

Chrysalis 441

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 441: Fishing for Levels

Ah, fishing. It's a peaceful, pleasurable and altogether gentlemanly pursuit. A meaningful hobby for those who enjoy quiet and rest. The sun dappling on the gentle waves. The quiet hum of insects and the chirp of birds in the trees. Serenity. Tranquillity. These are the words I associate with this noble activity.

[Master! I really don't think we can handle any more!]

[That can't be, it's only been two minutes. What's Tiny's opinion?]

[Master! You know he gets happier the more danger he's in!]

[Oh, come now Crinis. I'm sure Tiny has a reasonable and measured opinion on how things are going.]

[I really must disagree!]

[How's it going down there, Tiny? Do you think you can handle some more?]

[HOOOOAAAAAAR!!]

[That's what I thought!]

I manipulate the fireball to extend it further away from my position, nestling on the upper reaches of the reef and flare it once again. This draws the ire of the monsters swimming above, some of whom can no longer bear for this source of hated heat and light to exist, and charge down to massacre the being responsible for it. Which of course leads them into the trap we have prepared for them. Crinis has extended a maze of tentacles, all she can handle, which is more than even I thought she could, to block up the path the monsters need to take to get to me. Just in front of her position, Tiny meets the oncoming rush head on, his fur alight with electrical energy, his fists moving swiftly, snapping out with jabs and straights that pick monsters right out of the air.

He makes for an impressive figure when he actually tries to focus. Up on the balls of his feet he shifts his position with speed and grace, he keeps the enemy in front of him as he dances, his hands reaping a dreadful toll. For her part, Crinis maintains her maze of limbs out, the active tentacles mixed inside with the stationary ones, snatching unsuspecting monsters out of the air, coiling around them and rending them with her barbs.

All according to the plan, of course. The only problem we really have is that we've drawn in more monsters than we expected. Fish, leeches, some sort of eel thing and big shark creature that stinks of death. So a good catch, to be sure, but Crinis is starting to get overwhelmed. The majority of the tentacles she's extended aren't being actively controlled by her, so when the monsters who are too large to slip between the gaps get frustrated, they just start ripping and tearing into the limbs. Due to her mutations, Crinis' shadow flesh is much tougher than it was, but it still isn't as difficult to penetrate as my carapace, not even close. The shark in particular is able to tear through it with ease, forcing Crinis to regenerate her flesh and extend fresh tentacles to fill in the gaps.

[Master, your assistance would be most welcome!]

[Are you sure, Crinis? This is all for your levels you know!? Aren't you going to show me how powerful, you've become?]

[I-I will! I can do this! I won't let you down, Master!]

[That's the spirit, Crinis! By overcoming your limits you will ascend to a new height and greater power! Become the Sphere of Unending Decapitation that you always yearned to be!]

[Okay!]

With this motivational speech, Crinis redoubles her efforts and in a few short minutes the air fills with wails of terror as monsters learn what fear really is. After Crinis' plea, I do bring the light inside our little hiding place, no longer flaring it to draw in victims. The battle is fierce and vicious, pushing Tiny and Crinis to the edge of their abilities. The two of them are battered by the time it finishes. Tiny has wounds all over his body and I move fast to heal him, don't want his ongoing affliction to finish him off while we eat. I also perform a poison extraction on him, since I assume he was infected by one of his assailants. For her part, Crinis has shrunk, a good chunk of her shadow flesh has been lost in the battle and it will take her some time to regenerate it all. Her central body took little damage though, so her HP isn't much affected. This appears to be another quirk of her shadow flesh physiology.

[Good job team! Hopefully you managed to harvest some levels out of all that?]

[I did!]

Tiny nods in such a way that conveys to me he did indeed gain a few levels and he enjoyed the fight immensely, furthermore, would it be possible to send more enemies next time?

[I think that was about as much as you can handle, Tiny. You did nearly die after all.]

He seems to shrug in a way that indicates he doesn't agree with me, but he's stronger now so it should be fine.

[Stop being dumb and eat. We have a ton of Biomass we need to clean up.]

The unfortunate part of fighting up here is that a lot of Biomass fell through the gaps in the Corals and has been lost below us, but we've managed to hold onto more than half the total. I've grown accustomed to the taste of shadow monsters over the weeks but it really is terrible. Not that anything I've had to eat since I was reborn in this world is delicious. Perhaps I should have eaten some human food back at the village? They have a temple to me now right? I could get them to leave offerings of delicious meals! But, it wouldn't have any Biomass, so it seems like a waste. Could I get them to cook monster parts for me?

As I ruminate on the possibilities of Biomass cuisine, the three of us munch our fill and then rest. More Biomass points have been harvested and my total has reached one hundred and fifty one. A good opportunity for a cheeky upgrade. I think I know just what I want to improve as well. I could do a lot of things with this Biomass, but I've really been having a lot of fun, and getting a lot of use out of, my instant twitch musculature and my Wide Gated Sub-Neural network. The musculature allows greater strength to be exerted in smaller bursts, perfect for snapping mandibles or quick dodges, and my neural network helps me react to the barrage of information my eyes and antennae provide in the midst of a fight.

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These two combined have improved my offense, but more dramatically, taken my defence to a whole new level! In fact, they've truly allowed my defensive skill, Exo-Skeleton Defence, to shine brighter than before and I'm levelling that Skill much faster than previously. It's all coming together!

So naturally I want to take these two body parts to +15!

[Do you wish to improve Instant Twitch Musculature +10 and Wide Gated Sub-Neural Network +10 to +15? This will cost 130 Biomass.]

I do!

[At this level you may choose to combine your mutations, or emphasise one. Which will you select?]

For both of these body parts I chose to go deeper down one aspect rather than generalise, so reinforcing the effect is the only choice that makes sense! Bring it!

CHANGALANGATANG!

STUPID ITCH!

When it finally fades away, I look in satisfaction at the entries in my status.

Blink Musculature +15 and Transmission Sub-Neural Network +15.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 442: Devastation

Titus surveyed the broken wreckage of the once prosperous city of Liria. The Legion fort around the Dungeon entrance had been levelled giving him a clear view of the devastation the moment he had stepped back onto the surface. Garralosh and her monsters had done their work thoroughly here. Everywhere he looked he saw wreckage, as if the beasts couldn't stand to leave one stone on top of another. The Legion commander felt the pain in his heart as took in the ruins. He could see the ruins of Baker Dockerty's shop from where he stood. The jolly old man had been full of life, ready with a smile and a glazed bun, Titus' favourite, every time he'd stopped by. So much waste, so much loss. All because of one stupid monster.

He blew a breath, releasing the tension building in his chest. What was the point of raging at a dead beast? The kingdom was gone, Garralosh was gone, the Legions' responsibilities in this backward part of the world were over. Still, Titus felt no sense of satisfaction. They hadn't managed to defeat the giant Croc themselves and he was still filled with regret that he had failed to take her life when they had clashed. His axe had bitten her flesh, taken an arm but she had slithered away like a snake. Perhaps if he'd pursued then, he would never have witnessed this scene now, perhaps his son would have taken the trials elsewhere and survived. Regret boiled in his belly.

Sensing her fathers' emotions, Morrelia stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You're an idiot," she said.

Titus turned his stony face toward her.

"You did more for this country, more for this city than any dozen other people in its history combined. You fought harder and longer than even the Legion asked of you. There was nothing more you could have done, so stop being stupid and feeling guilty about this. None of it is your fault."

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Nearby Legionaries looked quite chagrined to hear their revered commander spoken to in this way but what could they do? It was his daughter! Titus himself didn't seem to mind at all. He only nodded and patted the rough and calloused hand on his shoulder with own, equally worn one.

"You always had a way with words, Morr."

Morrelia snorted.

"No I don't and you know it. I'm just in a unique position to look at you as human instead of a legend."

"You don't see me as a legend?"

"My memories are of you teaching me how to lace up a boot, not saving the kingdom for the umpteenth time." She stepped away from her father to run her eyes over the wreckage again. "I still can't believe this happened. When Anthony and I first came here, this whole space was filled with monsters, almost every surface was covered with them. How did we ever kill so many?"

Titus flicked an eye when she said that. Behind him, many Legionaries were overcome with emotion as they reached the surface. Many of them had been born here, had parents, spouses, some of them had children. Morrelia had been able to provide a list, the names of everyone who had gathered at the survivor village. It was a scarce comfort. Only a fraction of the people who'd lived in the kingdom remained, and the capital had been the hardest hit. The tears and cries of anguish stung. Sometimes he wished he could unbend long enough to show that kind of emotion, but he never did. Part of him was afraid that if he ever let it out he would never be able to bottle it up again. Only his family were able to truly see what went on under the surface, only his wife and daughter. He was determined to keep them safe.

"Have you thought about my offer, Morr? I want you to come with us when we go."

Morrelia frowned. In truth, she was conflicted. During the journey upward, she'd spent time talking to her old friends, from her centurions, trainees in her year who'd gone on to make full legionary and others who'd started not long before she left. The Abyssal Legion had been such a part of her life, to reconnect with it again had felt so natural, as if she had been welcomed back to the family. To her, the Legion was literally family. It was a chance to spend time with her father, to reconnect with her mother, after ten years of separation. She didn't want to abandon the community in the south, the survivors that she'd formed bonds with through desperate battles and struggles, but how could she turn away from this chance. If she did, how long would it be until she saw her parents again?

Enid, Beyn, Isaac. Well, Isaac could burn in the third strata, but the others, even Anthony, that puzzling creature who seemed to turn everything she'd been taught about monsters on its head. There was

something building there, something special. She wanted to be a part of it, wanted to help build it. It was an adventure, creating something entirely new out of the ashes of the old.

"Give me a little more time to think." She told her father.

The commander looked as if he had more to say, but refrained himself. He wouldn't push her. His children had never reacted well to being pushed. He'd never even mentioned the idea of joining the Legion to them as they'd grown up. He wasn't certain he wanted that life for them. Sure enough, they'd thrown themselves in head first the moment they'd come of age. Morrelia was the most headstrong of all, it was unusual of her to be undecided in anything. He would give her the space she needed.

A sob, almost a muffled cry sounded behind them, and the two turned to see a devastated Alberton, the Legion Loremaster for Liria. The old scholar had a hand raised to cover his mouth and his eyes were red as he took in the wreckage of his home.

Titus stepped toward his friend, putting a powerful arm over his shoulders. Morrelia approached his other side, reaching up to grasp his arm. Alberton had been a big part of her upbringing in the Legion, both as her father's friend and as her teacher when she was a trainee.

"Lean on me, old man," Titus encouraged his friend, who appeared to be close to collapse. "Don't stand on ceremony."

"The entire Kingdom? Everything my family has built for hundreds of years. All gone? So many people..." The old Legion scholar was beside himself as he openly wept. His entire life, his family, his history, wiped from the face of the world. All that was left was ashes.

"This is why we call them monsters, Morrelia. Look at what they've done. Look at this! We can never have peace until they all are dead. As if they never existed in the first place."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 443: Devastation Part 2

The pain and suffering the members of the Legion, the pain in their faces and voices affected Morrelia deeply. These were the men and women who had dedicated their lives to defending the sapient races of the surface from the depredations of the Dungeon. They were the inheritors of a mission that originated since the Rending and had endured for thousands of years. To those battle hardened eyes, the annihilation of Liria represented more evidence of righteousness of their cause. It was hard for Morrelia to disagree with that sentiment, it was something she herself had believed her entire life. It was hard to deny, the monsters were responsible for this catastrophe. They brought death and destruction with them everywhere they went, and had done so since the moment they had breached the surface.

And yet, she had seen a different way. A monster who was prepared to cooperate with humans, who was prepared to bring other monsters along with their ideals. Coexistence was possible, she'd seen it with her own eyes. The very concept flew in the face of everything that she'd been taught. What everyone on the surface had been taught.

What did this mean? Who should she talk to? Who could she talk to? The people in the village were a little too enthusiastic to throw away the lessons of history and embrace a new way, not without good reason, but could they really be trusted to see things clearly. Similarly the members of the Legion were too

far slanted in their view. They were literally a monster exterminating army, unmatched in zeal and efficiency. Were they really the people to talk to about cooperating with a monster? Morrelia could imagine how it would go. The moment she spoke to Titus about what Anthony really was, they would drop all their plans, march south and exterminate every ant and human they found, pat themselves on the back and count it a job well done.

The thought of Enid cut down by her father's axe made her feel physically nauseous. It was pretty much inevitable that Isaac would die that way, but the others didn't deserve it.

"You look troubled, Morrelia. Care to share your thoughts?"

"Myrrin?"

"Hi there," the younger woman smiled and came to sit down on the stone Morrelia was resting on.

It had been a cornerstone for the White Lion, well known tavern in this corner of the city. Not much remained of it now. One crumbled wall and the smashed remains of the once gleaming oak bar. Shards of glass lay scattered across the ground, the final remnants of the bottles the innkeeper, Gregor, had one taken such pride in.

"Feels a little strange to be trying to give advice to my own Senior," Myrrin admitted.

Morrelia scoffed.

"I'm not your Senior. I'm someone who dropped out of training whereas you are a full Legionary. Under what definition could I possibly be considered Senior to you?"

Mirryn shrugged. It was hard to explain, especially to Morrelia's face, that she was so dominant and overbearing, so forceful in her personality, it was hard to think of her as anything but a superior.

"You've probably even outleveled me," Morrelia grimaced, "doing whatever it is you Legion types do in the deep."

"Surely not!" Myrrin protested, but secretly she thought she just might have. The slaughter she'd taken part in during the wave had catapulted her levels and stats to a height she had never dreamed of achieving.

The other woman's eyes narrowed, as if detecting the underlying truth, but she let it go.

"You'll be coming with us won't you?" Myrrin asked. "I've never been through a gate, I'd only heard of them. It'd be nice to have more people we know on the other side."

Her black leather armour creaked as Morrelia shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm still thinking about it. I'm just not certain."

"I understand. Things were pretty tense when you left."

"I said a lot of things that I came to regret."

"You were grieving, we all were."

"That doesn't make it okay."

"Time heals all wounds, so I'm told. Maybe you should trust in us more."

"Maybe I should," Morrelia admitted.

Myrrin leaned back and looked up at the sky.

"Seems like we won't get a chance to visit this village of yours. Runner came up an hour ago. They're going to send us through early. The commander has already issued the order to pack everything up and get back to marching. Alberton's furious. He wanted more time to comb through what was left of the archives."

"It would take weeks to excavate anything out of there! Garralosh caved the entire thing in!"

Mirryn giggled.

"The commander tried to tell him, but the old man is too stubborn when it comes to his precious books. I think we're going to see the Loremaster carried away over the shoulder of a centurion soon!"

"Save me from stubborn old men," Morrelia muttered.

"At the very least you'll come down and see us off, won't you? We've so much more to talk about, I don't want to have to wave you off in an hour."

"I can promise that much." Morrelia was reluctant to leave her father behind so soon, and it had been nice, catching up with old friends. "It'll be interesting for me, I've never seen the underground city."

"It's fairly interesting, to say the least!"

"I'll bet."

"Come on then, lazy bones." Mirryn stood up. "You might as well come and help."

"I suppose I may as well," Morrelia grumbled as she stood and stretched out her tired muscles.

The two walked back toward the Dungeon entrance to find the officers busy running their rulers over the logistics of the march, chasing down every stray member of the expedition and confirming details with their own superiors. At the centre of it all stood Titus, barking orders where necessary but mainly being a silent pillar of calm in the centre of a storm of activity. When he spotted her coming he walked towards her without hesitation.

"Are you coming with us?" He asked without preamble.

"I'm coming to the gate." Morrelia stressed. "I haven't decided to join back up."

His face showed no emotion, but she knew he was happy to hear this news.

"Good then. Make sure you report to Tribune Aurilla, she's in charge of our headcount and food."

She almost snapped out a quick legionary salute, but managed to restrain herself at the last moment. Her father's eyes missed nothing and were laughing at her as he turned away.

"See if I ever salute you again, old man!" she fumed to herself before she went to gather her few belongings and weapons before seeking out the Tribune.

As they finished readying themselves, darkness had begun to fall over the ruins of the city. The villagers who had accompanied Morrelia north had begun the journey back, to report on what they had seen and bring word of the conditions in the Dungeon.

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[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 444: My Head hurts

So far the upper reef farming strategy has proven to be successful, if stressful. Some monsters seem too reluctant to approach the bright flame, but others are clearly maddened by it, charging down to extinguish me, and it with extreme prejudice. After we started to see less monsters swarming out original spot, we had to pick up and move to another location, clearing out the riff raff along the way before recommencing our farming practices. So far we've been at it for four days and both of my pets are enjoying the benefits of the near constant fighting. Both of their levels have been steadily climbing and their combat skills have been getting some serious boosts. Most of the monsters they fight have been tier two and above, which really helps in terms of XP gain. The influx of Biomass has also been most welcome.

For my part, I've been grinding away at a number of Skills. Non-combat related ones for the most part, since I'm making sure that Tiny and Crinis do most of the fighting in order to hasten their evolution to the fifth tier. The skill I'm most interested in raising right now is my Core Surgery Skill. I need to unlock the mysteries of the advanced techniques employed by the Sophos so that I can teach them to the colony when I return but so far they've proven to be difficult to master.

Grinding away at manipulating cores in order to increase my skill level and bring me closer to increasing the rank of the Skill is one thing. I can do that, no problems, and I have been. But mastering the ability to fuse two cores together so neatly that they slide into each other like laser-cut metal is a freakin' nightmare! For starters, I need to get Core Surgery to the next rank before I can even unlock the skill, but I've been practicing the techniques required in order to ensure I can get my hands on the skill as quickly as possible. I've been straining my poor head as much as possible but so far all I've gotten is a headache and some not quite as horribly scrambled as before fused cores.

Once I'm done with them I've been handing the cores over to Crinis and Tiny to make sure that they are as close to maxed out as we can get them. It shouldn't be much longer now and they'll be almost ready to accept the final core to tip them over the edge. I'm keeping an eye out for a rare core but so far we haven't come across one. Special cores seem much more common down here and we've come into possession of a few of those, but rare cores are proving elusive.

The issue I had with my core is that I pushed it to max size, then absorbed a special core immediately after I evolved. My hope had been that with time and patience I would have been able to absorb two special cores beyond the limit and gain a more powerful evolution that way. My gambit ended up being taken to an entirely new level when I obtained the rare core and tried to push the experiment even further. So not only did I absorb a special core past the normal maximum, I went ahead and absorbed a rare core as well! The end result was excruciating pain and a very high risk of damage to my core. That I

only escaped such a fate could only be put down to dumb luck. By the blessings of Gandalf's ever bristling, bushy beard and brows was I able to survive!

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For Crinis and Tiny, if I only feed them the rare core, they should go through a truly painful and uncomfortable experience, but not have to experience the risk of permanent damage. Even now I still worry that something went wrong and I just haven't been able to notice. A hidden flaw in my core, a fault line or hairline fracture that might flare up and bite me right in the profit margins when I least expect it. It's anxiety inducing!

My magic skills have been the other focus. Healing Magic is getting a constant workout due to Tiny's affliction, so level gains have been steady there and I've made a point of playing with fire magic during the downtime when we hide away to rest in order to keep pushing that Skill higher. I went ahead and bought the air magic affinity, just to round out my basic avatar elements. I've not had a chance to try and level Earth or Air magic yet, my brains are already pushed to the straining point maintaining the healing and fire mana constructs. I'm starting to think I'm going to need a lot more brains down the line. To utilise one type of magic effectively, without a gland to produce that mana for you, it really requires you to perform two tasks simultaneously. You have to create and maintain the construct, which takes an effort of Will on its own. Then you had to operate the construct, feed it raw mana to produce the desired affinity. THEN you had to take the new mana of the desired affinity and shape it into a mind bending, intricate shape to produce the desired spell!

In an ideal world, you would have two brains to perform these tasks. One to hold onto and operate the construct, and one to shape the spells. For the time being, I'm using my weaker sub brains to maintain the constructs and the stronger one takes turns operating them and shaping the spells. This means I have to pitch in with my main mind every now and again, which is frankly a pain. I'd much rather all this petty grinding be done by the sub-brains so I can focus on other things. Perhaps my sub-minds will come to resent me for that, but they'll just have to deal with it! They know who's in charge!

The other thing I need to consider is how far I want to push the elemental magic Skills before I attempt to fuse them. The further you push them before fusion, the more potent the fused skill will be, that's a fundamental truth of the System that Beyn imparted to me. Certainly it's been true with my bite skill. The result of the fusion has proven to be very strong after I pushed each bite Skill to the fourth tier. Right now, I think my goal is go for the fourth tier Since I have multiple minds to grind away at these Skills, I should aim high. Who knows how humans and Kaarmodo manage to train their Skills to the heights that they do? With only a single brain? Crazy.

Right now, the three of us are resting. After an extended fishing expedition, we retreated down to roughly halfway to the bottom of the coral reef where we found a nice and cosy little alcove. Crinis and Tiny are sleeping presently whilst I keep watch. It'll be Tiny's turn to watch when I slip into a little torpor to get some rest. Naturally I have to explicitly order him not to sleep when I do so, otherwise he slacks off.

In front of me is a small pile of cores, our harvest from the last hunt. I say small, but thirty cores is quite respectable when I think about it. The abundance of cores down here is starting to change my view of normal. A haul like this in the first strata would be considered incredible wealth.

With a sigh I bring my antennae forward and touch them to the next core. I need to keep pushing and force myself to adapt these stupid things to the extreme level that I can, then try to fit them together with another core from a different species. It gruelling, headache inducing work, but someone's gotta do it!

Chrysalis

Chapter 445: Grinding for kicks

I stagger awake from torpor, my body snapping into motion faster than my brain can keep up. The result is that my legs spasm and my antennae stab into the air at the same time, giving out a general vibe of intense energy coupled with mind shattering fear.

"Hugga?!"

I'm still getting used to not being able to blink. At no time in the day is this more apparent to me than just after I wake up. The urge to clear the sleep out of my eyes, to eliminate the dryness, but I can't blink! There is no sleep! I can't even rub my eyes or anything. It's weird but for some reason this is some of the last hang-ups I have as human turned ant. Generally speaking, I'm good with the rest of it. I don't have many problems anymore with my new form, in fact, it's pretty great. In my opinion, those who wouldn't swap from human to monster ant are fools! Seriously mentally deficient! I even get to join a family with thousands of siblings! For someone who never had any brothers or sisters in their human life, this is a big plus for me! Well, I suppose I still don't have any brothers...

[Okay guys, I'm up. Are we ready for some more fishing?]

My two pets give me their acknowledgement and make our slow and careful way back to the top of the coral reef to try and reel in some more monsters. Our farming is starting to slow down at this spot, we'll have to move soon. It's hard to be sure exactly where you are in this absurdly massive expanse, but I've been trying to skirt the edges of the coral reef without heading towards the centre. I don't want to pull down something on the level of that giant leviathan, not until we've had more time to power up, explore and scout out the situation at the top of the food chain. Right now, the plan is to lay relatively low and keep pumping our Skills, eating Biomass and pushing Tiny and Crinis towards their next evolution.

[Okay Crinis. Are you set up and good to go?]

[Ready, Master!]

[How about you Tiny?]

[Oooo!]

[Nice. It was slowing down at the end of the last one, so I'm going to start fairly bright. Be prepared for the enemy to come in hot!]

Having forewarned my pets I push more fire mana into the ball of light even as I manoeuvre it out past the last grasping tendrils of the corals and shadow seaweed. The response from the drifting schools of

sea monsters is immediate. Some dart away from the heat and light, moving away from that which causes them to feel fear and discomfort, but others, others charge headlong to destroy it! Straight into our net!

The battle is fierce and I contribute in the little ways that I can from my hiding place. Smashing out the odd fireball spell and chomping on anything that gets too close isn't a huge contribution but when my poor pets are getting swarmed, every little bit helps. When the fighting is done, we Hoover up all the Biomass we can, the stomach upgrades proving their worth once more, before we retreat back to our hidey hole to count our gains.

All in all, another profitable run. I managed to level up, which is a pleasant surprise. It feels nice to reach level seventeen, even if I'm still a long way from my next evolution which is at level eighty. Both of my pets are creeping closer to their tier five evolution. Level forty is still a ways off for the two of them, but if we continue our routine, they're sure to get there before too long. I really did skip ahead of them a lot in levels by harvesting the XP from those Croca commanders. Then I got the experience for finishing Garralosh, which was another ton of levels.

Once we make it back I take a few hours to grind through the cores we were able to find. After all of my grinding over the last five days, I was finally able to level Core Surgery enough that I could increase its rank to Core Crafting (IV), which means that so long as I can pull it off, the Core fusion skill will unlock for me. After a number of attempts, I still fail to slot two cores together neatly enough to satisfy the unlock condition. Through painstaking trial and error I've gotten much closer, but still aren't there yet. The two creatures I've chosen are the Leech and Fish. Taking weak variants of these two creatures, only tier two, due to their more simple cores, I've been trying to shape them into compatible parts before fusing the two cores together. The trick is to focus on the traits you want to keep from each of the creatures and manipulate them in such a way that the fusion won't affect the integrity of that part of the core.

Easier said than done since I'm yet to succeed. When I'm done with all of the cores they are absorbed by Tiny and Crinis but the two of them inform me that they've maxed out their cores now and can't take anymore. This is good news! The preparations for their evolutions are getting closer and closer to being complete. This means the last six cores are mine to absorb! It's going to take a heck of a long time before my own core is maxed out. Since you can double the size of your core each evolution, that little bit extra I squeezed in last time pays me forward double this evolution, which means more evolutionary energy again! So long as I can find a suitable core to use at the end of the process, I'll be good.

My mind automatically shies away from thinking about the core we took from Garralosh, still stashed with the colony far above my head. Nope. Not even going to consider that until I absolutely have to. With another round of feasting behind us, our Biomass has built up quite significantly. I haven't upgraded myself during this hunt spree, so I suppose I might as well go ahead and do a little spending.

With two hundred and fifty seven points to spend, there's plenty I can do!

In order to maximise my gains, I think I'm going to take my stomach upgrades from +15 all the way to +25, maxing it out. This should help keep the Biomass flowing even faster and allow me to get the rest of my upgrades in a shorter time. It's going to cost a whopping two hundred and five Biomass just for this one body part, but it should prove worth it in the long term. To be honest, I probably should have invested in it straight away but I get easily distracted by other, shinier upgrades.

The list of choices expands rapidly in my mind and there are many to choose from. I wouldn't have thought there would be such a list for just a stomach, but the System never fails to be creative. Faster digestion is an interesting choice. You could spend less time between meals, increasing Biomass intake that way. There are a lot of options that allow for increased Biomass extraction from a particular type of monster, which is intriguing. Essentially the stomach would mutate to become more adept at refining Biomass from, for example, shadow based monsters. It seems limited in usefulness however, unless you intended to stay and hunt in a particular strata for an extended period of time.

That could be super worth it for the ant queens though, now that I think about it. I doubt Victorian and Antionette are going to keep evolving to a super high tier, they might even stop taking XP at tier five or six, which means they would probably stay in the second strata for a very long time. If these mutations can increase their efficiency for the prey consumed here, the colony might benefit a great deal!

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For my part, I take the next level of Biomass penalty reduction and stomach capacity increase, doubling down on the mutations I chose at previous levels. The end result is the Vast Hungering Stomach +25! Gweheheheh. Maxing out mutations always puts a smile on my dial. If only I didn't have to deal with the stupid itch...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 446: Fighting in the Shadows

Having pushed my stomach to the maximum possible level quickly starts to pay dividends. After mutating, the three of us pick ourselves up and start to move to another spot. The usual method to traverse the coral reef is to climb our way back down to the ground and move from there. This has a few benefits. Firstly, we don't get hunted by monsters from above and there's no chance of accidentally bumping into any leviathan class monsters, which is nice. Safety first as I always say! Secondly, we increase the possibility of happening across a nest or den of monsters along the ground. The crabs proved to be such a tasty and delicious meal of XP and Biomass, one I have no objection to indulging in once more. We haven't stumbled across many such treats but if we don't try then we never will.

It just so happens that in the process of moving, always a careful and slow affair in this web of coral plants with their stinging barbs, I sense a signature of a nearby cluster of monsters. How delightful! A travel snack!

[Tiny, Crinis. I can sense a nest of creatures to the left over there. Can you see them Crinis?]

[Oh! Ah, yes! I have them!]

[You should have picked them up way before me. What's the story Crinis? Have you been sleeping back there?]

[I haven't been asleep! I was just ... distracted.]

[Distracted? By what? Is there something else around here?]

That'd be the last thing I need, jumped by some monster leaping out of nowhere to smack me in the thorax whilst my supposedly omnipresent eye was dazed and confused. It's very unlike Crinis to be

anything but perfectly diligent. She's almost obsessively careful in her scouting responsibilities. Her Ability to sense mana sources at great range and clarity is such a blessing down here. I haven't checked, but I hope that the first thing she mutated to +20 was her Mana Sensory Gland followed closely by her Shadow Eye. The latter of those two has grown to be quite the handy thing here in the Second Strata. It gives her the ability to see through shadows, and since shadow mana is literally everywhere down here, she's able to get a good look directly at whatever is in range of the thing.

[No, there isn't anything else here! I was just ... thinking.]

Thinking? What sort of development is this?!

[What were you thinking about? If you don't mind sharing that is,] I hasten to add.

I've been trying to build a sense of independence in my pets for a long time, I'm certainly not going to try and squash this fleeting sign of development from my most dedicated pet!

[... It's nothing.]

[... Sure. Remember you can always talk to me, or not. Your thoughts are your own. If you decide that you'd like to chat to me, you can do so anytime. Okay?]

[Yes, Master.]

[Alright then. Now let's go annihilate whatever it is that's occupying this nest nearby.]

[I think it's Centipedes again, Master.]

DAMN CENTIPEDES. EXPERIENCE THE HEAT OF MY RAAAAAAGE!

Thirty minutes later the hated shadow variant of the claw centipede has had their territory reduced by one nest. I'm still determined to completely erase this hated species from the entire Dungeon. Perhaps it will be impossible on my own, but with the assistance of the colony, we may be able to accomplish one day. The thought of millions of ants hunting the hated centipede throughout the entire world of Pangera puts a warm fuzzy feeling in my heart. It's decided! The moment we return to the colony I shall pass on this most sacred of missions!

As we're busy munching on the Biomass, Crinis interrupts my thoughts.

[Master, I think I'm sensing something?]

[More monsters? Excellent! I'm barely warmed up.]

[I'm not sure that it's monsters, it feels different. I think they're coming this way.]

This sounds a little interesting. What could be going on here? I reach out with my own mana sense, but I can't get a handle on what it is that Crinis is telling me about.

[They might be coming for the clearing. Let's get behind some cover. I want to try and get a look at whatever this is. What direction are they coming from?]

Once Crinis points out a direction with one slender tentacle, the three of us scramble to hide on the other side. I duck and weave through the stone coral until we are reasonably behind cover. It's not easy

for an ant larger than a car to hide, but I do my best! Hopefully the stealth skill to carry me a little here. Tiny isn't particularly stealthy either so I urge him to get a little further back. Crinis is, quite naturally, still resting on my back and quite small in her shrunken form, shouldn't be any problems there.

After a few moments, I start to detect what it was she was talking about. There are six different mana sources I detect, but they're different to what I would normally associate with monsters. Monsters are bright with mana, filled to the brim with it as it flows through every fibre of their bodies. If the monster has a core, it glows like a lightbulb to my mana sense, and energy ripples around those creatures as their core pulls in the mana around them.

What I sense now isn't like that, not at all. Their seems to be hardly any mana inside the bodies of these creatures, nothing at all like a monster. It's so confusing! What could possibly be down in the Dungeon looking so dim to my mana sense?

I'm curious! What is it? What could it be?! Unconsciously, I nudge myself a little closer to the clearer to get a better view as these six strange entities step into view.

The six figures step into the clearing, taking in the scattered remains of the Biomass we had been consuming. They move quickly toward the centre of the clearing and I take in my first impressions. It's immediately obvious why they didn't feel like monsters. It's because they aren't. Monsters, that is. If I'm not mistaken then these are sapient creatures, possibly from the surface. They're humanoid, but taller and bulkier than a human. I'd put the tallest at over eight feet tall, nearly as tall as Tiny, and wide, thick in the shoulders and hips. Unless the light is playing tricks with me, it also appears as if they are made out of, or at least covered in, stone.

"Gruhalesa Rorrhan." One of them speaks and its voice is as deep and rough as two rocks being crushed together.

I'm agog, fascinated. Surface people! With language! Made of stone! This might help explain why they felt so strange to my mana sense. They had a stronger reaction than humans had in the past, which made me think there was no chance they were a sapient race, but clearly they have a bit more of the special stuff in their makeup. Not as much as monsters, who are literally born from the stuff, but hey.

The obvious problem that I have now is, how the heck do I get as far as possible from these giant stone people before they try and hack me apart for my delicious core?

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[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 447: Stone Skin, Fast Feet!

Suddenly gripped by fear I hunker down and try to keep myself as still as possible. Don't breathe, don't even blink! Blink and your dead! Wait... I don't have eyelids! Settle, Anthony. Play it cool. My mentality is frazzled after being thrown into this unexpected situation. I have just the Skill for this. Without hesitating, I sink my mind deep into the soothing calm of meditation.

When using this Skill, emotion fades into the back of my mind, brushing against the edges of my awareness instead of rushing to the forefront and dominating my decision making. To be honest, I

should probably spend almost all of my time sunk deep into the meditation Skill. I can recognise that when I use the Skill and my emotions don't cloud my thinking. The problem is that I don't really like the feeling of being this cold and logical, it doesn't feel like me. So I tend to avoid it, even though I recognise how much better my decision making would be. The more I use the Skill, the higher level it would get as well. Who knows what depths of emotionlessness are possible as it continues to rank up?

Those considerations are for another time, right now I need to focus and get out of this situation cleanly. My thoughts clear and I watch the six figures with cold detachment, taking in details that I hadn't focused on before. The armour the stone people are wearing is minimal. Their arms and chests are mostly bare, they have arms guards strapped to their forearms, the glint of hard metal standing out against their dark grey skin. A variety of weapons are visible on their backs or hips. Large curved blades and two handed swords on their backs, as oversized as one would expect due to their massive frames. One of looks like he's carrying a Buster Sword! Look at the size of that thing! A shiver runs throughout outside of my awareness as the image of that massive edge shearing through my carapace flits through my mind.

Don't worry, the diamond carapace is inviolable, it will never fail you. Their eyes scan the clearing constantly as they take in the signs. Their movements feel professional and clean, they never move too far from each other, their hands stand on the hilts of their weapons and they talk constantly, muttering low whispers to each other. Presumably about what they see or sense.

To combat the ever-present darkness they each hold a glowing crystal in one hand which emits a strong beam of light, like a

I need to be careful here. I know for a fact that mana detecting Skills are possible for humans as well, and I've seen humans use mana detecting crystals. If they bust out something like that, my overloaded tier five core is going to light up like a firework.

I've seen enough. Staying still any longer than this carries way too much risk.

[We need to sneak out of here team. Get yourself ready to go. We move slow and silent.]

My two pets give me their assent and I shift my legs slow and steady, gradually pulling myself further away from the clearing. I don't know why these six stone people are down here, and as much as I'd like to get some information, I don't want to risk it. I have no idea how powerful these people are. Nor do I want to start any beef. Maybe I launch a gravity bomb in there and wipe them out, get a bunch of experience and walk away laughing. Then three days later the entire expanse is flooded with very angry stone folks wondering where their team went and hunting for my impressive sparkly hide?! No way!

[Advanced Stealth (II) has reached Level 10, upgrade available.]

I'll take it. Perfect timing for this particular upgrade. Without hesitation I spent the skill point to upgrade the rank of stealth. As the knowledge trickles into my mind I begin to employ the techniques that blossom into understanding, minimising my massive profile, using the shadows and lowering my weight with care to suppress sound.

I only manage to take ten steps before my antennae sent a shock through my non-existent spine. A tingle of warning that sends phantasmic ripples off all over my carapace.

DUCK!

BOOM!

The coral around me explodes as my hyper speed reflexes send me smashing my own head into the dirt to duck low. As a testament to my newfound reactionary prowess, I even manage to tuck my antennae in and neither of them gets chopped off! Winning!

[GO, GO, GO! Get on your bike and ride!]

Tiny bellows out a hoot of rage mixed with two parts joy as he leaps to his feet and with one mighty bound sends himself flying up into the coral branches as they collapse around us. With my near three sixty degree vision I can see the coral appears to have been sheared off, as if sliced with a giant knife, and the giant structures are starting to come down around our ears.

Agile as a ... well... a monkey, Tiny flings himself through the wreckage even as it descends through the air but I don't have time to admire it, I need to motor! Six legs scrabbling and spinning like a road runner my muscles strain as I push my legs to their extreme, forcing immense amounts of power through my legs to the point I can feel them about to crack. Luckily they don't and I gain traction. We're away!

BOOM!

Missed me!

[Advanced Dodge has reached Level 3.]

Excellent! Keep running!

DASH!

Putting all of my Skills to use I move so fast my antennae are pressed back against the top of my head by wind pressure and the scenery around me fades to a blur. In my mind I can sense the six dim figures launching in pursuit, moving with incredible speed and precision. These people might be a higher level than I thought! This is exactly the sort of thing I didn't want to happen!

How did they spot me? Detection skill? Another one of those enchanted crystal gizmos? Good 'ol fashion eyesight? At this point it doesn't matter, I just have to get away.

[Hang on Crinis! See if you can throw them off somehow!]

[Okay!]

Darting left and right I manage to avoid to the following strikes. I can see them, if only vaguely, as they flash out around me. It's sword light, but narrower and so much faster than I've ever seen before. In just a heartbeat it lashes out, slicing through everything in range and then it's gone. This is surely a high rank Skill in use. I don't want to mess with whoever is throwing these out, the variables and potential danger are simply too high to bother with.

It's not like I'm defending my home or anything, I have no stakes here. Better to just run away and live to fight another day. So, I run!

DASH!

Another surge of strength pulses through my legs and I zip forward my eyes can't even follow my own movement. The coral branches and swaying seaweed rush past and I don't even care if I get stung by some horrific poison. Escape first and then cleanse poison later!

Even now I can still sense the enemy behind me, flitting like shadows through the destruction that they wrought.

LEFT!

Fzzz, ting!

A buzzing sound tickles my ear before a steel tipped crossbow bolt slams into the ground next to me and I stumble slightly due to the sudden change in direction before catching myself and continuing to run. I need more distractions!

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

Acid flies out in all sorts of directions, wherever I can sense them. Wherever it strikes the acid sizzles and turns sticky, causing the pursuers to shift and adjust their trajectories to avoid it. It doesn't buy much, but every little bit helps.

[Crisis? Got something yet?]

POW! POW! POW!

[Now!]

After concentrating hard, Crisis plunges her tentacles into her own shadow on my back and they emerge dozens of meters behind us, erupting from the ground to form a dark web that reaches greedily to engulf one of the hunters.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 448: The hunt is on

I don't exactly know who these people are, but they are very persistent! Thanks to the magnificent meditation Skill, I'm very much cool, a placid lake. Not a ripple on the surface of my thoughts.

BOOM! CRUNCH!

Not upset at anything, I am a calm blue ocean. I embrace serenity. Serenity now.

BOOM!

Serenity now!

PLEASE stop trying to inflict such deep cuts on my business zone! The level of budget cuts they want to inflict simply can't be borne in this fiscal quarter. My Gaster has been experiencing very lean times. That's a lie but don't focus on that part, focus on the part where I don't get sliced and diced!

They are trying to link around and surround me, moving as a unit even though I'm sure that they aren't speaking. How could they? The collapsing corals fall with the weight of buildings as they crash down to

the floor of the expanse. As we run the air is full of the roar of stone as it crushes and crunches everything around us.

Why the heck are so keen on killing me? Am I so delicious? Is my core so precious?! Surely not! Is it my carapace? It could be? Shiny and pure, coated with pure diamond. Who wouldn't want it? It's my curse for being so beautiful! Did I bring this on myself for being so attractive, so illuminating? Like a precious jewel, my lustre is too bright to resist.

Whatever the reason, I will escape! I will run free!

Firing acid in all directions I put my minds to work, furiously pondering ways to enable my escape. Should I cast spells? Difficult. Wielding fire magic, water magic or gravity will be tough. If they catch up to me, Gravity could prove very helpful. I could slow them down using bolts or the domain in order to preserve myself. Hitting them whilst they flit through this waterfall of destruction is near impossible. Also, I don't want to antagonise the hunters if possible. Clean escape is by far my preferred option.

Therefore, the best course of action, my minds reason, is to find a distraction and use the chaos to run!

[Crisis, keep a Shadow Eye out for distractions!]

[I'm a little busy here, Master!]

[Get a second brain already!]

To be fair, Crisis is probably using her main brain to focus on her tentacles involved in her little surprise attack. Which appears to have gone well! Her target is currently engulfed in tentacles that surround them like a sphere of horrific blades and pulsing limbs. Hopefully no emotional scarring results from the stay within this eldritch prison.

The other hunters react with obscene speed to the threat and divert themselves to their comrade the moment the threat manifests itself. Blades flash, shadows converge and light erupts behind me as I push my speed to the limit and haul my precious diamond backside away.

[Ahhh!]

Crisis cries out in pain as her limbs are severed and she hauls what remains back out of her shadow gate.

[What's wrong? That wouldn't normally hurt so bad?!]

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[I don't know! It just hurt!]

Dammit. These hunters are getting on my nerves now. How dare they hurt my pet?!

[Hang on!]

But I'll make sure to make use of this opportunity!

Bringing my brains into the escape, I perform a number of acts at once. I dash around and through a dense section of coral whilst firing a barrage of acid toward the clumped shadows and grasping for nearby monsters with my mana sense.

In a moment of blind panic, I find a tiny spark and I seize it. In a second I've realised just what I managed to detect and if I could, I'd smile. Sweet justice is coming for you little mutts and I'm gonna enjoy it. From a safe distance.

Heart surging with hope and joy that allow to wash through my meditative mind I angle my way through the coral forest toward the nest of shadow hounds. Crinis' painful sacrifice has bought us enough time and separation that I have the space to get clear. Acid now gums up as many surfaces between the hunters and I, which buys just a tiny bit of time more as they resume the chase.

It's enough. I burst into the clearing as sword light explodes around me once more and a horrified pack of Shadows hounds is already in the process of hightailing everywhere and in all directions, clearly spooked by the cacophony they'd no doubt detected landing on their laps in such a sudden manner. Luckily for me they flight in all directions includes back toward the direction I came in, right into the faces of the hunters.

MUAHAHAHA!

How do you like them apples?!

Now, let's get clear!

[Tiny! Where the hell are you!?!]

[Haaar?!]

Up there?! Above my head the big ape is swinging through the coral like a ... I'm not going to say it. I'll just say he looks at home up there, comfortable even. I can feel the resentment building up. I've been down here struggling and running, where was my loyal pet during this time? Lazily swinging and leaping above our heads!

You'll get yours, Tiny. When I'm done with your core, you'll see. After you evolve your head will turn into an actual brick! You'll be a giant lightning ape with a literal fired clay brick for a head! I'm sure it's possible. With the power of mana anything can be achieved. A brick head, which contains within it, another, more dense brick. That's you Tiny! Laugh while you still have a soft, malleable face!

Despite my smooth work it still takes us five more minutes of desperate running until I'm confident that our pursuers have lost the trail. Tiny, Crinis and I sit hunched in a small pocket of space halfway up the coral forest. All of us are breathing heavy and recuperating from our frenzied escape. A part of me is still paranoid, expecting blades of sword light to explode around me at any second. Those hunters were fierce, and persistent! They were freakin' dogged in their pursuit! Is hunting a monster like me really that valuable? Is it my core? Surely not. It's a good core, don't get me wrong, especially for a creature of my tier, but for strong and skilled fighters like the stone temple pilots back there, it can't be the first one they've ever seen.

Now that I reflect back. The whole chase feels a little off. None of those sword slashes felt completely lethal to me. Surely I shouldn't have been able to dodge that many strikes so cleanly? The more I think

back, the more I feel as if those strikes weren't lethal. Were they trying to cripple me, rather than kill me?

A chill runs through my core. Something feels off about this. Why are these stone hunters down here so soon after the wave? Are they normal Dungeon delvers, or is their purpose something else? I have this uncomfortable feeling something is happening that I don't understand.

[How are you Crinis?]

[I-I'm okay. It hurt, but I've replaced the flesh that I lost.]

[Great. Tiny, come over here and I'll heal you.]

Once I top off his HP it's time for us to rest.

[Let's recoup our strength. I'm not sure we've seen the last of those hunters, much as I wish I could say different.]

This is going to make life more difficult for us. If we have to keep our eyes open for stone people trying to slice our legs off, we won't be able to hunt as blatantly as we have up to this point. Which means slower rates of experience and Biomass gain, which makes Anthony a very sad ant.

No matter, we'll just have to cope with the situation. Furtive and stealthy hunting may be less efficient, but it's safer. A little safety sounds like just the thing I want right now.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 449: They're Coming

Turns out that our rest doesn't last for long. When an opportunity comes along in dire circumstances such as these, I'm not going to say no! After thirty minutes of catching our breath and healing up, Crinis perks up a few seconds before I notice it also.

A strong reaction from my mana sense, below us. From the glow of the core I feel as if this monster has to be tier five, the same as me. This is a good chance to harvest some experience and gain a powerful core to play with then absorb. Should be go for it? Those hunters could still be around after all. It hasn't been long since we lost them and if they're still snooping around the area, I don't want to get their attention back on us so soon.

But, oh! This prey feels so juicy! Nice strong core, surely a ton of Biomass on offer as well. Since I was only just considering how scarce good hunting opportunities are going to be if these hunters stick around, can I really afford to turn away from a tempting target such as this?

[Let's go and check it out at least. Surely there's no harm from that?]

Reasoning this way, we emerge with caution from our resting place and start to descend toward the creature which feels as if it's leisurely picking its way through the coral undergrowth, confident in its own strength. Oh ho, we'll see how strong you are my little fish.

Something about stalking prey tickles the primitive parts of my human consciousness. It's dynamic and exciting. I climb down vertically, my claws gripping the surface tight as my antennae sweep through the air, soaking in every little particle the atmosphere has to give me.

Even Tiny seems sharpen up, his ears twitch furtively as he take in the sounds of the expanse, his eyes focused with an unusual gleam.

[Nice, Tiny. I like to see that look on your face. Stay frosty.]

He gives a confused grunt.

[I mean, stay sharp.]

He frowns, his ears droop a little.

[Just stay focused dammit!]

Ears perking back up, Tiny gives me a toothy grin as his powerful hands grip the coral, lowering himself hand over hand. For her part, Crinis is focused and intent as she concentrates her special sense on tracking the prey. It doesn't take long for us to find it. The creature resembles a mutated lobster. It's front end is raised up, two powerful, fearsome looking claws on its right side, a mass of writhing leech-like limbs on the other. Those things look particularly nasty, tentacles tipped with ringed mouths as if they seek to suck out their victims blood.

Nasty.

Beneath the strong looking carapace the many little lobster legs scuttled away as the creature moved with the lazy grace and confidence of a creature who feels unthreatened in its current environment. Compared to the usual crabs and leeches, this monster would surely have little trouble moving through this place, but not today Mr Lobster. I wonder if you taste as expensive as you look?

No, wait. Stay cool, Anthony. Don't rush things, you might end up in serious trouble that way. Still spying on the unhurried creature from above, I cast about with all of my senses, trying to find any hint of the hunters.

[Crinis, I want you to go and scout around, see if you can find any sign of suspicious movement. We don't want to run into those damn stone people again and get jumped when we attack.]

[Okay, Master. Will you be okay with me moving away?] Crinis fretted.

[Of course, don't worry so much!]

Reluctance was evident in every tentacle on Crinis' body as she rose from my back to extend her limbs to move away.

[Tiny, don't attack, let's just relax here and take it easy until Crinis has had a look. We need to be careful right now.]

A look of dissatisfaction crosses the face of the big ape, but faced with a direct order he doesn't have a choice but to follow my directions. The two of us hang like giant but more attractive spiders from above the monster. We control our breathing and move as little as possible to stay hidden whilst Crinis does her scouting. Beneath us, totally oblivious to the two hungry creatures watching from above, the massive lobster continues to scuttle on its way.

After five minutes Tiny and I have had to change our position twice and still Crinis hasn't back from her scouting mission. I'm starting to get a little nervous but then her voice rings in my mind.

[Master, I think I found something strange. Come to me.]

Oh no. That's not what I wanted to here. Moving carefully the two of us move toward the direction I can sense Crinis and we find her hanging from a coral branch by her tentacles, her body still in its shrunken form to minimise her profile.

[Toward the left, Master, along the ground.]

I stretch out my own mana awareness and I find them, faint ghosts of energy, creeping through the lower reef.

Dammit! Stupid hunters! They're still here, all six of them, moving in a pack!

[Now Master, toward the right.]

Uh wot? I already found them on the left? Don't tell me... Heart sinking toward my core I turn my senses in the other direction and after a few short moments I find them. Another six moving in the same direction as the first lot, perhaps sixty metres apart. They're coming through the coral like a drag net! Trying to scoop me up like a fish!

No, no, no! Not like this!

[We need to get out of here. They're clearly hunting for us. But where can we go?!]

[What about up, Master? I haven't detected them above us.]

Good idea!

[Move slow and careful, we need to stay hidden at all costs!]

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Twelve hunters on our tail. Twelve. And those are just the ones we've found so far! Was the tier five monster, so nonchalantly moving through the area they'd lost me in just bait? Is this all part of their masterful plan? Why the hell would they even want me that badly?! I don't like this Gandalf!

One leg at a time we creep toward the upper reaches of the coral branches in order to escape above the hunters. If we can get high enough and then sneak over the top of the two hunting groups, we'll be in the clear! Once we get past, we can race toward the edge of the expanse and get the heck out of dodge. With this strange behaviour from the hunters, it's just too dangerous to stay here anymore.

You win, hunters! You've managed to chase me out of here, my tail between my legs. I don't want to deal with your nonsense, so I'm out! Go and hunt each other and your mothers for all I care, just leave me out of it. The closer we get the top the more we start to angle across to loop over the hunters heads, far below us now. Desperate to get away from this net, I'm willing to take the risk.

Of course they predicted it. They saw me and my pets climbing during the last chase, they know that we can climb high in the coral with ease!

As we loop over the top of the hunters and exultation is soaring in my heart, I feel Crinis stiffen on my back and then I sense them as well. A third group, right in front of my face. They haven't seen us yet, but we only have seconds before they do.

What to do? Fight? Run? Hide?! My sub minds begin to spin at a thousand kilometres an hour, drawing on mana and preparing spells that might help as I try to think. I barely got away from six of these people, how the heck will I get away from eighteen?!

Chrysalis

Chapter 450: Spider to the fly

Well, nards. This isn't ideal, not even close. Enemies below, enemies in front. With these new groups popping out of nowhere, my mind is starting to conjure stone faced hunters leaping out of the shadows in every direction, ready to drag me to the ground and peel of my carapace. It's not going to happen, I won't let it!

[We're in too deep now, they're all around us. We've no choice but to try and break through the middle. Crinis, stay on my back and help distract them. Tiny, try your best to follow and throw a little lightning to keep them off our trail. It's going to take a real effort to slip out of this one, but we can do it. Let's go!]

It's clear that these hunters are determined to get their rocky hands on me, even though I have no idea why. I can't afford to play nice anymore. I didn't want to get violent before in case it increased their desire to chase me, but it appears that was a waste of effort on my part. They were always going to come for me, I should have gone hard when there were only six.

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To be fair though, it isn't as if I could have predicted a situation like this! More hunters appearing to try and track me down? It's inexplicable! It defies explanation! How could they possibly know what a magnificent specimen of a monster I am? They only caught a glimpse of me! Nevertheless, no more Mr Nice Anthony. I'm getting out of this encirclement and never turning back. They won't even smell me again!

[Go!]

As I holler out that command the three of us burst out with as much speed as we can, all pretence of stealth thrown away. We head toward the left, moving toward one of the groups sharply but away from the others just as quick. The reaction of the stone people is rapid and decisive. The group in front detects us in an instant and moves to intercept as the group below us rises through the coral branches to cut us off from below. The final group of the three circles around behind us and starts to climb, cutting us off from below.

You aren't the only ones who have ideas! Let's see what happens when we do this!

Flaring to brilliant life above my head the globe of flame makes a glorious reappearance, flooding the area with light and blessed heat. Quick as a thought I whip the ball of fire upward as high as I can and pump it full of fire mana churned out by my main sub-mind. Like a miniature sun the fire roars, sending

light deep into the vast ocean of shadow above, bringing warmth to a place that hasn't felt it since it was formed.

And the monsters hate it. Even as my mind starts to work on my next spell, the angry cries and roars of hundreds of monsters can be heard echoing down from above. This will bring any other hunter groups right to me, but I just have to chance it right now. A massive swirl of chaos is going to be my best chance to escape and I'm going to make the biggest I possibly can to make it happen!

They're already coming, the hordes of fish and sea snakes and creatures that want to extinguish my flame and myself at the same time. As they pour down from above I can feel the shadows hesitate before they recommit to the chase. They're determined, I'll give them that.

But not as determined as me! Freedom beckons to me and I shall seek to leap into its welcoming arms, no matter the cost! My antennae forewarn me of the incoming sword light and my legs pulse with strength as I shift my not inconsiderable weight to respond to the perceived threat.

CRUNCH.

Shards of coral fly through the air as blades fly up from below and sever branches all around me. My minds frantically churn as I fall, helping to calculate the best path through this collapsing mess. I have to jump from falling branch to falling branch even as I weave together my gravity domain. If they are going to come at me, they're going to have to deal with the power of gravity! Let's see them overcome that!

The purple mana from the gravitational mana gland explodes out from me and forms a dense sphere around me. It's a strain to maintain it at this time but I'll have to push myself hard to get out of this. The hunters react with caution when they witness the gravity domain expand outwards. I can feel them hesitate in my mana sense, but only a fraction of a second. Nothing will deter them!

From above comes the swarm of enemies. Shadow fish, sharks, tentacles monstrosities of all kinds hurl themselves into my gravity domain, trying to bite me at any cost. What they find is that their own weight is massively increased and swimming freely through the air is not quite as easy as they found it moments ago. The weaker monsters even drop out of the bottom of the domain, hopefully right onto the heads of the hunters below.

The hunters on my right grip their blades and unleash their strikes in a coordinated unit, almost as if they are thinking with one mind. Six separate sword lights flash out and carve away the footing around me, forcing me to jump clear looking for more footing I can dig my claws into. I can't afford to lose speed and every moment I'm in the air is a moment my legs aren't rocketing me forward.

My antennae tingle and more blades streak through the air towards me, ripping apart the coral I was about to land on, sending me tumbling through the air. I might have fallen right down into their hands after those well placed strikes, but fortunately my backup army of fish has arrived to muddy the waters and the hunters can't follow up, buying me and my pets precious seconds.

[Crisis, Tiny! Gonna need some help!] I shout as I frantically try to get my feet back under me and generate some traction.

Lightning crackles and tentacles fly in response to my call. The hunters are swift and nimble, but even they struggle to evade the wild arcs of electrical energy that come flying their way. Crisis contributes in

her traditional manner, by spawning all manner of horrific tentacle nightmare zones towards the enemy and sinking her limbs into their very shadows.

Nice! Good work team! Still falling through the air, I manage to get my legs set on a tumbling block of coral long enough to leap from it toward a nearby stable coral piece. The second my feet touch down on that precious safe ground I'm going to dash and never look back! So long suckers! Stay here and play tag with each other forever for all I care!

At that moment a powerful blow strikes my consciousness and rings it like a bell. My vision blacks out for a moment and each of my minds screams in pain but I manage to hold on and stay awake. My thoughts are sluggish and my brain, all of my brains, ache powerfully. My momentary lapse was enough for me to miss my foothold and my Grip Skill isn't enough to support my massive frame. I slide away from the coral and now I'm falling again. Shouts from Crinis ring in my mind but they are dim and spike into my mind as if from a great distance.

[Get... Safe,] I manage to squeeze out before another blow strikes my head and I fall away.