve. Want to try and find a few things also.]

[Oh?]

[It might be nothing, but we'll see how it goes.]

[Very well. Stay safe. The colony needs you still.]

[Of course! You know me.]

[That's why I worry.]



## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 407: Aphid Time, Spending Up!**

"If you believe your entire world is a prison, is it wrong to try and break it?"

Question posed by Orisan'shan. Founder of the Closed Circle Society at the Academy of Stone Soul.

After chatting for a little while, I bid farewell to the Queens and let them get back to their important work, namely eating and producing brood. In one month, the colony will have over ten thousand individuals. I've no idea how they're going to manage the education program now that the wave is subsiding, but I'm sure that the council will be able to work something out. Getting literally thousands of monsters to form a core, level up to tier three and get enough Biomass to mutate is going to be a logistical nightmare. Especially now that the farms are not going to be effective.

Wait a second! A flash of understanding hits me and I dash back toward the Queen.

"The Aphid Queen? Where is she?"

Surprise showing in the twitch of her antennae, the Queen turns back to face me.

"My pet? She's down here, producing young aphid. Where did you think she was?"

Excitement thrills through me.

"So it's started then? The aphid project? Are there any in the expanse?"

Victoriant nods.

"I think the first of the aphid went out yesterday. The soldiers and scouts have been hard at work in the expanse getting it ready. Wills, Advant and Sloan have been down here since yesterday. Didn't you know?"

...

"Uh... I've been busy."

The Queen's antennae begin to vibrate, as if she sensed my lie and is preparing a thwack. I need to clear off!

"I'll go check it out! Thanks-bye!"

And we're outta there! Practically sprinting, I blow past some confused looking Brood Tenders and out into the Dungeon tunnels. From there it's a short hop over to the expanse proper and the ant presence here is immediate.

Soldiers and scouts are in position around the entrance, climbing over the mounds of damp earth and clinging to the trees. There are literally hundreds of them here, and a steady column of Biomass is being hauled out and taken to the Queens in a steady column.

Holy moly! I blinked and the colony moved into the expanse in a flash! Faced with hundreds of cooperative monsters, it appears as if the monsters of the expanse had little choice but to roll over and accept their fate.

"Eldest? I didn't expect to see you here," Advant's scent reaches me.

I turn to face the much smaller soldier approaching from the nearby column.

"Hey there Advant. How goes the expanse takeover?"

"Smoothly! We managed to exterminate the old aphid population pretty easily. The new aphids are being tended to now and they started producing Biomass just a few hours ago. Want to have a look?"

Of course!

My glee knows no bounds as I follow Advant into the depths of the marsh, helping to pulverise monsters along the way. It doesn't take long before I'm able to witness a tender sight that I'd only seen in documentaries before. High in the branches of the largest, mana infused trees, tiny aphids cling to the thinner branches, extracting whatever sweet tree juice they need to survive. All the while a team of ants watch over them, checking the aphids for problems and shifting them about periodically to ensure they're getting the most efficient meal. As I watch the ants begin to prod the little bugs with their antennae and the aphids happily offer up Biomass for their defenders.

Perfect!

"How many aphid do we have so far?" I ask my guide.

"Roughly thirty. The Aphid Queen only started producing young recently, but the population should rapidly expand. We think we should have over a thousand in a week."

Makes sense. The aphid, despite their cuteness, are very simple and weak monsters. The only complex thing about them is their capacity to offer Biomass nectar from their business district. No weapons, no armour, no advanced senses. They are helpless without the ants watching over them. Which means, egg laying wise, they are cheap as chips to produce. The Aphid Queen could knock out a couple thousand a week, given enough food.

It's wonderful to see the system coming together!

"This is good stuff Advant. This might help the colony pick up the shortfall in Biomass now that the wave has receded."

"Just as you predicted, Eldest."

With that casual expression of confidence in my non-existent foresight, the ant claps me on the side with one antenna and then wanders off to see to her many duties. Which leaves Tiny, Crinis and myself in the middle of the marsh expanse, left to our own devices.

Not willing to put it off any more, I let Crinis and Tiny cut loose to rustle up some experience whilst I try and deal with something I've been putting off for some time: my status.

I might have four brains but I just can't handle the numbers dammit! Since the fight with Garralosh, I got a heap of levels, a heap of skill levels, a ton of Biomass and with all my new glands, there is a metric ton of mutations I need to do. Perhaps the fear of the itch is what did it, or perhaps the fight with Garralosh just left a bad taste in my mouth. Regardless, the time is now!

Right now my status looks like this:

Name: Anthony

Level: 14 (Rare Core) (V)

Might: 91

Toughness: 79

Cunning: 64

Will: 45

HP: 158/158

MP: 230/230

Skills:

General:

Expert Excavation (III) Level 5; Advanced Grip (II) Level 8; Advanced Stealth (II) Level 9; Tunnel Map (II) Level 6; Iron Mind (IV) Level 2; Expert Stamina (III) Level 7; Profound Meditation (III) Level 12; Flicker Dash (III) Level 5;

Mana:

Mana Transformation (III) Level 15; Condensed Mana (III) Level 9; Finer External Mana Manipulation (III) Level 8; Mana Coveter (III) Level 2; Expert Water Magic Affinity (III) Level 3; Enhanced Mind Magic Affinity (II) Level 9; Empowered Mana Sensing (II) Level 9;

Pet:

Distant Pet Communication (II) Level 5; Core Surgery (III) Level 6; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 1;

Defensive:

Expert Exo-Skeleton Defence (III) Level 16;

Offensive:

Deadly Acid Shot (III) Level 8; Advanced Precise Shooting (II) Level 9; Omen Chomp (IV) Level 3;

Mutations:

Senses:

Perimeter Eyes +15, Future Sight Infrared Antennae +15;

Defence:

True Diamond Carapace +15, Supportive Inner Carapace Plating +15;

Physical:

Rapid Absorption Legs +15, Empowered Mandibles +15, Regrowth Regeneration Gland +15, Loquacious Pheromone Gland +15, Discerning Stomach +5, Musculature, Sub-Neural Network;

Acid:

Mana Binding Acid +15, Acid Nozzle, Acid Concentration Gland, Acid Stimulation Gland;

Mental:

Adaptable Coordination Cortex +15;

Mana:

Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +15, Collective Will Vestibule +3;

Species: Juvenile Colony Paragon (Formica Sapiens)

Skill points: 20

Biomass: 463

I upgraded Cerebral Endurance to Iron Mind and gained a bunch of levels in a heap of skills. What's really gonna take my time is the Biomass expenditure. After ONE feast of Garralosh I gained over four hundred and fifty points. It's nonsense is what it is. Just how many mutations did that old monster had? Mind you... just how Biomass rich am I becoming? I'd rather not think on that actually.

May as well get started with it then. We've moved a little distance away from the ants, and my loyal pets can shield me from prying eyes.

Bring on the menu!

I'll start with my new acid network.

[Do you wish to improve Acid Nozzle to +5? This will cost 15 Biomass]

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

Once again the vast list of possible mutations unfolds within my mind. What a pain. Even for something as simple as the acid nozzle, there's still this many options?! Let's see here. Focused acid nozzle? Reduces range but increases the force of the acid spray. Hose acid nozzle? Instead of firing in bursts it turns into a hose like attack. Hmmm. Flexible acid nozzle, increases the flexibility to improve firing angle even further. I mean, that's what I originally purchased the nozzle for, but I'm satisfied with the result so far. I think I'll focus in a different direction.

After much musing I decide to go with the Pressurised Acid Nozzle. This option improves the range and reduces the spread of the acid fired, meaning I deliver my product with more precision across more distance. This is something I can only endorse.

The Concentration Gland. This organ serves the purpose of thickening and increasing the potency of the acid within the acid gland it's attached to. I wonder what sort of options I'll get here?

[Do you wish to improve Acid Concentration Gland to +5? This will cost 15 Biomass]

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

Alright then. The list has hundreds of options, many of them what I expected. You can use the concentration gland to add extra effects to the acid, elemental damage, longer lasting, more acidic. It seems as if the concentration gland makes a nice pairing with the acid gland as you can spread your bonuses or further reinforce them with this organ. There isn't anything that's too wild here, although the 'solidifying acid' one is weird. Turn the acid solid? Why?! Perhaps it would make sense in a monster built a little differently than I am, I certainly wouldn't want to be delivering that product.

In the end I select the Potent Acid Concentration Gland +5. This will improve the ability of the concentration gland to perform its role, making the sticky and mana eating effects of my acid more powerful, without doing much for the damage caused by my acid.

Lock it in and keep going... only 433 Biomass to go. Ugh.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 408: Hello again my old friend**

Next on the chopping block is the final link in the commercial zone the Acid Stimulation Gland. It's a simple gland that does what it says on the tin, replenishes the acid faster. I'm curious what sort of upgrades would be available for something so relatively straight forward.

[Do you wish to improve Acid Stimulation Gland to +5? This will cost 15 Biomass]

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

If the list is shorter, then I don't think I can tell. Still a metric ton of options. Short bursts of rapid regeneration? Constant but smaller effect? Tie rapid replenishment of acid to certain times of day or particular conditions? Drain stamina to increase replenishment? Drain mana? Drain HP?! That last one is a bit nasty. Literally draw blood and turn it into acid. How in the heck...

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But the mana and stamina options intrigue me. By triggering the gland, it will start to consume the specified resource to stimulate the acid gland and increase acid production. Since mana is a resource I have a lot of use for and don't really want to increase the drain on, stamina seems like a logical choice. Especially when I consider that I gain increased regeneration from the Vestibule.

Fatiguing Acid Stimulation Gland +5 it is!

With that, my business district has chosen its path. To keep things simple I'll take the option to double down on those upgrades at +10 and reinforce them at +15, which should give some potent effects. This is for purity of effect in these interconnected organs and not because I can't be bothered searching through the menus for more options! That's my story and I'll maintain that lie to my grave!

With that done, I can turn my attention to my musculature and Sub-Neural network. These are two upgrades that I'm very excited about. First, the muscles.

[Do you wish to improve Musculature to +5? This will cost 15 Biomass]

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

Again the menu, and again the tantalizing options. Elastic muscles, extra flexible muscles, muscles that are hardened to resist damage, muscles that self-repair, muscles that you can force to break themselves for a burst of extra strength. I guess I need to focus on what I want my muscles to do... as an invertebrate, my muscles don't feel quite as critical to me, since they're on the inside rather than the outside. Flexibility options are irrelevant, defensive options I can also discard. What I really want, is to bite harder. I'm a fairly uncomplicated ant, I suppose. Moar biting. That is the name of the game when it comes to my muscles.

The most important muscles to an ant are right in their face! No endurance, just more instant power!

Twitch Musculature +5. Increases the instant release of power for rapid but short movements. This looks good. It doesn't help with sustained biting but it helps give more explosiveness to my bites. It may even have an effect on my movement, allowing for a faster dash.

And then the Sub-Neural network. Essentially a fast response nervous system add in to increase reaction times, this little enhancement cost me a fair bit of evolutionary energy and I'm very interested to see what sort of mutations are available for something like this.

[Do you wish to improve Sub-Neural Network to +5? This will cost 15 Biomass]

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

And I shall!

Look at these options! External Sub Neural network? Enable the nerves to extend outside the body itself and detect fluctuations to further improve response times?! Wouldn't having nerve endings outside your body be a little on the risky side?! There's a heap of options to make the network more sensitive to various forms of stimuli, or respond to specific threats. Heat, cold, poison, air movement, mana density. Seems as if you can tailor the response based on the threats to get hyper fast reaction speeds to the threat you hate the most. It's tempting, for sure, but I'd prefer to have something less effective but more generally useful.

After a while I settle on something I think is fairly sweet.

Gated Sub Neural Network +5. Forms mana spatial gates that send signals directly to receptors in the brain, shortening travel time of signals from extremities. It does cost extra mana to maintain but I think will provide the biggest generic boost without any other serious drawbacks.

So essentially, my body becomes covered in this little gateways where my nerves come together which teleports the signals into my brain. That is freaking awesome. Lock it in! The only question is, do I want the same thing at +10? I'll need to consider the options I think.

And now for the Vestibule. Saving the finest for last.

[Do you wish to improve Collective Will Vestibule to +5? This will cost 9 Biomass]

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

I have to admit I feel a little trepidation with this. The Vestibule is far and away the single most powerful gland I have, I certainly don't want to mess it up with a poor selection. Let's see what we have.

The majority of options are surprisingly what you would expect. Improve the effect the Vestibule has on stamina, or stress, or health regeneration, or gland rearmament. There is no option to allow it to regenerate mana though, curse the luck. Other options relate to range of the effect, allowing the organ to be effective further away from the source of the 'Will'. I get a stab of fear when I notice the option to include another species in the designation of the Vestibule. Am I really prepared to start receiving energy from the humans of the village? Those nutters? No. I don't think I could handle it.

For now, I think it's safest to go with something conservative and just increase the range. I can't always guarantee that I'll be close enough to the colony and if I can have their support as I roam the Dungeon, I'll be a great deal happier.

Let's lock in the Vast Collective Will Vestibule +5.

Then I'll pay for those.

...

Oh right.

The itch.

[Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 409: Search for the Sophos**

Ah, the itch is back. It's horrendous. In just moments I'm on the ground with Tiny and Crinis watching over my prone and twitching form. Perhaps I should have waited until I was on my own, but once I started I got caught up! Why do I suffer this endless torment!?

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To be honest, the worst part, by far, is the Vestibule. As the strange flesh crystal undergoes its mutation, waves of irritating, irresistible itchiness roll through my whole body until my eyes are bugging out of my head. I hate it! I hate it so much!

After five minutes, it's all done and I immediately start queueing up the mutations for +10. If I'm going to put up with this then I'm going to get it all done at once. Maximum pain in the minimum amount of time. Let's do this! After poking through the menu I end up with my selections looking like this:

Hyper Pressurised Acid Nozzle +10,

Thickened Potent Acid Concentration Gland +10,

Rapid Fatiguing Acid Stimulation Gland +10,

Instant Twitch Musculature +10,

Wide Gated Sub-Neural network +10.

Doubling down on all of the upgrades that I'd selected before. This particular purchase is going to set me back a cool two hundred Biomass. Quite the hefty price to pay. I'll have one hundred and eighty eight when it's done. The previous itch only just beginning to fade from my mind, I grit my mandibles and confirm my selections with the great and bearded system.

....

HAGGACKAFLA!!!!

Wait a sec....

SMAGGAGLEADAP!!!!

Is there another one coming?.... HA.... HAG.... No .... No I'm good.... SHLAMALAMANAN!!!! Aaand I'm back on the floor. This time it takes me ten minutes to get back myself as my body undergoes a savage round of mutations. To be honest it isn't quite as bad as the last time because I chose not to mutate the Vestibule. I want to think a little more on that before I commit to anything.

In fact, the range I got from the first mutation seems to be quite significant. I can feel the trickle of energy rocket back up to what it had been during the battle. It seems as if the entire colony is back within my range now. Which is good. Upgrading from +3 to +5 seems to have also increased the amount of energy trickling into my system, which is a plus! With more upgrades, the Vestibule will really start to flex some serious power. Something to look forward to.

[Alright guys. I'm okay.]

[Are you finished mutating, Master?]

[Yeah, I'm all good.]

I push my legs under me and get back to my glorious, not flailing on the floor self.

[Alright. We need to go exploring and I want to try and find an old friend.]

[An old friend, master?]

[Yep. Formo the Sophos. Stand-up guy, but a little old fashioned. I didn't have you when I met that guy. He's a super powerful Core Engineer with pets that are insanely powerful. He suggested his whole village was quite close by. Hopefully they're as friendly as he was.]

[I'm sure that we can make our escape if they prove difficult, Master.]

[Ehh. You didn't see that worm.]

[Worm?]

[Let's just say, it was bad news. Let's go Tiny. Time to hunt the Dungeon!]

Tiny is only too happy to leap to his feet and get back into the swing of things. The 'things' swinging are largely his fists in this instance, as he pummels his way through the monsters in our path. With Crinis providing support, her tentacles lashing out, grasping hold of poor unfortunate monsters who don't get long to lament their fate before they are rendered, then eaten.



We need to head back towards the forest expanse. I last saw Formo in the tunnels branching off from that place, so hopefully I'll be able to get in contact with him somewhere over there. I don't have a bright idea on how to find him other than wandering around the tunnels and broadcasting widely through mind magic. But before I can start that, we need to get back toward the right location.

And so we battle! Glorious, glorious battle!

It's almost insulting how easy it is for us now. We tear our way through the first strata monsters like a super heated knife through already partially melted butter. Even an earth bear tyrant isn't able to stand up to my Omen Chomp for more than a single bite attack. My newly upgraded musculature allows me to snap down with incredible speed and force, and the upgraded skill, which allowed me to tear into even Garralosh's powerful scales, is easily able to pierce the hides of these monsters.

But I still sit back and give most of the experience to Crinis and Tiny. Crinis in particular, is quite close to her evolution. She's only a tier three lifeform at the moment, as opposed to Tiny's tier four and my tier five. If I can get her a rare core, then she'll get a massive boost in power during her next evolution. More things to look forward to!

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 410: Tunnel time**

My mandibles close with a mighty crunch and another massive centipede has met an early grave.

[You have slain level 15 Adult Claw Centipede]

[You have gained experience.]

To one side, Tiny is pinning down a rotting rabbit and he is repeatedly punching it in the head until it stops moving and on the other, Crinis continues to work her dark magic on the creatures unfortunate enough to fall into her clutches.

[Got things under control, team?]

[URAAA!] Tiny bellows, both in my mind and out loud as his fists finish their work.

[Yes, Master. These low class filth will be out of your way in just a moment. Do not trouble yourself over them.]

[I mean, they aren't really any trouble.]

[Just leave them to me! I mean... us.]

[Uh... okay.]

It may just be me, but I feel that Crinis has become a little more intense lately. She's always been a little bit ... on edge. But since the Garralosh fight she's been fighting hard for every scrap of experience she can get her horrific, barbed limbs on.

[How close are you to evolving now Crinis?]

[... I still need six more levels.]

[Don't stress about it. We'll get you up to level twenty in no time flat. You're doing great work, no need to beat yourself up.]

[Yes, Master.]

I can tell from the sullen knot she's making with her tentacles that she's not happy. Tiny is still flexing his hands and eagerly eyeing our surroundings looking for things to beat up. I can't help but sigh a little. Both of my pets are feeling the desire for strength. I understand it, now that I've reached tier five, my strength has skyrocketed. Crinis doesn't want to feel useless and Tiny doesn't want to fall behind.

I need to get my hands on some appropriate level cores for them in preparation. Tiny will need a rare core, who knows where I can get my mandibles on one of those. I think Crinis will be fine with a special core evolution. Trying to absorb a rare core at her tier may not be safe.

[Let's keep looking around. We must be getting close to the forest expanse by now.]

The three of us clean ourselves up for a moment, scanning our defeated foes for cores to absorb and eating a little Biomass before we move on. I've been trying to get back to the place I saw Formo, since that would be the obvious place to start searching. We've been pushing through the twisting tunnels of the Dungeon for three days, taking a brief nap to refresh ourselves after the first fifteen hours.

We are far from the colony here and the support from my Vestibule has begun to fade. I'm honestly surprised it goes this far, I'm a long way out after all. Perhaps further mutations to increase the range will keep me in touch with my siblings from a truly ridiculous distance. Food for thought.

The tunnels before us are dark and oppressive once more, now that the light of the walls has faded back to a muted glow. Jagged stone formations cast pointed shadows at odd angles and the constant shrieking roar of monsters has been replaced by the muted scurrying and furtive battles that I recall from my 'youth'.

The mana levels are still higher than they were when I was born, but we are back to a much more comfortable state of affairs. Certainly travelling is much more comfortable than it was before. Our trio continues to pick our way forward through the tunnels. I focus on my antennae as we travel, ensuring that I try and pick up every lurking creature. Running through all these tunnels is doing wonders for my tunnel map, I'm filling in all sorts of new territory. As this tiny slice of the Dungeon continues to unfold in my mind map, the thousands of smaller and larger tunnels that twist in every direction, branching seemingly infinitely, the sheer size and complexity of the Dungeon is starting to come into view.

It's big. It's real big.

Wait a sec... tentacles?

[Watch out, Master!]

From her traditional riding position on my back., Crinis whips out a few tentacles to grab a nearby stone pillar and drags me to one side just as another set of tentacles whip through the air where I'd been just a moment before.

[Crinis?! What the hell?!]

[It's not me!]

I process that for a second.

[Another JellyMaw!?!]

I'd been slow to react since when I see tentacles in my future sense I ignore it. It's always Crinis after all!

[GRRRRR!]

Just as I realise what is attacking me, Crinis releases a decidedly un-Crinis like growl of rage.

[Crinis what's -]

Before I can even ask what's wrong, there is an explosion of dark limbs within the narrow tunnel, blocking my sight entirely. The almost black tentacles writhe through the air towards us and with a shriek of rage Crinis launches herself forward, throwing herself from my back and rapidly expanding.

In seconds the tunnel is completely filled with writhing limbs and I can't for the life of me tell which tentacles belong to which creature. Tiny and I back off a little, helpless to discern where exactly we should attack.

[Crinis are you alright?!]

[DIEEEEEEE!!]

Yikes! Something about this has really gotten underneath Crinis' skin! Wanting to help my pet, I scramble up the side of the tunnel and try to get a better view. As my claws grip the stone I feel a little dismay at the difficulty I feel hauling my newfound bulk off the ground.

Damn! This mass and size are really weighing me down here. Literally!

Gritting my mandibles I haul myself up and get myself upside down to try and push forward. Unfortunately the tunnel is still a wall of battling tentacles in front of me. Crinis' main body is pushing forward toward the conflict, eager to close the distance and I decide to do the same.

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Here we go, try something new. Upside down DASH of power!

My legs scream at the load as I activate my dash skill whilst hanging upside down from the roof. In less than a second I smash into the wall of coiling limbs, my sheer size pushing them out of the way through sheer momentum. Beyond, I see something I didn't expect to see.

Similar to Crinis, but also different, the monster looks like a dark flower made of shadow and tentacles. Thick limbs like petals rotate around the centre of a giant, dripping maw, suspended on a stalk-like pillar of limbs. The 'head' of this monstrous flower tips from side to side as an increasing number of tentacles extend from the body to combat my pet.

Is this thing more evolved than Crinis is?!