

Chrysalis 421

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Chapter 421: Departure

The second strata has for centuries been known as the place in which true danger begins. The first is considered the realm of the mercenary, the opportunist. Any party with a modicum of organisation and training should be able to eke out a living there. Farming for the smallest of cores and the petty materials that form at such low levels of concentration.

No, the real promise and opportunity of the Dungeon lies below. Where the mana grows thick, and takes on attributes as it is exuded into the air. The second strata, the shadow realm, is the first such challenge. It should not be assumed that only shadow mana can be found here, but it is for sure the thickest. There are other insidious and dark forces at work here. Undead, terrible lightless and cold creatures abound in this layer, making it far more dangerous than the first. But the rewards are commensurately great.

The Dungeon is always fair. Greater risk means greater reward. Cores are more abundant there, not to mention the incredible wealth of attributed minerals and materials. The armour of the Undying Phalanx of Rillex was crafted from metals mined in this layer, the powerful death mana sustained those men beyond what their bodies could endure. Such are the rewards of the deeper delves.

[A shame you couldn't stay longer, old chap! It's been wonderful to make your acquaintance a bit better this time.]

[Likewise, Formo! Your people have been remarkably hospitable. I have only positive things to say! Except for maybe the noise...]

[WHAT?!]

I wince.

[That's it, right there.]

[I suppose you are right. We hardly notice it, you know. Until you pointed it out, I hadn't even considered how we sound to others.]

[Well, how often do you meet other people? I can't imagine you get many visitors down here.]

[Hardly any! Since we were classified as monsters, we get hunted by a lot of opportunistic nincompoops. Those tend to get fed to the worms. There are a few groups still willing to trade with us, but they tend to be considered a little unsavoury by upstairs standards.]

[IGNORANCE!] I shout.

[QUITE SO!] Formo agrees. [Nevertheless, we persevere. Good luck on your journey, young Anthony. I wish the best for your colony.]

[Any chance I could bring some of my core shapers here to learn from you?]

[HO HO! HA! No.]

[Worth a try.]

[No it wasn't. Your kin are more than welcome to come and trade with us, but we don't share all of our secrets so easily.]

[Didn't seem so shy when you were teaching me...]

[We didn't show you nearly everything, boy!]

[Fine, fine. All the best Formo.]

[Farewell, young Anthony.]

Only Formo came to see me off, which is fine. I gather that these sorts of farewells are not a big thing amongst the Sophos. I've had a good time staying here, and I've learned a ton, but it's time to move on. Some might say I've been shirking my duty to the colony, and we can't have that!

Standing in the tunnel somewhere outside the Sophos village, I wave to Formo with one antenna. Naturally they wouldn't see me off from the village, oh no, they had to darken our minds before hauling us out on a worm. At least they were polite this time and didn't knock us out immediately, they asked politely, which is something.

Formo raises one scrawny, shrivelled arm to wave back before he mounts his enormous worm and turns around, moving back down the tunnel.

[Alright then gang. Time to go deeper!]

[Yes, Master!]

[HRAAAAA!]

Tiny matches his mental communication with a rowdy bellow. He's ready to unleash his rage upon more powerful monsters and harvest that rich, succulent xp! And I can't say I blame him. I'm ready for a more serious challenge as well. With Crinis on my back and Tiny thumping the ground by my side with his meaty fists, we set our sights on a new destination.

Using my Tunnel Map, we angle back towards the colony, but with a new twist: we're going down. As the tunnels start to slope downward I can feel excitement building in my heart and relief building in my core. Every metre down thickens the mana in the atmosphere and eases the burden on my newly densified core. My body is thirsty for mana now, I can feel it. Even using my sub-brains to drag the nearby energy into my core is barely enough to sate my appetite. The second strata is calling to me and I'm happy to answer.

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Not to mention all of the goodies the Sophos told me about down there. Enriched materials, stronger monster cores are compelling arguments. When we eventually return to the colony, it'll be with a mighty haul of riches, I've no doubt. Before then, we need to amass cores to reinforce ourselves and experience to improve our levels and skills.

We proceed with caution through the Dungeon. The after effects of the wave are still being felt here in the form of monsters who were spawned in the height of the wave or made their way up and are now surrounded by monsters who aren't their match. Most of what we encounter are just the usual first strata dross, not nearly able to match up to us, but every now and again we come across a nasty shadow creature or evolved beast which means we need to progress carefully.

I let Tiny and Crinis fight for the most part, both of them need more experience than I do, but I take more than my fair share of the Biomass. I need a heck of a lot of the stuff now, post evolution and I'm going to make sure I max everything before I evolve again.

It takes days for us to shift our way across since we move laterally more than we do vertically, but soon enough we come to a place where the narrow, craggy tunnel opens up to a wide, wide passage before us. Immediately I can smell a change in the mana in the air. We're close!

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Chapter 422: Gate to the Second Strata

The air tickles against my mana sense, a new sensation, like a pool of shadow lapping against my mind. There's something else that's off about this tunnel. It's too... civilised. The usual crags and stony pillars that jut upwards or downwards are curiously absent. It's almost as if someone had curated this section of tunnel to make it more palatable to move through.

Oh snap!

Have we come across another travelled section of tunnel that the humans use? Or does someone else live around here? I can't rule it out. It's time to engage stealth mode! Which I have to say, I'm not nearly as good at now, given my size... It's better than nothing!

[You guys hang here for a minute. I need to go and explore this tunnel to make sure it's safe.]

[Hurr?] Tiny grunts.

[No we can't just fight everything. If we run into those Legion guys, they'll be more trouble than we need right now. Use your head.]

[Harr!]

[Yes, I was a bit harsh there, I apologise.]

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For an ape so thick that his skull might have been condensed in the heart of a neutron star, which itself was the bastard child of another, even more dense neutron star, he really could inject plenty of emotion into a grunt.

Crinis, ever obedient and eager to please, was happy to hop off my back but I'm certain she's planning on keeping an eye on me with her mana senses. Time to engage stealth mode! Come on Grip Skill! Strain! My claws groan as I start my journey up the wall, my vastly increased mass causing all sorts of trouble. With a bit of effort I make my way to the ceiling of the cavern and start snooping along down the side of the cavern.

With every step the mana thickens and changes, my legs drink it in from the walls and my core soaks in it, recharging at a rapid pace. Nice! We must be close now. This tunnel is truly massive. It gapes, more than a hundred metres wide and easily more than twenty metres tall. It's quite the drop from up here, even for me. But fortune favours the bold, forward Anthony! Go boldly! Where no Formica Sapiens has gone before!

Yes. The further out into the tunnel I travel, the more clear the signs of civilised intervention is. The floor of the tunnel hasn't been carved into stairs, but it's clearly been flattened and smoothed out, especially in the middle. Perhaps some kind of road? I'm intrigued!

Slowly and carefully I shuffle forward step by painful step, even gaining a new level in Grip along the way. Which helps, but not much. Damn. I've got six legs, I should know to never skip leg day! Tough it out, Anthony! Breathe through it!

A few hundred metres down I spot something that makes me do a double take. It's a wall. Normally not cause for a whole lot of excitement, but when I say wall I mean an actual, constructed wall. I might not have noticed it if I hadn't noticed the smooth curve as it met the tunnel wall on the other side. Bless you, eye mutations. All of those itches were worth it!

Like a stalking tiger, which is actually an ant and upside down, I creep forward one leg at a time. I've learned since the last time I snuck up on a guard post, they have monster detecting crystals. Considering I can detect a few small critters creeping about, suspiciously few, to be honest, I don't think they know I'm here already, but I don't want to get much closer.

Instead, I creep around the perimeter long enough to establish that this isn't some tiny guard post but rather a more substantial fort-like structure. I can see a rampart, a gate, narrow windows for the firing out of. What I don't see is any people hanging around, but to be honest, I don't need to. I've seen enough!

Time to hightail it out of here! Stealthily...

I turn and sneak my way back to my waiting pets. Tiny is asleep and Crinis is quite anxious. Typical.

[We have an issue guys.]

[What is it, Master?]

[The way forward is guarded by a big ass fort.]

[HARR!]

[One we won't attack you abs for brains!]

[How we will proceed then?]

[We will do as any good ant should! Prepare the digging formation!]

What else would an ant do? All problems can be solved through the power of digging! The tunnel won't even have to be that long. A couple of hundred metres and I should be able to pop out past the fort and home free to the second strata! Gweheheh.

The deep calm of ant zen washes over me as my face hands get busy in the soil and rock. With my tunnel map, it's trivial to angle our little tunnel to curve so that it will meet up with the main passage past the fort. Post evolution, all that extra power I have goes a long way to speeding up the digging process. My mandibles dig huge grooves out of the dirt, crushing rock with ease and making rapid progress. Tiny and Crinis take up position behind me and haul the dirt out. Tiny with his massive ape hands and Crinis with her hundreds of tentacles are able to scoop and shove the loose material behind us at a rapid pace.

At this speed we'll be through in less than a day! Muahahahaha! Stupid fort! Did you really think you could stop me?

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Chapter 423: Break through to the other side

Diggy-Diggy Dig!

It's digging time! My soul is soothed and my very being is suffused with peaceful serenity as I get busy chomping my way through the dirt and soil. The going is slower than I'd thought it would be, I'd underestimated the increased tunnel size required to fit my newfound bulk through. It really is quite discombobulating (is that a Sophos'ism?) to have ones' body change to such a massive degree. I'm more than double the size I was just one evolution ago. For my next evolution, which should be far away, I think I'll be focusing less on increasing my size and more on density. There should be a heap of easy gains to be had there since I enlarged myself so drastically last time.

Still, such thoughts melt away as I dig. They are transient, as the dirt is transient. With our labour and efforts, such things can be moved, they can be shifted, made light by the work of our face hands. Indeed, the only truth we find is that which we unearth for ourselves. Dig, for peace. Dig, for truth. No matter the reason, dig!

Time flows by and I'm truly disappointed to find that my time carving out this tunnel has come to an end as the rock crumbles before my chomping mandibles, opening up to reveal a dark, dark, cavern. Poking my head through I can see the other side of the fort some two hundred metres away on my right. The gate is more clearly visible from here, a tough looking steel grating covers even more imposing banded gates. The fort is built into the wall of the cavern itself, its stone walls curving to meet the cavern rock on either side. The ground leading downward toward where I currently spy from has been cleared away to allow clear sight lines and make it impossible to sneak up. Thankfully they weren't that thorough on the uphill side.

Well, it's none of my concern. I'm in the clear!

[We're through. Let's go guys! Second strata here we come!]

The excitement is real as Crinis and Tiny help me rip away the last of the stones and we tumble out into the main cavern. With barely a moment to pause and gather our balance, we bound forward into the dark. And it's dark for real. The light seems to sputter weakly throughout the cavern as we race forward, trying to put some distance between us and the fort.

Hugging one side of the rocky cavern walls, my antennae detect strange movement amongst the deepening shadows. Flitting forms dart about on the edges of my sight in an unnerving way. The other thing my antennae notice, is that it's getting bleedin' cold! With every step the temperature is dropping

and my heat detection is falling away. Even the hints of creatures that I see seem to give off barely any heat.

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Come to think of it, does Crinis? I swivel my temperature awareness back to the enlarged blob riding on my back. Sure enough, as the heat leeches out of the air her temperature has fallen down to practically nothing.

[You cold, Crinis?]

[Uh, no?]

[How about you Tiny?]

[Cold,] he grunts.

He actually spoke a word?! He must feel very strongly about it to manage to squeeze out actual language! That tells me I'm onto something here.

Another hundred metres down the tunnel we come to the tipping point. The tunnel curves down sharply here, as much as forty-five degrees, and before us is what I can only describe as a shoreline. Except it isn't water that eddies and swirls before my feet, but something else entirely. It's like a mist, or a fog that hugs the ground, except thicker, brought almost to the point of being liquid. It stretches out before us and seems to go on forever down the tunnel. I think this is the official border. Formo had told me I'd notice the change when I got to it, and here it is. Tentative, I dip one claw into the stuff. Just for a second.

Cold!

It's like freaking ice! I snatch my limb back and the dark air seems to cling to it for a second before settling back down to its normal calm, unruffled swirling. You know, I knew it would be dark. But I didn't expect the cold. We're going deeper into the ground, shouldn't it be getting warmer?! This doesn't make any sense. But then again, it is mana. Who am I to tell it what it can and can't do?

Nothing for it. I'm not going to let a chill stop me from progressing on my path to adventure, awesome and colony world domination!

[Come on team, let's go!]

Leading boldly, I push forward, plunging down into the Second Strata. Immediately the cold washes over me, and as soon as my head pokes through the surface layer, I can appreciate just what the Shadow layer is all about. Dang it's dark! Where the heck is the light from the mana veins? That comforting blue glow I've relied on for so long?! I bring my head closer to the wall and to my shock I realise that the mana veins are still there, but no longer do they pulse with soothing blue mana, but black shadow magic now flows through the Dungeon's veins!

[Oooh, this is nice!] Crinis croons from my back.

I can feel her stretching her tentacles and her powerful flex as they reach out into the cold, dark air.

[This must feel like coming home in a way. How do you like the air here?]

[It's invigorating! I feel like I'm connected to every inch of space down here!]

I suppose that makes sense, since this place is so damn dark and completely saturated with the kind of mana she uses to reach through shadows. I wonder, does that mean that other shadow beasts are able to do the same? I don't like the sound of that!

I try to scry the dark tunnel with my eyes, but they just aren't doing much for me down here. I'm starting to get a little nervous. My heat sensing antennae are almost useless, my eyes are in the same useless senses boat. How the heck am I supposed to navigate? There could be shadow monsters reaching out of thin air to poke me in the eyes right now!

Quick! Mana sense! I mentally snap on the skill and I'm relieved to find that it works just dandy here the second layer. The thick mana in the air floods my senses, but just like eyes underwater, the sense still works, just not perfectly. Looks like I'll be grinding this Skill for the time being. Let's press forward!

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Chapter 424: World of Shadow

Although cold and dark in extreme ways, it'll be nice when the colony expands down to conquer this place. A new terrain, a new frontier that shall submit to the superior power of the ant. I feel a little guilty leaving the family behind, but things were a little weird there after my evolution. The whispers I was hearing, the reverence I was starting to get, it didn't quite sit right with me. It seemed like a good time for a little separation. Perhaps after some time apart the strange atmosphere that was taking over up there will dissipate. And maybe I'll be able to figure out what exactly being a colony paragon entails. I'm a 'juvenile' after all. I can suppose that when I next evolve, I'll be given the option for 'mature' colony paragon. That may be the rare evolution, or perhaps even a normal one. What'll that entail? I already have the communal will gland, weird flesh crystal that it is. Do I get another? Or something else? And the strange whispers that I heard. What the heck was that about? I don't want to think about it too much, I shy away from the implications. I'll have to face up to it at some point I suppose.

But not now! Right now, we have a new world to explore! And what a strange place it is!

It's been curiously quiet, activity-wise, as we continue to descend quite sharply into the second strata, With every second that passes my mana sense grows a little more accustomed to navigating this swirling mass of dark mana. It's almost like navigating through a storm. Instead of hail and sleet pelting down from above, it's the ebb and flow of Shadows that twirl like mist caught in a breeze. Except there's no wind down here. Spooky. I start to feel like I'm underwater, plunged into a Shadow Sea.

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And the landscape begins to change as we progress. The rocks become strange, for one. They twist and curve in strange directions. Instead of normal stalagmites and stalactites they create an eerie geometry. Sharp angles and unexpected curves create shapes that cannot be found in any nature I subscribe to. The beginnings of an ecosystem are popping up amongst the rocks.

As we skitter along, Tiny trundling next to me, the great ape's shoulders shrug uncomfortably as he eyes the tunnel with unease. On my back, Crinis still appears to be having the time of her life. Her newer 'arm' tentacles wave happily in the air, almost as if they were trailing through the thickening shadow magic, or as if she were wagging her 'fingers' in it.

At our tread, small shifts of movement amongst the rocks are the first thing that clues me into a new form of monstrous life here. I skitter a little closer and I'm stunned by what I see. It almost looks like a coral. From the stone floor, at first it appears like a small rock formation, maybe basketball size, but tiny fronds emerge from holes in the rock to trail gently in the air. It would almost be adorable, if not for the staring eyes that tip half of the stalks, and the mouths full of razor fangs that top the others. When I draw near, the gently waving fronds retract into the stone in an instant, all that remains is a seemingly innocent junk of stone with indistinct holes.

Well, provided they don't get any larger than that, I don't anticipate this thing being a problem. Wait, did I just curse myself?

As I ponder just how horrifying a massive version of this creature would be, a sudden shift in the twisting shadows around me snags my attention. To my mana sense, it looks as if small whirlpools appear spinning in mid-air. To my eyes, I don't see a thing. What a curious thing...

Then five shadow beasts leap out of the air.

[Holy moly! Enemy attack!]

I shout to my allies, uncertain if they are wise to the danger and in Tiny's case I can see I was right. The ape looks confused as his head swivels left and right, trying to see. Crinis is, of course, right in her element. More sensitive to the changes in the mana than I am, her tentacles are already in air and snaking towards these beasts as they begin to fall towards us.

I can sense the slash coming before it even occurs and my reflexes are absurdly fast, twisting my body to the side and presenting the perfect angle of carapace to the shadow claws that strike down from the lead beast. Sparks fly from the diamond carapace, unmatched under heaven for both hardness, and sparklyness.

The beast snarls, its twisted maw of rubbery shadow flesh grimaces as its surprise attack is foiled. Too late for regret, creature! Experience my mandibles of power!

CHOMP!

Too lazy to even activate an attack skill I snap out with my mandibles, fully expecting the rending of shadow flesh between my snapping jaws, shock strikes as my jaws snap shut. Even though I saw it happen, I'm not sure I believe it! The Shadow beast absorbed it's leg inside its body and just extended it out again in a different position! They can do that?!

Since when?!

[Something is weird! Smash them!]

"ROOOAAAAA!"

Tiny bellows in rage as one of the beasts swoops down and rakes its claws along his back, drawing blood. Unwilling to take it, his lips peel back to reveal his sharp bat fangs and his massive hands sweep through the air. One creature is unfortunate enough to land within that meaty palm and with a shout of joy Tiny clenches his fist, securing his victim. It isn't pretty. After he brings the monster up in front of his face to roar at it, Tiny rears back to smash the beast into the ground with all his strength. No coming back from that one. I don't care what type of fancy tricks they have.

The strange, slippery abilities the monsters are displaying are giving Crinis some trouble. Every time her tentacles latch onto one, they morph and reform their bodies to escape. But she learns quick. Multiple limbs start to reach for each creature, latching on in several places at once. The beasts aren't able to shift themselves fast enough before the barbs emerge and begin to rend them apart.

After that, it isn't long before we clean up the last of the beasts. The fight was instructive. It's clear that the shadow monsters will enjoy advantages here that they don't otherwise. I wonder what else will crop up?

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Chapter 425: Goals and ambitions

[Remember why we came down here guys?]

[To escape our responsibilities?]

[No! Crinis, what the hell?!]

[Sorry, Master! I- I thought you said -]

[Never mind what I said! Those are things we keep between us. Special secrets that we never utter out loud.]

[But we aren't talking out loud?]

[Besides the point! No, let's focus on the other important reasons we're here.]

Crinis raises one of her thin tendrils to scratch herself on the top of her sphere.

[Well. We're here so you can absorb mana and survive long term...]

[Mission accomplished on that front. My core is ticking along great down here.]

[Wonderful!] Crinis considers again for a moment. [We also came to get experience and Biomass for Tiny and myself.]

[Right. Since we don't get much experience up above, or Biomass, we should find more challenging, highly evolved monsters down here.]

[And we want to scout out the strata for the colony, since the Queen will need to come down here eventually.]

[She will, and soon.]

[And you wanted to try and find traces of others like you.]

[Correct! More like myself and Garralosh. According to the Sophos, there are a few of us down there in the depths. I'd love to hear what they've been up to, so long as they managed to hold onto a little sanity.]

I think for a moment.

[Does it bother you that I was from another world and resurrected here as a monster, Crinis?]

[No? Why would it?]

[Uh. I have no idea. Perhaps you would think I wasn't a proper monster since I used to be a human?]

[Pfft. Master? Not a proper monster? Surely you're joking with me!]

Eh?

[What do you mean?]

[Come now, Master. I don't think you'll find another monster that's as strong...]

Well I mean, that's true.

[... or as wise...]

I am known far and wide for my great wisdom, it's true!

[... or as savage...]

Natura- ... wait, what now?

[... as cruel and relentless...]

Hold on, really?!

[... merciless and ambitious as my Master!]

[That's really how you think of me?]

[Of course!]

Ouch. That's some serious psychological damage you're inflicting there Crinis. You don't even realise it, either. Actually, somehow that makes it worse. Am I really that nasty? I mean, I've done some stuff, but cruel? Savage?! I'm not confident that Crinis' views can be trusted on this one. She has a strange slant sometimes. In my mind I'm a perfectly lovable ant monster.

We finish munching on the Biomass of the defeated Shadow Beasts and I'm interested when a notification pings from the System.

[Master profile of the Dark Ghoul unlocked.]

Oh? I've not checked in on my unlocked profiles for a long time, but Formo did say that the master profile was a way of peering into the mind of the Dungeon itself. Which he seemed to think was important. There's no harm in it, so I may as well take a look.

Idly munching I bring up the full profile for the.. Dark Ghoul.

Master Profile:

[Tenebris Pallidi: Dark Ghoul, A Shadow Affinity monster with powerful claws and tricky movement. Beware the Shadows.]

Might: 56

Toughness: 33

Cunning: 15

Will: 18

Current Evaluation:

The Dark Ghoul is an iterated version of early base design Shadow Creatures. Despite the age and relatively crude design, the Pallidi has proven to be an enduring monster archetype, the Shadow variant particularly so. Perturbations were introduced to the evolutionary tree of the creature this cycle to attempt to find a better pathway to carry forward, as higher tier versions haven't lived up to the base monster's efficiency.

Interesting. So it seems these Dark Ghouls have been around for a long time, since the Dungeon finds them to be successful monsters, but the evolved versions are underwhelming? I've yet to see much of the evolved versions of this monster. No doubt I'll run into plenty down here. Not that I want to do too much fighting just yet. I think it'll be better if Tiny and I can acclimate to the conditions in this strata a bit before we go too crazy.

To that end, I decide it may be best if we leave this main passageway and explore a few side tunnels. We're less likely to run into any big bads, or stumble into an expanse if we stick to the smaller passages. If we use the body analogy, these big tunnels are the main arteries that connect the organs, or expanses, together. The smaller tunnels are like capillaries, the little veins that are useful for hiding and settling smaller monsters in. Sadly, I no longer fit in all of these but there are some that are larger than the others and I can get around alright.

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I direct the team to the left wall, dodging around some more weird corals and I stop when I feel something wrap around my leg. Not feeling too threatened I look down and notice the waving fronds another small plant like thing. It almost appears like seaweed. Long and wide leaves that float through the air as if we were underwater. I didn't notice them since this specimen seems quite small, less than a metre tall, just enough to wrap up the tip of one of my legs.

I pull my leg free with ease but when I do, a sharp stab of cold pierces into me. Ouch! What the heck was that?! Bringing my eyes closer for a better look, I spy small needle points line the edges of the fronds. It appears this stupid plant stabbed me! If only my legs were as tough as the rest of me...

I will have vengeance. Without mercy I turn and unleash a blast of acid at the offending seaweed and watch with satisfaction as it bubbles away to nothing. Still, checking my HP I notice that I've only taken a

single point of damage from that strike, but the cold feeling remains, as if ice were injected in my veins. Poison is a strong possibility here.

[Crinis?]

[Yes, Master?]

[Could you cut the end of my leg off?]

[!?]

[Please?]

Protesting, but not as strongly as I'd expected she would, Crinis wraps the stinging leg in one tentacle and her barbs do the rest. Thankfully I can regenerate half a leg in no time flat. Ten minutes later and we are back on the move, wary of poison plant things.

Within another ten minutes we locate a side tunnel with enough headroom to accommodate Tiny and myself, so we plunge forth. The narrower space gives a sense of comfort in this lightless environment and I feel a little more secure, less worried about creatures springing from nowhere.

At least the - Oh god! Creepy spider!

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Chapter 426: Wrong Legged

To my eyes, there is nothing wrong with the tunnel ahead. More of the coral-like plant fronds crop up, along with a few specimens of stabbing fronds, which I'll provide my trademark service whenever I can. Visually, there's nothing wrong, the scene is peaceful, idyllic. One might even venture to say picturesque. My mana sense, however, paints a very different scene.

Threads of pure shadow cover the tunnel from top to bottom. As if the darkness itself had been woven into thick webs that cling to the walls, the ceiling and the floor for dozens of metres. Worst of all, in the centre of the mess sits the most horrific looking arachnid I've ever imagined. I look down on spiders for having two more legs than is necessary. I mean, you get to six legs, the perfect number, enjoyed by the majority of lifeforms on Earth and probably Pangera. You're at six, why the hell would you keep getting more? You've achieved leg nirvana, the goldilocks zone of legs! An organism would have to be diabolically stupid, or dipped in pure distilled evil to fail to recognise the holy nature of the insect.

So I hate spiders for that reason. Stupid or evil, I care not which. They all are horrible and deserve what comes to them. This spider has seen the wicked ways of its kind, witnessed them indulge in their cauldron of sin and thought itself: "What we have going on here? It's good stuff. I'm impressed, I dig the vibe. But check this crazy idea. What if we had... what if we were to have... more legs?"

I recoil in horror as the bloated beast reveals itself to my mind. Eight? No. Ten? No. Twelve? Not at all. Sixteen legs! Why?! In the name of all that is good and sacred in this world and all others, WHY?! That number of legs is completely superfluous! I cannot imagine any advantage to be gained by possessing this ridiculous number of legs. This creature I cannot allow to survive! I shall rend it to pieces and devour its legs with savage glee! Glee I tell you!

Facing off against the many-legged Taratect of legend, I won't back down. The webs will be a problem, but not one that I can't handle. They appear to be woven out of attributed mana, not actually physical or tangible in the normal sense. Luckily for me, my acid is the perfect tool for deconstructing this mess.

Foul creature of evil! Eat acid!

POW! POW! POW! POW!

[Hurr?!] Tiny grunts in confusion as I unleash acid into the seemingly normal tunnel. His expression changes quickly as tangles ropes of shadow begin to melt and fray into view.

We're going to have to do something for Tiny, he's going to struggle in this Strata if he can't see what he's doing. Crinis has none of these issues and is completely aware of what I'm doing.

[Why does it have so few limbs?] She asks with revulsion.

[... Wrong question Crinis. And I have less!]

[You're different! You're perfect, Master!]

[Correct! Insect kind reigns supreme!]

POW! POW!

More acid flies out, chewing through the webs at a rapid clip. The many legged spider doesn't appear to enjoy the process of having its sweet home torn into shreds. From its position clinging to the top of the tunnel with its grotesque number of legs the spider descends and reaches out. Able to grip both sides off the tunnel at once its limbs seem to stretch forever as it begins to advance on us with a deadly grace.

Yuck! This just keeps getting worse! The creature is like a nightmare daddy long-legs of a spider! Each limb is metres long, thin and bent sharply at the joint. The details of the body are still hard to make out. It's bulbous and disgusting, I can say that much with certainty, but the rest is still hidden in darkness.

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Not for long!

POW! POW! POW!

Raising my business end up high, I aim forward and continue to deliver liquid justice toward the face of the creature. The more my acid chews through the web, the more the scattering droplets splash closer to the offending beast.

Unleashing a long guttural hiss, the spider bares its fangs at me and what a hideous maw it is. Not one set of fangs, oh no, just like everything else about this arachnid, it's decided to take things to extremes. Its mouth is nearly enough to rival that of Crinis, my dear murder sphere, in its sheer horrific-ness. Multiple sets of jaws make a ring of sharp grabbers that reach out, grasping at the air as if tasting me.

It seems as if you want to get closer to me, mister spider. I believe I can find it in my heart to grant your wish!

My sub-minds stir and begin to pump gravity mana into my mandibles. Their combined efforts are able to flood my jaws with energy in a few seconds, energy which I'm only too happy to reach out with towards our many legged friend.

YOINK!

I seize the spider and cause it to fall toward me, preparing the Omen Chomp Skill to deal fantastic and deadly damage to this offensive arachnid. However, the beast reacts with incredible speed, digging into the walls with its claws and defying the suddenly resistible call of my face hands.

Damn you spider! Do I really have to go in there and get you?!

POW! POW! POW!

I unleash further blasts of acid at the arachnid, trying to bait it out, but it proves to be surprisingly dextrous, dodging wildly and trying to remain ensconced within its tattered web. Maybe I'll try ...

YOINK!

My mandibles glow bright with gravitation mana once more as I try to drag the spider out, but it resists once again, snatching at the walls with its many legs and straining against my pull. This damn spider! It wants me to chase it into what remains of its webs. I'm not going in there, who knows what crazy shadow web tricks it has going on in there! I also don't want to have to sit here and acid the webs away. The gross stuff extends for dozens of metres, I can't be bothered melting it all!

I feel Crinis stir on my back and I tip my front end upwards a little to get a better view. Perhaps frustrated by my lack of progress at extracting our webbed friend, she wants to take action. Her permanent tentacles wiggle back and forth as she concentrates and the darkness around her deepens, thickening until it almost appears solid. Her body ripples like the surface of a pond after you throw in a stone and a dozen limbs flash out of her main body and plunge into the shadow portal she created around herself.

The spider unleashes a shriek of surprise as its body is seized by Crinis. Actually no, she's not going for the body, she's going for the legs! Her tentacles lash out from the darkness and wind around each of the spider's legs in a flash, immobilising it in an instant. Furious, the spider opens its jaws wide and sink its fangs into one of the offending limbs.

[Tsk.] Crinis mutters, withdrawing the damaged tentacle before she extends others to wrap around it and carve it off.

[What the heck, Crinis?!]

[Poison.]

[Ah.]

The rest of the spiders legs begin to suffer much the same as Crinis' tentacles as her buzzing barbs begin to rend them from its body. With the spider momentarily incapacitated in this way, Tiny is finally able to make it out in the darkness. With a whoop of joy, he leaps forward, heedless of the webs, reaching his victim just as his fellow pet completes her dark work and de-legs the spider.

What follows is mercifully brief as Tiny electrifies his fists and smashes the spider's head into a fine paste. I feel like he was venting his frustration, much as I wanted to do. Ah well, nice job, Tiny.

Chrysalis

Chapter 427: Tunnels of shadow

The perils of the Dungeon are many. Physiological and psychological. There are many threats that seek to cause bodily harm. The monsters, naturally, are what most consider the deadliest things a person might encounter in the Dungeon, and I admit that the lay person may have the right of it in this instance. Ravenous beasts with a boundless ferocity and low cunning are the least threatening of these creatures. At deeper levels one must contend with creatures capable of so much more. Magic, strategy, social hierarchy, advanced pack tactics accompanied by higher stats and more developed skills.

But this is far from the only threat. Starting in the second strata, the Dungeon spawns more complex eco-systems. The Shadow Sea (as some refer to it) being the first of these makes it no less deadly. Large and terrifying monsters may require most of a would-be delvers' attention, but the stone and tunnel holds innumerable fatal threats.

Then there's the cold, relentless biting cold. Without the proper Skills and preparation, it saps away energy, drains focus and is yet another burden, along with the unending dark, that weighs on the mind. Many a brave Mercenary has been broken by the second strata without ever battling a monster there. It is a place that is inimical to the sapient races of the surface, designed to trap and destroy them, break and bury them. Yet we persist in rushing toward our doom, desperate to unlock the wealth and mystery of the world beneath our feet. No sooner had a team conquered the second strata than they rushed into the third, only to find a whole new world of challenges that awaited them.

The conditions of the Dungeon, Magio Scholar Tarius.

The Biomass of shadow monsters always has a weird texture. It's rubbery and feels less solid, but at the same time is quite filling. I don't partake too much, the pets still take priority, but I get a couple of points from it, which goes to show this spider must have evolved at least a few times.

May as well check the profile. I'm interested to see what the Dungeon has to say about it.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Aranea Plurimorum, you are awarded one Biomass]

[Basic profile of the Aranea Plurimorum unlocked]

[Aranea Plurimorum - Many Hands Spider. This monster uses its stealth and webs formed of shadow mana to entrap its prey. An ambush hunter by nature, direct confrontation is not this creatures greatest strength.]

Yeah, I get that much. Spiders are cowards, everyone knows that. Filthy, many-legged wimps who shun a fair fight. I'll conveniently ignore any and all webless arachnids to justify my snobbery. You don't see ants hiding in wait, making sticky traps! No! Ants charge forward, facing up to much larger and more powerful foes in a direct assault! Sure, we usually outnumber our opponents several thousand to one, but hey, no need to focus on the little details.

Still, the webs weren't too impressive in the end, Tiny was able to leap straight through them, no problem at all. Crinis and I had to pick our way through a little more gingerly. I'm not sure why, but I just

don't like the look of the stuff. The web hasn't dissolved or anything since we defeated the spider. In order to progress through the tunnel we're going to have to melt or destroy it.

[Good job getting on top of that spider, Tiny. I'm impressed you could break through the webs so easily.]

The big ape looks proud of himself, a wide smile on his bat-like face. With a wide wave of his meaty hand he manages to convey the sense that it was no trouble at all but only he could have managed it.

[Don't get so full of yourself. You had no clue if that web would be safe for you to jump through. What if you'd gotten stuck?]

He frowns and clenches a fist before waving it with vigour. He's saying that it wouldn't matter what the web had going on, he'd have been able to smash through it regardless.

[This is what I keep saying. You can't just smash everything with brute strength. What about Garralosh? You couldn't fight her with strength could you?]

He deflates a little and waves his fist vaguely toward the ceiling.

[You'd have been able to fight her if you were just a bit stronger?! I think you'd need to be a lot stronger. I'm serious here you dumb ape. I'm worried that one of these days you're going to get yourself into a real mess. Crinis and I have both been poisoned so far in this stupid shadow layer. What would you do if you were inflicted with that?]

A fierce grin splits his face and he wiggles his eyebrows.

[No you can't punch poison, you idiot!]

Still smiling the great ape goes back to shovelling the Biomass into his face. Well, he seems fine. Out of idle curiosity I check his status. I don't know what I expect to see, but something brings me up short.

[Hey Tiny, did that spider injure you?]

He frowns at me, insulted by the suggestion.

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[No? So why are you missing three HP?]

He looks confused for a moment before he starts to check over his body, shifting his arms to inspect them carefully before pawing at his back. Unable to find any wounds he shrugs at me and goes back to eating.

During the whole performance I watch as his health ticks down another point.

[You got poisoned by the webs you idiot!]

I slap myself in the forehead with one antenna out of frustration. Of course there was some trick to the webs! There were made out of shadow mana! There's no way a bottom feeding monster like a spider would be satisfied just wrapping people up with webs. There'd be tricks to it. Attributes in the threads, razor sharp threads, remote thread control, weapons made out of webs! All sorts of stuff is possible!

And whilst I've been thinking his health has gone down another two points! For his part, Tiny looks mildly confused. He raises up on fist and acts as if he were going to hit himself in the stomach, then looks at me.

[NO! You can't punch the poison out of yourself! Just how dumb can you be?! Argh! I'll have to try healing you. Hold on a minute.]

Grumbling at the effort required, I laboriously start to weave together a healing mana construct. It's not one I've used before and learning a new construct is always a massive pain in the abdomen. More complex than an architectural schematic, more intricate than an artwork. Without the Skills and beyond human brain power, they'd be impossible to hold in one mind.

Luckily I've got four minds now! It still takes me ten minutes to get it up and running. I push out some healing mana and ungraciously pour it into Tiny. He'd lost thirty HP whilst waiting for me and I keep pumping it into him until he gets back up to full.

[There you go, you dumb ape. Try not to do - ...]

His health is still going down. We might have a problem here.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 428: Stupid Ape

I continue to heal Tiny every few minutes as we sit in the ruins of the lousy spider's web. Every time I heal him, his health starts to trickle down again a few moments later. Does this poison never run out? What the heck is going with it?! If I had the power of resurrection then I'd bring that stupid spider back just so I could kill it all over again. How dare it do this to my loyal, stupid, hardworking, idiotic, steadfast and stupid pet?!

But after an hour of constantly healing him, my minds are starting to hurt and the slow leak of health out of Tiny is yet to stop. Begrudgingly I spend a Skill point to buy Healing Magic Affinity Level 1. I probably should have bought it ages ago, it's not like it's never going to come in handy, but for some reason I held off. I don't want to be the healer of the party, I want to shove that responsibility to another so I can focus on being badass and annihilating stuff. But if just dumping healing mana into the big ape isn't going to do the job, perhaps the skill will teach me some poison removal magic?

Aha!

It's here. I thought as much. The trickling knowledge of healing magic is filling up my brain! Lots of new spell forms and interesting methods are here, including one for the removal of poison. Grumbling at the inconvenience, I whip up the required spell and apply to the ape who still looks like he wants to punch himself in the stomach.

I should let him...

The healing mana settles onto him and sinks into his body whilst I sit back with a sigh. There we go, crises averted.

[Be more careful next time you moron!] I scold Tiny.

He frowns, his bat ears twitch and he holds his fist up once more.

[NO! I just cured you! Why would you want to punch yourself- ...]

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His health is still going down...

DAMMIT! Why?! What the heck kind of web-fu did that taratect have going on, huh? Hacks? Is it hacks? Some sort of cheat skill?! I never got one of those Gandalf! You bearded moron!

[Crinis! Do you have any idea what is going on? Some sort of Shadow poison? Have you seen a skill like that at all?]

[No, I haven't. But I don't think it's poison...]

[What? What do you mean?]

[Look closely, Master. You should be able to see it with your mana sense.]

[My mana vision isn't as good as yours...]

I focus on Tiny once more, not with my eyes, but with my mind. Crinis has a huge advantage over me here in this department, but my skills aren't totally lacking. Letting my mind reach out I examine with minute detail the mana that flows through Tiny's body. His core flares bright in my mind and the energy that ripples through his entire frame is bright and energetic. He seems fine? Wait!

I grasp a sliver of something that slips away from me. What the heck was that? Determined, I focus harder and strain to grasp what I'd seen. There it is! Roaming through his body like a cunning worm is a slithering shard of shadow mana! It wasn't poison that those webs injected him with, it was a spell!

How insidious! This must be some sort of advanced Skill or technique, it has to be. I get the feeling that spider was quite a high level, grown fat during the wave on the fresh monsters that swarmed through its tunnel. Now that I can sense what is happening, I can see the harm being done in real time. Like a dark snake the mana flits throughout Tiny's body, wrecking and damaging everything it comes across, causing his HP to drop. When I heal the damage, his situation doesn't improve as the mana continues its work. The poison removal didn't work, since it's not actually poison that he's infected with!

What the heck are we supposed to do?!

[Alright Tiny. I want to listen carefully.]

A serious expression comes across the bat features of my first pet. He leans forward, attentive, his huge fists curled in his lap.

[You aren't poisoned by the spider. You've been infected with damaging Shadow Mana.]

His eyes steady, Tiny nods slowly. Then, he thunderously punches himself in the stomach. Unable to resist his own colossal strength, he groans and collapses to the tunnel floor.

[... you idiot.]

After I heal him up again, he managed to do quite a lot of damage to himself, I try to use external mana manipulation to dissolve or remove the offending spell but it's too hard for me. Either the fact that the mana is trapped within his body, which means it's more difficult for me to effect, or its too elusive and slippery for me to take hold of.

And so it comes to this. I decide that we'll continue our delve of the second strata and I'll have to keep healing Tiny as we go. Perhaps if my healing mana gets to a high enough rank I'll be able to cure him, or if my external mana manipulation ranks up, I'll be able to help. Either way, the spell inside him is small enough that he doesn't lose his health super quickly. As long as I keep topping him up, he'll be fine.

Still, it's an inconvenience I'd rather not have to put up with, and the constant threat to my oldest companions life is anxiety inducing. We're off to a poor start here in the second strata. We need to be smarter in our approach. Although, considering the membership of our group, with me leading it, this mess was somewhat predictable. Well the benefit of hindsight is 20-20 as they say. We can only move forward with greater wisdom! Greater enthusiasm!

Whoops! Better heal Tiny again...

I'm going to have to manage my sub-brains, or have them manage each other. They can flip the job of maintaining the construct between them in order to get enough rest. With three of them, it should be fine. By fine, I mean I won't have to dedicate my main mind to the job of topping Tiny off. This should help to train my skills quickly as well.

With that renewed spirit we set off once more! I clear out the spider webs and we advance down the side tunnel. There are still small plants cropping up and we take some time to investigate each one before we continue. Crinis is forced to sacrifice two more tentacles to poison and negative energy as we progress. I'm starting to sense a theme in this strata. We come across a few creatures that are easily dispatched, but then we find something that really irritates me.

Centipedes.... Always with the lousy centipedes.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 429: The Wizards' favourite

Before me in the tunnel twists a tangled trap of terrible centipedes. Clearly though, these centipedes are of a new and different breed. Bodies of sleek shadow flesh, segmented armour that practically smokes with dark wisps of mana and gnashing mandibles that gleam to my mana sense.

I mean. What the hell?! Why does the Dungeon love these stupid creatures so much? Of all the invertebrates that exist on Earth, or that the Dungeon could dream up and cobble together out of random insect parts or something. Why is it that the Dungeon is so prepared to lavish its love on these filthy centipedes?! I'm starting to understand the point of view of the Sophos more and more... Perhaps I'll do just as Formo suggested and eliminate every root and twig of these cursed creatures from the Dungeon just to expose their inferiority once and for all!

[Tiny! Crinis! Attack without mercy! Annihilate them all!]

DASH!

The three of us rush forward to do battle and the centipedes hiss with fury as they sense us approaching their nest. The creatures appear to have abandoned the built up mound style of nest I observed in the forest expanse and instead look to have dug out a pit into the tunnel floor. It's sizeable, more than ten metres across, and it is filled with the hideous things.

They gnash their mandibles, spit and splutter as we throw ourselves bodily into the pit. Dozens of centipedes rise up to meet me but they hold no fear for me. Even if this new species is larger and more formidable than the old version, I'll show them what I'm made of!

CLINK! CLANK!

Mandibles and stingers fly from every side only to bounce off my precious diamond carapace. I can't wait to upgrade it again, the day when I'm covered in precious diamond will come soon! Prepare to receive the bite of justice and destiny, filthy bugs!

Omen Chomp!

The mandibles of dark energy expand before me as my stamina plummets and six centipedes are caught between the ethereal jaws.

CRUNCH!

[You have slain level 14 Stitit Tenebris Scolopendra (II)]

...

[You have gained experience]

A whole new breed of centipede for me to destroy! I shall purge them all!

BOOM!

Tiny leaps down in the pit and collapses on the swarming monsters like a rockslide. A rockslide bursting with electrical energy for some reason. The sound of sparking lightning fills the air as his fur writhes with ropes of electricity that sizzle and flare every time he touches a foe, which is lots, since he's in a pit full of them. The cries of burning bugs and the scent of roasting Biomass fill the air.

Haha! More!

CHOMP! CHOMP!

The pit is filled with dozens of centipedes and their rage at having their home invaded is palpable. They bite and stab at us and we return in kind. Crinis is able to extend her limbs to reach every nook and crevice of this habitat and she begins to carve the creatures apart without mercy. I feel that my pets may have inherited my distaste of this creature. Which is a good thing! Hatred of centipedes should be universal!

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Despite being a new species, the clutch of creepy crawlies proves to be of little threat and we exterminate them in short order. A triumph for Ant kind over the weaker arthropod! And now, the feast!

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Stitit Tenebris Scolopendra].

[Basic Profile Unlocked]

[A new variant of the Claw Centipede, the Dark Arisen Centipede has taken on the properties of the second strata, such as shadow flesh, affinity for darkness and shadow, as well as enhanced poison abilities. Along with a general increase of toughness, cunning, might and will, the Dark Arisen Centipede is far more dangerous than its weaker cousins.]

You what!? Damn you, Gandalf! You've lavished this level of attention on these stupid creatures, and they're still so weak? I'm gonna eat them all! Just you watch!

We chomp our way through the nest of coiled insects, Crinis in particular shoving them into her cavernous maw with relish, before we continue to explore the tunnels. Having to pause and heal Tiny every so often is a bit of a pain, but otherwise we make good progress. We find a few monsters, but nothing so extreme as the spider for the next few hours and we begin to get into a groove.

It's taking a little while for me to adjust to being nearly sightless. After investing so much of my early Biomass points in my eyes, it's quite painful to come down to this strata and find myself totally blinded. I assumed it would be dark down here, but this level of dark is out of control. Goths would hesitate in the face of this much black. To my mana sense the walls positively pulse with the shadow mana that flows through the Dungeon veins, leaching out into the air and stealing away the light.

The monsters glitter, like small glowing points of shifting energy in a dark cloud. It's hard to make them out, but it's doable, and I'm getting better with practice. A few more Skill levels won't hurt, but I expect it's going to take a couple of days for that to happen. In the meantime, I think I can make do with what I have. Tiny's the one struggling the most. He's basically just operating on sound and the light he can produce from his electricity. Whenever he bumps into something he starts sparking just long enough for him to demolish whatever it was that got in his way, usually a rock.

The tunnel twists and turns, but always slopes downward. The further we go, the thicker and more dense the corals and plants become, forcing us to shift our path or cut our way through. It takes time but we progress at a steady pace. There are some smaller tunnels that shoot off this one, but most are too small for me to enter anymore. These places are the refuge of the weaker and smaller monsters, amongst which I no longer count myself a member.

After a few more hours we come back to the main tunnel that we broke off from. I can see in my tunnel map that we've moved basically in parallel but followed a far more twisting path. Not to worry, we need to continue gathering experience.

[Come on Tiny, let's follow a few more of the side tunnels before we get too much further. If we keep following this major tunnel, we're sure to connect to an expanse eventually and I want us to be ready.]

[Hurr.]

Tiny rumbles a growl back at me. I can tell he's still irritated by the shadow mana ripping through his body and the monsters we've battled so far haven't been enough to slake his desire for challenge. I'm not too worried though. I'm sure the second strata has way more interesting things to throw at us than what we've seen so far...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 430: The Monsters Come

It's true that shadow monsters seem to be stronger than the creatures of the first strata at a lower level of evolution. Most of the monsters we encounter are tier two or three, but they are significantly stronger than monsters of that same tier we encountered above. It's keeping life interesting, but the experience and Biomass penalties are still applied. Frustrating! With a sinking feeling in my stomach, I'm coming to realise this means I'll be permanently gimped for being born as a first strata monster.

It makes sense, Dungeon wise. Down here the mana is thicker and attributed. This means the Dungeon is able to produce different kinds of body parts, the shadow flesh, for example. Who knows what the lower strata monsters are capable of, or what they're made of? Perhaps there are ants born below who are diamond from the moment they come out of their pupal stage....

Jealous! That better not be true!

The only way we can keep up is to push our mutations and Skills to the limit. Although, I wonder if it's possible to recreate certain body parts as more powerful versions, made from more mana intensive materials, is what I'm driving at. I've not seen the option so far, but that doesn't mean it won't ever exist. Perhaps just arriving in the second strata was enough to unlock the option. I'll have to wait until I evolve again to confirm this, but that's a long way in the future. Tier five creatures are thin on the ground so far, but to be fair we're only creeping through smaller side tunnels right now. Other than the strong monsters who've created their own little kingdoms like that spider, there are mostly small fry here now.

Must have been crazy down here during the wave though. Thank goodness I never had to see it.

[Master, I sense something strange.]

[Really?]

Mana sense levelled up a little while ago and I was able to rank it up to Expanded mana sensing, which improved my range, but not my finesse. Crinis still has me dead to rights when it comes to detecting our foes.

[I'm not finding anything though?]

I concentrate harder but to no avail.

[It's weird,] Crinis mutters, [it's like dust? The moment I find it, it's gone again.]

I can feel the orb on my back writhing its tentacles back and forth as she tries to find whatever has triggered her eye.

[Tiny, you hearing anything?]

One thing we've learned is that Tiny's ears, even without mutations, are really good. I shouldn't be surprised, considering he has the large, triangular ears of a bat. I think when he evolves again, he should make them mutable. When I ask what he hears, he cocks his head to one side and listens for a moment before shaking his heavy head.

[Think you can give us some light?]

The big ape nods and concentrates for a moment before he begins to spark, electricity roaming over his fur and illuminating the tunnel oh so slightly. The flickering light throws the objects in the tunnel into relief, ironically filling the tunnel with shadows. Because that's what we need more of.

It's enough light that my fancy compound eyeballs are able to be put to use and I scan the tunnel to try and find what it is that we're sensing. But there's nothing there.

[Are you sure, Crinis?]

[Positive. It's fast, and small. I think there's more of them.]

[Eh? More? Like, how many?]

I look around nervously, but I don't even know what I'm looking for! Gently swaying fronds of various poisonous or stabby plants wave through the air, along with dotted stone formations that extend mouths, or barbs, or barbed mouths out in order to feast on monsters that pass by. Along with general outcroppings of rock, the tunnels are starting to get quite busy, making it harder to spot... whatever it is I'm looking for.

Wait! I sense something!

To my mana sense it looks as if dust that had been floating through the air, suddenly comes together and darts behind a stone.

[I've seen it! It's like some dust that moves!]

[Dust?]

[Small particles. It was floating in the air and then came together into a ball and hid. Tiny, spark up a little more, we might be able to see it.]

Tiny grunts in response and the electricity becomes more intense, sizzling and cracking dangerously in the air. The heat in the tunnel begins to rise as the light glitters through the shadow strata. At first, I can't see anything.

[Crinis?]

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[It's hard to detect. I feel as if it's everywhere and nowhere.]

[That doesn't sound good...]

I stare hard, using my mental faculties as well as my physical ones. I don't want to be taken by surprise down here in this sea of shadows. Who knows what might happen? More poisons, or death mana, or teeth from the shadows, or dodgy fast food. Who knows what horrors lurk in the darkness?

[Over there!]

I flick an antenna to the right, pointing to the slight movement I saw. Tiny and Crinis both turn quickly, just in time to watch a patch of dirt on the wall crawl together into a blob.

[What is it?] I wonder.

A small sound reaches my ears then, as if a tiny vibration were rocking the tunnel. The small hairs that cover my antennae stand on end and I turn to look at the tunnel walls on the other side. All around us, the walls are shaking as what had appeared to be a layer of dark dirt comes to life and starts to gather together.

[It's all around us!] I holler at the others.

[Master! I can sense it now. It's huge!]

I can too. For dozens of metres in front of us as well as dozens behind, my mana sense is flaring as whatever this is begins to literally pull itself together from its disparate parts.

"ROOOOAAAR!" Tiny bellows, smashing his chest with his mighty fists, his eyes burning with rage.

Finally, a decent fight, he seems to be saying as he snarls, his fangs on display. Lightning surges even thicker across his body and begins to accumulate on his fists as all around the walls continue to crawl and shift. The dust gathers together into small blobs that then begin to seek each other out and merge. Rapidly, bodies are forming all over the place but my mana sense is telling me that this is one creature. All the mana I sense from it is exactly the same.

Not willing to wait, Tiny leaps forward and smashes his charged fist into one of the blobs, scattering it with explosive force. The disparate pieces splat into a nearby wall before they quiver and begin to move once more. Tiny shakes his fist, unsatisfied, and turns to another blob to blast it with lightning. Twin streaks of blue energy shatter the air and the blob is vaporised in a moment. To my mana sense, I can see that not all of the dust was destroyed, but at least some of it was. As if sensing that it can be harmed, the dust surrounding us begins to amalgamate more quickly.

You hurt it Tiny, keep going!]

The ape grins.