

Chrysalis 411

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 411: Shadow Flower

[DIEEEEE!] Crinis shrieks as she continues her furious tentacle assault, one that is matched by the dark flower in its intensity.

Their conflict looks like nothing quite so much as an enormous pile of shoelaces actively tying themselves into knots. That interaction takes a darker turn in seconds as both sets of shoelaces suddenly extend differing but equally savage barbs that start to tear into each other with abandon.

The tunnel reverberates with the sound of buzzing and rending as the two shadow creatures start slicing each other apart. Their shadow flesh is curiously pliable and doesn't offer much resistance to the cutting force as bits and pieces of both start to litter the floor.

[Crisis?! Are you okay there?!]

[DIE! DIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEDIEEEEEEEEE!] is all I get in response.

Holy moly! She has dived right off the deep end!

I need to assist. Not that I think Crinis will lose in this JellyMaw showdown. I just want to ensure that she doesn't get too torn up in the process. Indeed, already she's begun sprouting new tentacles to replace those that have been lost and those limbs whip through the air to battle alongside their brethren in the great tangle.

From my precarious position on the ceiling I can see the shadow flower extend limbs like roots across the floor of the tunnel, burrowing into the soil, but I also manage to see the creatures own shadow deepening to black darker than night.

At that moment I make use of my new and improved business district to fire my sizzling product at the enemy!

POW! POW! POW!

How do you like that for an express delivery?! The acidic fluid rockets through the air fast enough to produce a piercing whistle, and the flower, not ten metres away from me, recoils as if struck by stones when my projectiles strike home. At that speed I suppose the liquid would feel rather solid, I hadn't thought of that. Though less splashy than usual, I'm happy to see that the acid still gums up and starts burning its way through the shadow flesh of the flower at a prodigious rate.

POW! POW! POW!

Plenty more where that came from, you offensive rose of death! And I mean, plenty more. With the full weight of my new production system back there, my acid has once again become the potent weapon it was when I'd first been born.

Ah, the nostalgia is real. Back when I was so weak that everything I saw was a threat and ranged combat was my only viable path to victory. The memories, the terrifying, harrowing memories. Things have come along way since those days, thank Gandalf.

For now, let's focus on what's truly important. Quenching the white hot rage that appears to be burning within the heart of my poor eldritch monstrosity of infinite horror.

The flower is not enjoying my new and improved product by any means. It writhes in pain, a hundred tendrils coiling around itself to shield it from my wrath. Not likely, you Crinis-irritating flower. It's way harder than that to get away from me.

My legs are still straining to hold my more impressive bulk attached to the ceiling, but I'm able to scurry forward to bring myself closer to the creature, just as Crinis completes her work with the shadows. Suddenly, a dozen ravenous, barbed limbs rise from the floor and latch onto the beast, hungrily tearing into its flesh.

Just in time for me to apply my mandibles.

Omen Chomp!

A huge chunk of stamina drains away as the nightmarish dark mandibles manifest before me and slice through the air. Shadow flesh isn't the toughest stuff in the world to start with and in the face of such a powerful skill, the limbs that extend from the flower are shorn away like hair caught in a barber's scissors.

A frankly disgusting amount of limbs flopped to the ground and with a psychic shriek of savage joy, Crinis bounds forward, her jaws wide open to reveal the cavernous, dark void within. I have to admit, the Flower puts up a valiant defence. It has a remarkable amount of shadow flesh in the tank, and if I'm not mistaken there is something fancy going on with those roots.

Flipping on my mana sense, my suspicion is confirmed. The creature has penetrated tentacles deep into the ground and is sucking mana up at a furious rate. In fact, that might explain its prodigious capacity to create shadow flesh. If the creature had some sort of capacity to convert mana into shadow flesh at an accelerated rate, that would be an interesting solution to the problem that Crinis attempted to solve with her Shadow Flesh Generation Gland. I have to admit, this shadow flower is an interesting design based on the original JellyMaw.

Hang on a second... Design?

Suddenly suspicious, I turn my gaze at the creature itself. A powerful core blazes inside it. Probably not a rare but pushing the upper limits of special, for sure. I can't shake the feeling that this creature is a little more carefully put together than the Dungeons own scattershot approach.

[Hold on, Crinis!] I call.

Too late.

[FEEEEASSSSSSSTTT!!!] She hisses viciously as her maw opens wide.

What I saw then, was not meant for mortal eyes. The process of one JellyMaw consuming another is, I can only imagine, the sort of thing dark gods whisper to each other at their evil clubs of nefariousness to make each other shiver. It was loud. It was messy. It was not quick.

When it was done, Tiny and I stood looking down at the now shrunken Crinis who appears to be covering herself with tentacles in order to shield herself from what she must assume is our judging gaze.

[Crisis...]

[Don't look at me!]

[...]

[I've disgraced myself!]

[You really haven't.]

[I lost control!]

[As if I haven't. Let's not mention Tiny.]

Tiny nods in solemn agreement.

[I am not worthy of your words, Master. Please disregard this disgusting servant.]

[That's isn't -]

Like a distant wave that rushed from a kilometre away to inside my head within a second, a formless pressure built within my mind and then exploded into my consciousness with an audible SNAP.

[Holy heck that smarts!]

[I SAY YOU CRETIN! WHAT IN THE NAME OF BOSH HAVE YOU DONE TO MY SERVANT!]

The mental contact is powerful, skilful and as loud as a foghorn blasting within an ear canal.

[You wouldn't happen to be a Sophos would you?]

[OH HO! SO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE DONE YOU RAPSCALLION. I'LL STRIP OUT YOUR CORE AND MOLD YOU INTO A FOOTREST! HOW DARE YOU! HOW DARE YOU, SIR!]

Maybe you shouldn't have left your pet out in the tunnels on its own if you cared so much?!

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[I COULD READ THAT YOU TWIT! DON'T YOU EVEN START ME! I'LL FEED YOU TO MY WORM AND LAUGH. LAUGH I SAY!]

I do NOT want to be fed to one of those worms!

[Wait a second! Any chance you know Formo? We came looking for him. He knows me!]

[...]

C'mon Formo. Please don't be a recluse that nobody's ever heard of.

[WHY DIDN'T YOU SAY SO? I'LL COME FIND YOU, OLD BOY! HOLD TIGHT!]

Thank you Formo. Thank you from your shrivelled legs to your bulbous, eyeless head.

Chrysalis

Chapter 412: The Sophos Village

When our guide finally appeared before us, I did a quick double take as he was remarkably similar to Formo in appearance. The impression was somewhat reinforced when he arrived riding on the back of a tremendously fearsome worm monster.

[WHAT HO! ARE YOU THE DASTARDLY CREATURES WHO THROTTLED MY CREATION?]

I take that as my cue to step forward then.

[Ah, yes. Hello there! We come in peace! Had we realised that the creature we were battling had belonged to one of the Sophos, we'd have left it well enough alone.]

This particular member of Formo's people shares much the same appearance as Formo himself. The Sophos are quite small, with thin, gangly arms and legs that support an unimpressive torso which in turn supports a truly impressive nonce.

Without eyes or perhaps even ears, the Sophos have an impressively bulbous head that they can't seem to hold up properly, resulting in a hunched posture that makes them look even smaller than they ought to. They appear completely hairless and somewhat wrinkly, which I can easily tell, since they don't appear to wear any clothes other than a loincloth.

[WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE CORE FORGE IS THAT?!]

I can't help but look around frantically to see what he's screaming about, but the guy doesn't have eyes! How the hell am I supposed to know what he's looking at?! His head didn't even move!

[I'm not sure what you mean?!]

[YOUR PET! HOW IN THE BLAZES DID YOU GET YOUR GRUBBY MANDIBLES ON ONE?!]

[Are you referring to Tiny? I mean. He's a big 'ol Gorilla. There's a few of them in the forest expanse, I'm sure. We can't be far from it, I'd be happy to take you.]

[NO, YOU BLITHERING NUMBSKULL! THE LIGHTNING FIST APE IS AS COMMON AS MUD AFTER IT RAINS ON A MUD FARM! I'M TALKING ABOUT THE SHADOW CREATURE!]

[Crisis? Uh. Just got lucky I suppose?]

[GIVE HER TO ME!]

[Nope.]

A brief silence descends between myself and the Sophos, who looks down at me (maybe) imperiously from atop his powerful worm mount. I get the feeling he never considered the possibility I might say no to that request.

[IT WOULD SEEM TO ME, THAT YOU OWE ME REPARATIONS AFTER DESTROYING MY CREATION.]

Even if the volume hasn't changed, it feels as if his tone has become a little less demanding.

[You may be right about that,] I'm happy to admit.

[IF YOU GIVE ME CONTROL OF YOUR PET THEN I SHALL CONSIDER THE DEBT ERASED.]

[No chance.]

Silence descends once more.

[WHY?] The Sophos finally demands.

I don't have to think on that.

[These are not simply my pets. They are my friends. You don't just give away friends that have battled loyally by your side, that's nuts.]

The Sophos glares down at me incredulously.

[BOY. THEY ARE MAGICALLY COMPELLED TO SERVE YOU LOYALLY.]

I shrug my antennae.

[I don't care about that.]

A moment.

[And how in the heck did you know I was a boy?!] I demand.

With his sightless gaze, the Sophos looks down at me, as if considering how to punish my disrespectful self, when a great booming laugh rattles into my head.

[HOHOHOHO! IT'S RARE TO SEE SOMEONE WITH A TRUE RESPECT FOR THE MASTER/PET BOND OUTSIDE OF MY KIND. WHAT A TREAT! A TREAT I SAY! AS TO THE OTHER, I MAY HAVE NO EYES BUT THE BLASTED DUNGEON CAN'T HIDE MUCH FROM ME. WE SEE MUCH THAT IT WOULD RATHER REMAIN HIDDEN!]

In a surprising move, the Sophos leapt from the back of his mount to land quite lightly before the head of his worm and drew near to us.

[MY NAME IS TIRIMON. ALLOW ME TO GUIDE YOU TO OUR CONCLAVE.]

[Hello Tirimon. I'm Anthony, this is Tiny and this is Crinis. Nice to meet you!]

Our journey to the village was a little unpleasant. I can still remember the modes of transport I enjoyed back on Earth. Buses, cars, bikes and all that normal stuff. I never thought I'd yearn quite so hard to return to those simple times as hard as I did whilst riding on the back of a giant, slithering rock-worm.

You can't see a thing for starters. The worm is almost as thick as the tunnel, so we were forced to squeeze ourselves into gaps where some of the body ring segments were smaller than the others. Tiny and I smacked our heads a few times on the roof of the tunnels.

That would have been bad enough, if Tirimon hadn't then turned to apologize to us about having to shut our minds down only a brief moment before my consciousness was smothered from within my own head.

I awoke to find myself within a strange cavern with another Sophos leaning down to look into my compound eyes. Something about the colouring of his leathery skin tickled my mind. Or perhaps that was the mind bridge that sprung so effortlessly between us.

[Formo?]

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[NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN, OLD BOY!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 413: Formo returns

[Is there a particular reason why you Sophos are so loud?]

[LOUD? WE'RE TALKING MENTALLY YOU CRETIN. NOT A SOUND IS MADE!]

[Formo! You know exactly what I mean! Every time I form a mind bridge with a Sophos I've had my head rung like a bell! Can you tone it down a little?]

[WE ARE SIMPLY EXUBERANT, MY BOY! FULL OF BEANS!]

[I seriously doubt you eat beans, Formo.]

[WELL, NOT UNLESS IT WAS A BEAN MONSTER I SUPPOSE!]

[Just, take it down a notch, please?]

[I SHALL- ahem. I shall try. I must say young Anthony, I didn't expect that I would see you again. Judging by your change in size, you've been quite productive over the course of the wave.]

[Well, once the colony got rolling, the wave was almost more help than it was harm.]

[Hmm. I wonder if you understand why that might have been the case.]

[I'm not sure what you mean.]

[No matter. Come, my boy, let us wander this way. My domicile is found near the forge.]

The two of us continue our stroll through the Sophos community. I'm not sure what I expected, but the place is much more humble than I had assumed it would be. After my first meeting with Formo, I envisioned the Sophos to be an all-powerful community of core shapers without compare. I'd assumed that they would live in the lap of luxury, but that isn't the case.

The village is built along wide tunnels, with domiciles carved out of the rock. I'd asked where the giant worms and such lived and had been informed that most of them lived in holding areas beneath the village. I'd been a little surprised at that. I'd expected that they might treat their pets a little better, considering how much they relied on them. Tiny and Crinis have been sent down there as pets are discouraged in the upper levels. I've been assured they'll be treated with the utmost respect, and I really have no option but to trust them. Formo has never steered me wrong yet.

The other thing that struck me is the total lack of Mana Veins here. The walls are bizarrely clear of them, light instead being provided by a series of core powered lighting installations. I was pretty darn interested in learning how the heck they did that but Formo was cagey about it when I asked. Damn you, you bulbous headed Sophos! Give me your secrets!

Another thing that struck me was how few Sophos I saw. Most of them looked fairly similar, the real defining feature I could pick out was the mottled colouring of their skin. Most of their skin was green, but some had patches of red, or blue, or even orange I saw. Other than that, their featureless faces appears the same from one to the next. Mind you, they would probably say the same about us ants.

[I don't see a whole lot of your people around Formo. Is it a market day or something? People sleeping in?]

[What? Of course not! There just aren't many of us! We've worked hard to ruffle the Dungeon's feathers and it doesn't appreciate it, not a whit! So the spawn rate for Sophos is abysmally low.]

Even I can tell how bitter he is from his tone.

[How does that even work? The Dungeon just up and decided your people were monsters?]

[BAH! You touch on a sore subject, old boy. We don't much like talking about, but when the opportunity to rant about the Dungeon pops up, who am I to pass it up?!]

[I'm sure I wouldn't know.]

[INDEED! My people were underground dwellers long before the Dungeon appeared. When mana began to seep through the ground, we were the first to experience and make use of it. When the Dungeon tunnels connected to ours, we were the first to come into contact with monsters and battle them. The surfacers ignored our warnings and laughed at our pleas for help. I have to say, their attitude towards us was much the same back then as it is now.]

[That's terrible.]

[STIFF UPPER LIP AND ALL THAT OLD SPORT! It's tough to keep a good Sophos down! We adapted, thrived even! But things began to change. After hundreds of years, we were so steeped in the mana of the Dungeon that the stupid System couldn't differentiate between us and monsters. In an instant, like a switch was flipped, we lost our Classes, we couldn't bear young, our levels were gone and only Biomass could sate us.]

My mind boggled. What a tragedy! How the heck did they survive?

[Just step this way. That was more than a thousand years ago, and there are some of us still alive from that time. We were nearly wiped out, I'm afraid to say, it was a close run thing. Luckily we'd relied on our pets from the outset, and they did not desert us. Now we build our settlements around any spawn point we know has produced a Sophos and we battle against the Dungeon wherever we can.]

[How do you actually fight the Dungeon? Is it a thing that you can hit? I thought it was more of a nebulous sort of.... Entity.]

I'm not sure how much I should share about my conversations with a mind that seems to think it runs the show around here. The Sophos may already know about it, or they might pin me down and dissect me. They seem pretty anti-system in general to me. Probably best if I play it cool.

[Oh, there is much about the Dungeon that can be learned, even when it doesn't want you to. It's also possible to work against the interests of the Dungeon, once you know what it wants. For example, have you seen the Expert Profile of a creature after consuming a ton of it?]

Ah, the profiles! I've unlocked a heap of those after all the fighting and eating that's gone on over the last few weeks and I haven't been bothered to read through them all. I actually unlocked Garralosh's full profile after eating her Biomass, considering there was only one of her the Expert Profile was unlocked straight away. I haven't been able to bring myself to read it yet. I mean, I killed and then ate her. I'd rather not learn something that gave me cause to regret it. As a fellow former human though, I probably owe it to her.

[Sure I have. Those damn centipedes were the first.]

Formo nodded his head.

[PRECICELY! Ahem. You were probably a mite taken aback by what it said. That profile gives a little insight into the dastardly intentions of the Dungeon.]

[If I recall correctly, that profile suggested that the centipedes were proving to be a good species and would be propagated further...]

[Right. Which means that species has been successful and the Dungeon wants to see more of it. Spawn rates will go up and new varieties will be tried, perhaps a shadow variant on the second strata, or perhaps further down than that.]

[What?!] I squawked. [Those filthy centipedes are trash. TRASH I SAY!]

[INDEED, OLD SPICE! SO IF YOU WERE TO GIVE THE SYSTEM WHAT FOR, THE BEST COURSE OF ACTION WOULD BE TO HUNT DOWN EVERY CLAW CENTIPEDE YOU COULD FIND AND WIPE THEM FROM THE DUNGEON IN ONE FELL SWOOP! THUS FOILING THE BLIGHTER'S PLANS!]

[You know what, I just might.]

I'm certain the colony would be happy to follow me in an anti-centipede crusade. I hate those things.

[Ah, just around here.]

The two of us turn a corner and I can't help but gasp. Before me the space opens up into a massive cavern and every surface is filled with circular work stations cut into the stone. Here and there I can see Sophos diligently meditating in the clear space in the centre of their stations, a core sitting in their gnarled hands as they strive to modify it to their wishes. There are cores, everywhere. Every bench hold dozens of the things and in the middle of the cavern a huge repository with tiered shelving runs from the floor to the ceiling and each layer is covered in cores.

I can't help but drool a little.

[WELCOME TO THE FORGE, YOU LUCKY DEVIL! NOT MANY GET TO SEE IT, YOU KNOW. HERE WE CREATE THE MOST FEARSOME PETS THE WHOLE WORLD OVER!]

The pride is obvious as Formo slips up control of his volume, but I don't mind too much. This is quite the sight!

Chrysalis

Chapter 414: Day Spa

[Most of our civilisation was lost when the blasted system changed us. No need for farmers, artists or poets when you're a monster. It was our ability to manipulate cores and create pets to fight for us that mattered, and over the years we've taken that skill as far as we can.]

The two of us were relaxing in Formo's house, carved into the wall around the outside of the forge. The inside was as simple as the outside, a small number of rooms, a crude bed and furniture which had been carved from the rock. Formo sat on a stone chair next to a small table whilst I stood just outside with my head through the door. This part of the town wasn't exactly made for monsters to move comfortably in, and the Sophos were quite small.

[I'm a bit surprised that you guys all seem to look pretty similar. Since you're monsters, shouldn't you have evolutions and all that? What tier are you anyway?]

Formo's snort rang in my mind for a moment before he spoke.

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[It's a touch rude to ask that sort of thing, old bean. But I don't mind I suppose. We deliberately don't evolve much in order to keep our settlements in the upper levels of the Dungeon. Most of us are tier five and a few of us are tier six. We use mana concentration enchantments to bring mana up from below in order to sustain us. If we kept on evolving, that'd become impractical and we'd have to move down. This settlement is already something of an oddity, since most of our communities are in the second strata. Better cores down there.]

[I can imagine. Any chance you would share those enchantments?]

[Nope.]

[Dammit.]

I think for a moment. I can feel that the mana in the air is more concentrated in here than it was in the tunnels outside, which is crazy considering there aren't any mana veins. Are they moving mana around with some sort of mana air conditioning system?!

[Your friend Tirimon seemed very interested in my pet Crinis. Any particular reason for that?]

[Is that the tentacly one?]

I nod.

[Yes,] he began to muse, one clawed hand coming up to stroke his narrow chin. [That's quite the rare specimen you have there. Quite rare indeed. Very new species. We encountered them for the first time during the wave, which I presume, you did as well.]

[For sure. Scared the heck out of me.]

[Hah! I bet! It's not unusual for the Dungeon to spit out new species during events like a wave, see how they fare. Now that things are calming down, we're quite keen to send an expedition to the lower levels to see what we can see.]

I refrain from pointing out that they won't see much, due to being blind. That's too cheap, even for me.

[No one's going to steal her are they?] I ask nervously.

[What?! THEFT!? NONSENSE! The Sophos aren't petty thieves!]

[Tirimon seemed pretty keen to get his hands on her.]

[Tirimon is a BLITHERING IDIOT for letting his pet out into the tunnels unsupervised. If he wanted to test its performance then he should have done so here in the proving grounds. I'm sure he wanted to replace his lost specimen but he got what he gosh darn deserved.]

He stood up, his thin legs wobbling a little as his oversized head began to tip his balance.

[WHOA THERE! Might as well pop down to the pens if you're worried though. I wouldn't mind checking in on my pets also.]

I have to back myself up a little in order to clear the doorway and we pass through the forge where Sophos diligently work their craft and we come to an enormous staircase leading both up and down. These stairs are so massive that I think even Garralosh would be able to navigate them! Makes sense I suppose, there would have to be somewhere the Sophos could move their pets throughout their community. That's probably why their streets are so wide to start with.

The stairs slowly curve and it isn't long before we arrive in the 'downstairs' area and my mandibles drop open reflexively. Had I really thought the Sophos would treat their pets poorly? I'm an idiot.

What I see could only be described as the most luxurious stable I've ever seen. A trickling stream of mana infused water meanders between spacious pens with high walls and comfortable amenities. The pets have beds. BEDS! And they look so much better than what the Sophos themselves enjoy! In fact, from the entrance I can see into a nearby pen where one of those enormous worms is comfortably nestled on an enormous padded cushion. A pile of Biomass rests next to the languid worm and I can see a Sophos inside, massaging the great beast.

In fact, there are far more Sophos here than there were upstairs. They move from pen to pen, checking on creatures, or even just resting alongside them. They don't appear to be doing much physical labour, which is understandable considering how weak they are, instead they direct other pets to the heavy lifting and move alongside them.

[It seems as if your people spend more time down here than upstairs.]

[Hurrumph! We can't have children anymore, you know. The Dungeon doesn't allow natural reproduction from 'monsters'. Not in the way we could before. My people invest most of their energy in their pets. They are the only children we'll ever have. Of course, not all pets are treated this way. Some are disposable soldiers, an unfortunate reality of living in the Dungeon, those who've been with us for a long time though... It's hard, when they die.]

[I understand. I've wanted to try and find a way to free my pets.]

[Hmm. You don't want them to be compelled to follow you but do so from their own choice?]

[Right!]

Nice to meet someone who understands my principle!

[SMASHING empathy there chap, but I have to say we haven't found a way to do it. When you reconstitute a core, the bond is formed and we don't know how to sever it.]

[Dang.]

Speaking of my pets, I find the pair of them resting in the lap of luxury within a pen waited on hand and foot. Tiny appears to be loving life as reclines in a padded chair that seems designed to hold his sort of weight as he munches on handfuls of Biomass. Crinis, for her part, is cringing against the wall trying to hide herself for a small crowd of six Sophos who appear to be standing and staring at her, motionless.

Now of course, I know that they are probably having a rich (and loud) mental conversation but I have to say, it looks a little creepy.

I can feel Formo weaving together a mind bridge in mere seconds as he attaches us to what I can only describe as a mind web, a multi-link bridge construct between the Sophos.

[WHAT IS ALL THE HUBBUB?!] he bellows.

[NO NEED TO BUTT IN, YOU PEASANT!] Comes the sharp reply.

As they erupt amongst themselves, I wander over to Crinis.

[How's it going there, Crinis? How long have they been here?]

[The. Whole. Time.]

Oof.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 415: The real art of core shaping

[Do you guys mind? My pet is feeling a little put upon here.]

As one the Sophos turn on me.

[MIND YOURSELF, BOY! THE EXPERTS ARE TALKING!]

Yikes. Not one to mince words, this one. Although, I could say the same for all of the Sophos I've met. They seem universally loud and pugnacious.

[THAT'S HIS PET, YOU NINCOMPOOP!]

[HOW DARE YOU!]

[OH, I DARE THAT AND MORE!]

[FORMO, YOU SLACK JAWED NINNY! I'LL MAKE PAJAMAS OUT OF YOUR FAVOURITE PET FOR YOUR WORDS!]

[YOU WANT TO TRY IT ASONAN? I'LL TURN YOUR HOUSE INTO A BIOMASS PANTRY. AND LAUGH! HEARTILY!]

[Calm down! Sheesh! No need to get so worked up!] I interject.

They turn on me once more.

[THIS- ahem. This is merely banter, old boy. Conflict between Sophos is- well, its unheard of.]

[AND NOT JUST BECAUSE WE CAN'T TALK!]

[OH HO! JOLLY GOOD JAPE!]

[QUITE SO!]

I'm not sure if my burgeoning headache or weariness will become more pressing in the short term. These damn Sophos are exhausting.

[WE WERE MERELY EXAMINING THE CHOICES YOU'D MADE WITH YOUR PET!] the one named Asonan shouts at me.

[I don't see why it's so interesting] I said, honestly. [For the most part, I let Crinis make her own choices.]

Silence fell at my words as the Sophos sightlessly stare at me for a moment before they turn back to studying Crinis.

[Anthony, you really let your pets make their own evolution decisions?]

[Yes?]

[Even that one?] Formo points and Tiny as the ape continues to shovel handfuls of Biomass into his face.

[Yep.]

[You didn't design their evolutions? Or manually control their evolutions?]

[I did a little work on Crinis before I reconstituted her, but my skill levels were low back then, and still are now, compared to yours I suppose, so I wasn't able to get much done. For the most part, I let them pick what they think will work out.]

[... why?]

I can tell the other Sophos are listening along the communal line as Formo queries me. I'm not sure why they have such an interest though, I feel a little defensive.

[Look. I'll come clean! On the one hand I can't be bothered to micromanage every little thing, on the other, they have their own minds, even if they're pets! They can decide what they want and how they want to go about it! These are big decisions, after all!]

[We don't disagree with that, we just find it interesting that your pets were able to make quite good decisions without your input.]

[Really?]

[Yes. Although with that one,] he points at Tiny again, [You'll need to intervene. The Lightning Fist Ape is an interesting creature, but it chews up its own mental attributes every time it evolves until it eventually becomes effectively mindless. We rarely bother with them due to the hassle, but if you can find a balance it could prove to be strong.]

[Uhh, that's great advice.]

[We tend not to give our pets such free reign. But I can respect your choice to do so.]

[Thanks!]

[WE REALLY CAN'T DECIDE HOW MUCH POTENTIAL THIS NEW SHADOW BEAST HAS,] another member of the Crinis fan club interjects. [IT'S AN INTERESTING NEW APPLICATION OF THE SHADOW FLESH ARCHETYPE. I'M CURIOUS TO SEE HOW IT WILL EVOLVE!]

[Well I think Crinis is pretty darn close to evolving right now, aren't you Crinis?]

[Ah! Yes, Master!]

[Well we can see that by looking at her core,] Formo says.

[How the heck can you look at her core without touching her?]

I can almost feel the Sophos around me rolling their non-existent eyes.

[Level up your skills Anthony. We hardly waste time on core shaping our real pets until we reach rank six.]

SIX?!

[Sheesh. I created a whole new species of Ant monster and I'm only rank three in core shaping.]

[YOU DID WHAT?!]

I get a solid mental blast right in the scone at that. All of the Sophos turn to stare at me once more, but this time the air feels a little more tense.

[I, uh. I modified the Queen's core to produce offspring more like me and the species of the entire colony, including myself, changed when they were born.]

[WHAT A BLASTED THING TO DO!]

[INCREDIBLE!]

[INSPIRED!]

[BLOODY FANTASTIC IS WHAT IT IS!]

[ANTHONY MY BOY!] Formo is back to his head thumping loudest. [CREATING A NEW SPECIES IS A GRAND ACHIEVEMENT! ESPECIALLY FOR A LOST SOUL SUCH AS YOU! GOOD SHOW! GOOD SHOW INDEED!]

His pronouncement is met with a chorus of "GOOD SHOW!" and "INDEED, YES!" from the gallery.

[Phew. I have to admit for a second there I thought you guys might get angry at me for making super intelligent monster ants.]

[BAH! WE'RE NOT SO EASILY FRIGHTENED! WE'VE FOUGHT OFF SWARM MONSTERS DOZENS OF TIMES!]

[HUNDREDS!]

[WE ARE NOT INTIMIDATED BY ANTS!]

[You know, that's nice to hear. It's good to find people who aren't afraid of monsters.]

[WHAT BOSH! WE ARE MONSTERS!]

[I even made a caste within the colony who are dedicated to core shaping after I was inspired by Formo's pets.]

[OUTRAGEOUS?!]

[HOW DARE YOU, INSECT?!]

[NOW, THAT IS THREATENING!]

[What really?!]

[NO! OF COURSE NOT!]

I sag to the floor a little, my legs splaying out. These Sophos are exhausting to deal with. Almost as if taking pity on me, the Sophos gather around to pat me on the carapace with their gnarled hands.

[It's rare that we find someone who values the shaping arts to such a degree. We're impressed, Anthony.]

[Thanks, Formo.]

[Lost souls such as yourself are not often in such a good position as you. Most that we come across are... disturbed, even from the beginning. That you have been able to defy the Dungeon and find a place in it is impressive.]

[Thanks. I've only run into one other of my kind and that was Garralosh.]

[Hmm. She died recently, did she not?]

[How do you know?]

[There are ways.]

[Be mysterious then. I know you mentioned another that you'd met.]

[Young Sarah! Fine young woman/bear.]

[BEAR?!]

[Indeed!]

[How is that fair?!]

[What? That she started as a powerful bear? And Garralosh started as a fiendish crocodile, whilst you were an ant?]

[Exactly?]

[Just another reason to hate the Dungeon!]

[QUITE SO!]

[HEAR HEAR!]

No need to remind me about that. These guys really carried a grudge.

[COME YOUNG ANT MONSTER. LET US DISCUSS THE FINE ART OF CORE-SHAPING, AND IF YOU WISH WE CAN SPEAK OF WHAT WE KNOW OF YOUR KIND.]

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[That'd be great!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 416: The Fires of Industry

Tungstant snapped back to alertness with a start. Her mind was still fuzzy with fatigue, but she pushed her feet beneath her with alacrity, energy surging through her body. There was so much to do! So much work, so much discovery! It was electric! How could a Formica Sapiens possibly rest when the tasks to perform lay spread before them like a delicious banquet? Impossible!

She charged out of the chamber in which she was resting to find the tunnels filled with frenzied ants. Pheromones blazed against her antennae, the air was thick with ants communicating at a rapid pace.

"Hurry up! I've gotta get to the new crafting district yesterday!"

"Not my fault you're late, slacker!"

"Quit polluting the air with your nonsense! Some of us are trying to discuss construction theories!"

"Take it a workshop or chamber. This is completely not the place for that!"

The Carver caste council member took it all in for a moment before she threw herself into the crush. In an instant she was buffeted on all sides by ants of all castes as they rushed to get to a hundred different places. Her position as a council member afforded her no extra consideration from her siblings, they cared only for the task at hand.

She followed the branches of the tunnel toward her first destination, the brood chambers. Upon arrival, he couldn't help but feel delighted by the masses of young she found there. Hundreds of them, lovingly cared for by dozens of tenders. This early in the day, the Brood were being transferred to higher chambers in order to benefit from the warmth of the sun.

Tungstant frowned. The humans used fires in order to warm enclosed spaces. It was a crude system, to be sure, and the smoke would be troublesome. Perhaps she should check in with the mage caste to see if they were making headway with enchanting. It should be relatively simple to produce a core enchanted to generate heat. With some care, the brood chambers could be at the optimal temperature for the entire day.

More work to be done, but rather than crushed, she was delighted. Her mind was afire with the possibilities. The visits to the human village had been everything the Eldest had promised they would be. Access to a civilisation with thousands of years of learning behind them had been invaluable. Of course, the people of the village were still struggling in the aftermath of their kingdom being laid to waste, but still the ants had been able to extract a tremendous amount of information. Forging, construction, enchanting, agriculture had all been new concepts to the colony but they had pestered the humans endlessly and then started experimenting straight away.

And with experimentation, came new skills and new skills meant grinding!

"Florence! How goes the brood?"

The brood tender turned away from her charges for a brief moment to speak with her fellow council member.

"Tungstant. As nice as it is to see you, we really are very busy here right now. Could you make this quick?"

"Who has time for a conversation that not's quick these days?" Laughed the carver. "I was asked by the generals to check in, they wanted to know how many hatchlings we were expecting over the next few days. They've been attempting to scout out hunting grounds in order to provide enough experience and they're worried there won't be enough.

Florence twitched her antennae but was able to recall the numbers in an instant.

"Three hundred and twenty four tomorrow and three hundred and fifty seven tomorrow."

"Fair enough. How long until we reach full capacity?"

"The first round of eggs from the new Queens hatched yesterday. We expect them to enter the pupal stage in five days."

"Great! Have a great day, Florence."

"To you as well."

The Tenders were always so polite. If only the mages could follow their example, as that was Tungstant's next destination. Back out into the connecting tunnels of madness before she made it to the mage chambers. Inside, dozens of mage caste ants were practicing their craft, grinding their skills and experimenting with enchanting cores.

"Got some more work for us, Tungstant? Need to hand more tasks to the big thinkers in the colony?"

"You do know carvers have higher Cunning than mages, right?"

"Speak not of this heresy!"

"Actually, Propellant, I had something that might be right up your alley. Fire enchantments to keep the brood chambers warm."

"Oh Ho! I see it. Yes. Yes! Simplicity itself!"

"Just make sure you test everything properly. I'll put a team of carvers on it as well. We can compare notes. Have your researchers made much progress?"

"We were only able to learn a small number of basic enchantments from the humans. Other than using those to grind our skills, making new breakthroughs is difficult. It's going to take time."

"Not to mention the lack of resources."

Tungstant looked out over the chamber. The colony still hadn't done much by way of architecture, most chambers were just hollowed out spaces of earth and rock without decoration, but she could see the beginnings of customization here in the space. Each mage had carved out their own little work space, demarcated by a small circle of raised dirt. Within each space, mage ants were meditating, shaping mana or engraving mana onto cores.

The cores were the key. They needed cores for new members of the colony, they needed cores for the core shapers, they needed cores for enchanting. The colony had an insatiable appetite for them right now, and there was only one way to get them, fight and destroy monsters.

"The soldiers and scouts are doing everything they can," Propellant said, "we just have to make do with what we have."

Tungstant could only agree. "Keep in touch. Things are moving fast right now, we don't want to miss anything."

"You could say, things are really heating up."

"Just. Why?"

Only too happy to leave the mages behind Tungstant began to make her way back to the carver workshops. Of all the castes, theirs had been the one to receive the most new knowledge from the humans and with so many areas of advancement to keep track of she couldn't afford to be away for long.

The workshops were where the carvers had been doing the bulk of their work and it was a flurry of activity as usual when she arrived. Cobalt was watching over a team of carvers who were experimenting with new developments in earth magic.

"How goes it, Cobalt?" Tungstant greeted her sibling.

"Busy! Where have you been slacking this time?" Came the good natured reply.

"Has there been much progress?"

"Since yesterday? No, of course not. These things take time."

"I just can't help but feel a little impatient."

"I understand that, sister. If we rush we'll come to false conclusions. Steady progress is key."

"I've been told we will be getting four hundred new carvers in three days."

"That's more than we thought!"

"Well, do we have work for them?"

"We could find work for twice that number."

"Right. All of the castes are being pushed hard right now."

"We wouldn't have it any other way."

Looking out over the ever expanding workshop, Tungstant felt a burning passion rising in her chest. Here and there, ants were constructing forges, trying to create tools shaped to their claws to replicate the techniques they'd seen from the humans. Already a few had learned the Skill. Next to them were experiments in enchanting, earth magic, engraving. She could see along one wall where a carver was using earth magic to shape a wall, gouging neat and perfect lines into a mural. Artwork, a tapestry of stone and soil.

Curious, she moved closer to inspect the work. It was still taking shape, but it was clear already what it would be. The Eldest was depicted in bold lines, standing atop a fallen monstrosity, Garralosh. It was strange, the sensation of emotion that rushed through her abdomen as she beheld the picture. The power images, and storytelling. This was also something the colony would seize. They would seize everything.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 417: Road to recovery

Morrelia was tired. There were many reasons for a person in the village to be tired. Construction had continued unabated since the threat of the horde had faded for one. The militia had not relented in their training and practice either, which consumed a lot of energy. Small scale Dungeon delves still took place every day, much safer now than when the wave had been underway and that required coordinating and supervision.

There were rescue teams being sent out constantly also. Morrelia knew that she and Anthony hadn't managed to find everyone in the kingdom who might have been hiding from the ravenous beasts, there were sure to be more out there and many members of the village had volunteered to go out to search. Perhaps they hoped to find family members or friends who might have survived, it hardly mattered. This required coordination, administrative effort and a heck of a lot of oversight.

None of which came easy, and obviously that didn't help Morrelia's energy levels. But mostly, she was tired because of Isaac.

"Well 'ello there spicy lady. What might 'ave you lookin' so magnificent today?"

"By the Legion."

Morrelia groaned and clapped a hand over her eyes to shield them from the pain.

"Isaac. Not again," she growled.

She took her hand away to reveal the man in question, leaning against her door frame, a broad grin on his face and a plate of hot breakfast in one hand.

"The roar of the tigress does nothin' to dampen this Lion's ardour."

"They aren't even... you know what? I don't care. Give me the food."

She snatched the plate out of his hand and shouldered past him eliciting a grunt that the lower levelled man tried to contain. Morrelia didn't notice and kept walking, shovelling the much needed meal into her mouth. She had no idea who had managed to start making fresh bread but in her opinion, that person needed a church more than Anthony did. If he could eat regular food, she had a feeling the ant might agree. She couldn't imagine he reacted well to seeing the church being built. She'd asked Enid about it and the older woman had been cagey, which told Morrelia all she needed to know.

"I just want to go one day without having to punch you," she spoke to the air.

But sure enough, Isaac was right behind her.

"I thought those were love taps!" She could feel the muck-eating grin on his face, even without having to turn around.

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"I swear, if I weren't so busy, I'd get my blades and hack you to pieces. Why are you trying so hard to piss a berserker off?"

"Sounds like the flames of yer passion are burnin' out of control!"

"FINE!"

In one motion she whirled around, plate gripped in two hands and she -.

Ten minutes later she was with Enid in the under construction town hall.

"The healers are busy enough as it is," the mayor grouched. "It's not like the ant healers pay us a visit every day."

"I know," Morrelia sighed.

"This is three days in a row now."

"I know! How is this my fault, by the way?"

Enid slapped her pen down and stared at the younger woman.

"Because Isaac is an idiot and you are a former Legion trainee. One of you is expected to have some self-control and it isn't him!"

"Send me away then. Let me go on a delve, or to hunt for survivors. Let me go to the city and see if the Legion force comes up. You know I can be useful there."

Enid raised a hand and pinched the bridge of her nose. There was so much damn work. They'd managed to get a paper press together, goodness knows how, and she had seized on the opportunity to start documenting everything, as a good merchant would. A census was done, followed by an inventory then they'd had to start drafting official documents. The kingdom of Liria might have fallen but Enid would be damned to the fifth strata if she would live in a place without law.

Which meant consulting the people, drafting a town guard, putting regulations in place. It took a tremendous amount of time. Then of course there was the trickle of survivors that were coming in. The search parties had been successful, which meant more mouths to feed and house, which meant more work.

How it all got done, Enid had no idea and she was the only person who knew everything that was going on.

"Enid, you need help."

"What?" She snapped, only to find Morrelia looking at her with worry in her eyes.

"Your burning out, Enid. You need help, bring someone on board who can help shoulder the load. There's too much going on and too many people for you to be doing all this by yourself. And it's going to get worse, you know that."

Enid sighed.

"I know," she said. Her shoulders slumped a little. "I've known that for ages. I could run my merchant house by myself, but this is bigger. I just... If I start bringing in more people, make a council, then all of this will start to feel official. Politics will come into it, tussling for authority. We don't need that."

"What we don't need is the mayor to fall flat on her face from exhaustion."

"Maybe I'd be less tired if our strongest warrior wasn't knocking out the captain of the town guard daily."

"Ahem. Putting that aside. I don't think it'll be as bad as you suspect. The people here are united. I've never seen anything like it. Besides, the ants are watching us so closely now. People are on their best behaviour."

"Maybe you're right."

"I am."

The two women fell into a companionable silence for a moment. Outside Enid's office, the sounds of a village, not a village, a town, drifted in through the glassless window.

"I'm going to get out of your hair," Morrelia announced. "You don't need me right now. I'll leave some people behind to keep training and leading the delves, but I think I'll be put to better use in the city. I'll head over there and start a delve to try and make contact with the Legion. They might be on their way up already, wouldn't hurt to meet them halfway."

The mayor watched her coolly for a moment.

"Even I've heard of Titus. How do you think your father is going to react if he finds out what things are like here?"

The air grew still as they both considered that. Legion policy toward monsters was direct, clear and incredibly simple. Kill them.

"Are you saying," Morrelia began slowly, "that you don't want the Legion to know about this place?"

"What I'm saying, is that you should be careful how much you say if you happen to have a reunion. Collateral damage is inevitable when the Abyssal Legion moves in force. You know that better than anyone. These are good people here, just trying to put their lives back together. They've taken the help that was available. That's not a sin."

Morrelia looked down the still seated Enid, her eyes narrowed.

"Just what have you started to believe, Enid? That sounds quite close to something that Beyn might say."

Enid turned to look out the window.

"It doesn't matter," she sighed, "I can't tell you what is divine and what isn't. I've gotten attached to these people and I'd rather they not be purged. That is something we can all agree on, isn't it?"

Morrelia nodded.

"It is."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 418: Hospitality

It's been nice, visiting the Sophos. Despite their somewhat decrepit and ghastly appearance, they were fine hosts. Every day they'd bring Biomass to Tiny, Crinis and I and we'd feast together with Formo and his favourite pets. They even took time to show me how they worked with cores and put together some of their most powerful pets. I have to say, their means and methods were far beyond what I was capable of. Even after the first session I was happy to bow down to their superior skill and capability.

Particularly in the area of core melding. Which is apparently a skill I've yet to unlock. Many of the Sophos best monsters were formed by fusing multiple cores together. This is an advantage in a number of areas. Firstly, by making changes to multiple cores, it was possible to effect more changes than if you focused on a single core. The resistance barrier they called it, the wall you pushed up against every time you made a change to a core. More changes, more resistance. If you could only make ten changes to one core, then by forming a monster out of two cores, you could make twenty changes!

Of course, it sounded far simpler than it was. That was just the theory. The art, as Formo was at great pains to point out, was in making the changes in such a way that not only did you push toward your desired outcome, you simultaneously shaped the cores so they would fit more snugly together. Doing that, was a massive pain in the commercial zone. The Sophos could spend days, even weeks, plotting a single change to ensure that the final outcome was closer to what they wanted, whilst also enabling the fusion process. I myself had seen multiple Sophos standing over a pair of cores arguing and slapping each other over the head as they discussed what changes to make to a pair of cores.

Then there were the three core constructions. Holy moly, that was a whole new level. Only the best and brightest of the Sophos dared to attempt it. Those with the best stats and highest Skill levels. Apparently the worms were such a pet. Crafted for each Sophos either by themselves, if they were capable enough, or by an expert. Each core had to moulded with the final product in mind, which involved two fusions. So the first two cores had to be shaped in such a way that they would fit together snugly and accept a third once that process was done. It sounded like completing a puzzle that then had to fit inside another puzzle. HARD! COMPLEX!

I was keen to give it a go and take my findings back to the colony. The core shapers had already proved their worth and this was just more evidence that they would be able to make a powerful contribution to the family.

[I can see it in your face you BLIGHTER, you're thinking of trying this, aren't you?] Formo burst into my thoughts.

[... maybe]

[Well don't be a COLOSSAL, BLITHERING INGRATE. These techniques are incredibly stressful to the mind and require high level Skills. You're only up to Core Surgery and don't even have the core fusion skill. That becomes available once you rank up Core Surgery. Don't even think of trying this until that's done.]

[What's the harm?" I protest. "Even if it doesn't work out, it's not like the core is wasted. I can just give it to a pet to absorb it, right?]

[NOT RIGHT, YOU DONKEY!]

[Donkey?!]

[Every core is precious! And some are vanishingly rare. Besides, more experience towards the next Skill level is granted from utilising that Skill correctly, as opposed to stuffing around! You could fudge your way to the next rank over hundreds of failures or you could achieve it with dozens of successes. If your colony is trying to raise many core shapers, do you truly believe you have cores to waste?]

[Ah. No. No we do not.]

[PRECISELY, OLD BOY! Do as we do and take your time to ensure each core you work on is a SMASHING success. That'll maximise your gains.]

[Good advice... Should we go help your worm?]

[Barry? BAH! With Garralosh gone, there's nothing around here that can hold a candle to him! Worry not!]

[I suppose so...]

It truly didn't appear as 'Barry' needed much help. The worm is gleefully smashing everything we came across, either using its tremendous bulk or simply swallowing everything in front of it.

[I do want to point out though, we came out here to get experience for Crinis.]

[Ah! So we did!] Formo exclaims as he smacks himself in his bulbous noggin. [Barry! Heel you lovable noodle!]

It was a little strange to hear Formo call his pet as if it were a dog, especially when he could have kept that conversation private, it was even stranger to see the massive worm turn and slither back, full of excitement and practically wriggling in delight.

[Okay Crinis. Your time to shine. Go in there and smash some monsters! We'll get you fully mutated and ready to evolve in no time!]

[Alright, Master!]

The abominable ball of death sitting on my back raised two tentacles like clenched fists in front of her face in a somewhat adorable pose before she inflated in size to open her mouth and reveal the nightmare void barred behind her razer teeth.

[You too Tiny, get in there and practice your Skills. Just don't steal too much, these kills are worth way more XP to Crinis than they are to you.]

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[HRN!] Tiny grunts in acknowledgement.

It's amazing how much he communicates with a grunt. I can tell from that grunt that he's not happy to be restricted in his fighting, but nonetheless happy to be able to cut loose.

[What about yourself?] Formo asks.

[Ah, no. Not for me, thanks. I've recently hit tier five, these monsters won't do a lot for me.]

[Right you are! Won't be long till you'll need to descend!]

[Wassat?]

[Well the mana here is too thin! It's already too thin! You've been fine in our commune because the mana is thicker there!]

As Crinis and Tiny move forward and begin to hunt I check my core and notice that he's right! I've started losing MP! This is a big deal since I've been using my sub-brains to draw in mana using external mana manipulation in order to train the skill and it's still not enough! Yikes! I could work a bit harder and maybe be fine, but still, this isn't a good sign.

[You're a second strata creature now, NO MISTAKE MY LAD. I recommend you head there immediately when you've finished your holiday with us! The mana here in the first strata is weak! WEAK I SAY! Every time you go down a strata, there's a qualitative change. You'll see.]

[I guess you're right.]

[Besides, there's a good chance you might be able to find more people such as yourself down there. With a bit of luck they're more sane than Garralosh was!]

Chrysalis

Chapter 419: Crinis Evolution

[The time has come, Crinis! Time to seize your destiny. To elevate yourself to a higher plane. A new tier, if you will. You shall become stronger, more powerful, more excellent in every way. But choices will need to be made. You must navigate the labyrinthine System and make the selections that speak true to you. Be certain of your path and firm in your convictions! What you select matters not, only how you feel about your choices matters. Reach deep inside the infinite void of endless murder that lies within and be true to the self you find there! Do you hear me Crinis!]

[I- I do! Master!]

[Good energy! You've come a long way, Crinis! Tiny and I are proud of you!]

[HRM] Tiny grunts.

[Exactly! We are with you all the way. There is nothing to fear except fear itself! And that fear is something we will fight! On the beaches! And the trenches! Or tunnels, I suppose...]

Dammit, I'm losing it!

[I've got it, Master! Don't worry, I'll be fine.]

[Okay, great!]

Phew. I was really running out of steam there. I need to see if there's a pep-talk skill. Any help I can get would be welcome, because I suck.

[Got your mutations sorted then?]

[Yes.]

[Special core's been absorbed?]

[Yes.]

[Right. Then we are all systems go. Let me just check your core to see if everything's on the up and up.]

So saying, I scuttle up to Crinis and touch my antennae to her shadow flesh.

Name: Crinis

Level: 20 (core) (III)

Might: 90

Toughness: 80

Cunning: 41

Will: 42

HP: 160/160

MP: 230/230

Skills: Expert Shadow Flesh Manipulation Level 15 (III); Expert Grappling Level 12 (III); Expert Shredding Level 16 (III); Greater Tremor Sensing Level 5 (III); Barbaric Dismembering Level 1 (III); Greater Fear Inspiration Level 9 (II); Mana Transformation Level 11 (III); Slick Tentacle Walking Level 4 (III); Advanced Tentacle Fu Level 4 (II); Further External Mana Manipulation level 4 (II); Advanced Shadow Magic Affinity Level 2 (II); Stealth Level 3(I);

Mutations: Armoured Shadow flesh +15; Obliterating Void Maw +15; Endless Dimensional Stomach +15; Legion Tentacles +15; Razor Barbs + 15; Grisly Teeth + 15; Omniscient Mana Sensory Gland +15, Reservoir Shadow Magic Gland +15, Abrupt Shadow Flesh Generator +15; Clear Shadow Eye +15; Masterful Tentacle Conductor +15;

Species: Shadow Murder Orb

Skill points: 27

Biomass: 14

As always, Crinis has been diligent in practicing her skills. All of her magic abilities are progressing at a steady pace, as well as her fighting skills. She should probably emphasise her Shadow Magic Affinity until she can get it to at least the third rank. The real juice starts to come out at around that level. The real difference is the mutations. After eating her fair share of Garralosh, and stuffing her face through the tunnels in the days since, she'd been able to get enough Biomass to max out her mutations, further aiding her evolution.

As I look at her choices, I can tell she's put a lot of thought into it. She fused her Shadow flesh mutations to create a tougher body that would hopefully take a bit more of a beating. She chose to emphasise the disintegrating aspect of her Maw, anything that went in there would start to break down at a fairly rapid clip. Nasty. Fused her stomach and now it truly is starting to get bottomless. Her dividing tentacles were fused and how she's able to produce even more of the damn things. She chose to emphasise the cutting aspect of her barbs and how they are sharp. Should help her cut through sterner defences. The teeth... I don't want to talk about the teeth. They scare me. Her sensory gland was fused, increasing range and granularity of her detection. Her Shadow magic gland was fused, bringing the properties of rapid refilling and greater capacity. The shadow flesh generator now spits the stuff out even faster than before. The Shadow eye was interesting. She chose options to increase the clarity of her shadow sight and then reinforce it. Makes a world of difference, I'm told. As to the tentacle conductor, she surprised me a little. I thought for sure she would increase the number of tentacles it could control, but instead she gave it finer control, allowing the sub-brain to make incredibly fine movements without her having to think about it.

All up, she's done a great job. How far she's come from when she couldn't make a choice for herself at all! Looking at this powerful, intelligent and accomplished pet, my heart is filled with pride. If I could, I would shed a single, manly tear.

[Looks fantastic, Crinis. Go forth! Evolve!]

[Okay!]

Crinis gives her guts pose once more before she slithers into the corner of the pen and falls still. I turn to the ogling audience of Sophos.

[Can she have a little privacy please?]

[WHAT?! OH! OF COURSE, APOLOGIES!]

These guys are incorrigible. I can't find in my heart to get mad at them though. They're just obsessed with pets to a truly unhealthy degree. Helping each other evolve their pets is par for the course around here. To them, I'd be the odd one out who wants his pets to evolve themselves and would rather nobody was around.

[I'll wait for you upstairs, Anthony. You can find me at my home.]

[Thanks, Formo. Appreciate it.]

[Not at all!]

Turning on their heels, the small crowd of Sophos walk away, stumbling every now and again as they lose their balance. They really have horrific physical stats. Tiny drags my attention back by rolling over and slapping his hands against the soft leaf matter that makes his bed.

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[Bit unhappy are you, eh Tiny?]

[HUFF!] the giant ape snorts and turns his back toward me.

What a baby. I crawl over to him and pat one furry shoulder with my antennae.

[No need to worry about it, big guy. Crinis is just catching up in tier. It was bound to happen eventually. You still have a significant lead in levels. You'll hit tier five long before she does.]

He shrugs his massive shoulders, but I can tell some of the angst is draining out of him.

[Won't be long now and we'll head down to the second strata. Thicker mana down there. Crazier monsters. Who knows what we're going to find, eh? Could be anything! We should be able to find some serious fights, don't you think?]

[GRRRR.]

[That's right! Things will pick up Tiny, don't you worry.]

Somewhat satisfied, the battle mad ape, settles himself and prepares to sleep. For my part, I lower my body to the ground and start to practice my mind magic skills as I wait for Crinis to complete her evolution. For tier four, it should take half a day. I'm very curious to see how she comes out!

Chrysalis

Chapter 420: Gratuitous Death Sphere

Of course there's a dodge skill. It's obvious that there would be one. It's a classic skill! One of the very basics. Right up there with 'charge' and 'hit', there is always going to be dodge! I don't remember seeing it in the menu when I first checked the available skills, so it must have unlocked at some point. Perhaps when my stats were high enough, or after I'd successfully avoided an attack from something.

Why the heck didn't I go back and check for dodge? I suppose I've adopted a strategy of allowing myself to get hit for most combatants. What with my incredible, shiny carapace and ability to shift position to maximise the usefulness of said shiny carapace, I've not really needed to dodge. Except when I run into the big powerful stuff, then I really, really needed to.

Grumbling at myself, I purchase the dodge skill. I really need to be a little more diligent in checking for new skills popping up over the course of my battles. There's no prompts, so you never know if something super useful has popped up. Whilst I wait for Crinis to complete her evolution, I pass the mind magic shenanigans over to my sub-brains and peruse the lists looking for more defensive options.

Sure enough, a couple stand out and I purchase them readily.

[Endure: Provides knowledge and instincts to assist absorbing impacts when struck by heavy blows.]

[Grace: Assists the user in maintaining balance when moving or in combat.]

Combined with dodge, these skills should help to elevate my defensive game to a new level! With my future sense and massively heightened reflexes, I should be able to dodge, duck and weave my way out of a lot of trouble! If I'd thought to purchase these skills and level them up I'd have had a much easier time avoiding those reckless charges from Garralosh!

Ah well, no use crying over it.

Actually since, I'm sitting around waiting. I should do a couple of cheeky mutations. Before we advance deeper into the Dungeon, I surely want to upgrade my stomach. If we're going to run into some higher tier enemies, I definitely want to be able secure my fill of that sweet Biomass!

[Do you wish to improve Discerning Stomach +5 to Bottomless Discerning Stomach +10? This will cost 40 Biomass.]

I do! And then for another 65, I'll fuse those two upgrades to achieve the Gluttonous stomach +15! Bwahaha!

Nice!

HURK!

It's okay! I can take it! Just one organ mutating is nothing to me now! A mere stomach. How could that possibly compare to the maddening itch of your very skeleton mutating? Or your muscles?! Bah! I can resist! I'll stand strong!

[Master? Are you alright?]

[GAH! Crinis! I thought you were still evolving?!]

[I'm finished, as you can see.]

It was true. She'd changed very slightly in shape once again. Her evolutions had a tendency to be undramatic on the outside, but a little more show stopping on the inside. This time was no different. Her size has once again seen an increase, she's approaching a beach ball now. She still has eight stubby tentacles and are permanently extended that act as her 'legs' and now she has four slender tentacles that extend equidistant from each other around the circumference of her body, almost like arms.

[Looking good there, Crinis!] I grind out as my stomach continues its metamorphosis. [I hope you're happy with everything that you picked!]

The ball of death shifted from side to side, suddenly shy.

[I believe so, Master. Why don't you check and see what you think?]

[Good idea!] I gasp.

Moving slowly so as not to betray the awful itch tearing up my insides, I stagger jerkily towards Crinis and slap an antennae down on her before she can question my lack of control.

[Right then! Let's have a look!]

Name: Crinis

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Level: 1 (Special Core) (IV)

Might: 100

Toughness: 90

Cunning: 56

Will: 57

HP: 180/180

MP: 230/230

Skills: Expert Shadow Flesh Manipulation Level 15 (III); Expert Grappling Level 12 (III); Expert Shredding Level 16 (III); Greater Tremor Sensing Level 5 (III); Barbaric Dismembering Level 1 (III); Greater Fear Inspiration Level 9 (II); Mana Transformation Level 11 (III); Slick Tentacle Walking Level 4 (III); Advanced

Tentacle Fu Level 4 (II); Further External Mana Manipulation level 4 (II); Advanced Shadow Magic Affinity Level 2 (II); Stealth Level 3(I);

Mutations: Armoured Shadow flesh +15; Obliterating Void Maw +15; Endless Dimensional Stomach +15; Legion Tentacles +15; Razor Barbs + 15; Grisly Teeth + 15; Omniscient Mana Sensory Gland +15, Reservoir Shadow Magic Gland +15, Abrupt Shadow Flesh Generator +15; Dark Shadow Eye +15; Masterful Tentacle Conductor +15; Tentacle Conductor; Light Sink; Shade Phase Organ;

Species: Gratuitous Killing Sphere

Skill points: 27

Biomass: 14

From the looks of things, Crinis has continued her balanced stat increases. Her stats are still good even when compared to mine. Curse my lowly starting ant stats! I'm starting to overcome that handicap now, but even so, it stings a little. Her organ choices are interesting.

Another Tentacle Conductor? Clearly she's aiming for the ability to control even more tentacles. Considering how many she can manifest, it makes sense. I wonder if she'll stick to the same mutations with this one? Finer control of a smaller number? Or go the opposite way, somewhat improved control over more limbs?

The Light Sink. That's interesting. She seems to be fully pursuing the limits of her shadow nature. This little organ will allow her to absorb light, darkening whatever area she's in. I wager with enough mutations she'll be able to strengthen the effect to the point she's surrounded by complete darkness whenever she wants. A massive advantage for her, since she needs no light to see and indeed, some of her abilities are stronger in the dark.

Lastly, the Shade Phase Organ. Quite the incredible piece of evolutionary gear. If I'm reading this correctly, it'll allow her to move not just her tentacles, but her main body through patches of shadow. A limited teleport, if you will. That could get particularly nasty. Along with the development of her skills, Crinis is ready to take on the second strata!

[Great work Crinis! I'm very proud of you!]

[Thank you, Master. If you've finished mutating we can head upstairs.]

I can hide nothing from them.