

Chrysalis 601

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 601: Finessing the Numbers

Once again, I've managed to pile up a respectable amount of Biomass, though far less than I could have. The priority was given to pumping up those around me on recent trips, on the next one I can afford to be more... dare I say it... selfish. It's not selfish to feed myself dammit! I need to max out my mutations before I can even think about evolving. Anyone who thinks I'm going to miss out on that juicy, free bonus evolutionary energy for maxed evolutions is insane! Insane I tell you!

To that end, I need to stuff my face. I won't apologise for it!

The other thing I need to do is use combat to pump up my Skills as fast as possible. Elemental magic needs to be the priority. Once I finally achieve the rank five fusion, I'll be able to finally push my practice in other directions. Mind magic will probably be the next area of magical study I need to push. Those mind constructs will allow me to push my prowess to a whole new level once I evolve and pump my brain power.

I feel like it's been a long time since I've even considered evolving. The Colony has been expanding so quickly, and conflict has come to find us at such a rapid pace, that I haven't had any time at all to consider my own progress. I guess in the back of my mind I'd kind of pushed all thought of evolution away since level eighty was such a ridiculously long way away. Not anymore though! Only twenty nine more levels! Sounds like a lot, but it's a heck of a lot less than eighty!

I'm getting excited just thinking about it. Evolution is so addictive, I swear.

Alright, let's get busy, if I sit around here and keep pondering my next evolution then nothing is going to get done. Leaving my pets to sort out their own numbers (even Tiny appears to be counting on his fingers, his face a mask of concentration), I duck out into the corridor and flag down a passing ant.

"Hey there, any chance you can get word to the golgari Torrina and Corun to come and drop by here?"

"Sure thing. Work hard!"

"When am I not?"

"..."

"Alright already! Geez!"

Everyone's a critic. Just because I'm not currently doing something, doesn't mean I'm not *doing something*. Sort of. I quickly brush up on the Skills that I've upgraded recently whilst I wait for my two advisors to arrive.

Flicker Dash ranking up into Snap Dash was a nice one. The improved dash skill has a dramatically shorter wind up than before. Not that the charging time was long, but if you cut half a second down to a quarter of a second, you notice. It's similar to the feeling of gathering strength in your legs before you jump. With flicker dash, there was a brief moment of wind up before the explosive speed was unleashed, now that time is almost gone. Combined with my reflexes, even faster dodging is now possible. Gweheheheh.

My digging Skill has once more ranked up, Master Excavation taking my ability to move serious dirt to a whole new level. The pursuit of ant zen will never stop! Meditation ranked up once again, which is handy. The Skill is basically a form of enhanced concentration, allowing the Skill user to push emotion and distractions to one side and draw out 100% of their strength. This new rank improves the ability of the Skill to be utilised when moving in high speed, stressful situations. Allowing me to stay centered and focused, even when dashing all over the place.

Directed mana sensing is a handy one, essentially allowing me to extend my sensing range by focusing on a particular direction, like focusing a beam of concentration. Ranking up grace is just helping me with my balance, never a thing to be underestimated when you can run up multiple surfaces and have six legs. All in all, my progress has been decent without being overwhelming. My strength has been steadily ticking up, without any major leaps.

That has to change! MOAR power will be needed if I'm going to defend the Colony and fight off the invaders! It's unlikely I'll manage to evolve before the golgari arrive, but I can push my Skills as far as possible before then and see what happens.

Ten minutes later my advisors arrive and I welcome them into my chamber.

[Wait, this is where you live?] Corun asks, blank faced.

[Sort of, I suppose? I don't really *live* anywhere. This is just the chamber we use to sleep and plan. Does any ant really have a place where they *live*? I mean, we live in the nest, right?]

[I suppose,] he looks at the bare, smooth walls. [You were a human though, once upon a time. I guess I would have expected you to have more of a need for a personal space?]

I'm a bit confused.

[I have my own room,] I point out, [how many ants in the Colony have their own room? It's more than enough.]

Corun looks like he wants to say more but Torrina cuts him off ruthlessly.

[Who cares about this!? What did you want to talk to us about?]

I shrug.

[I was planning on purchasing some mutations and doing some serious power levelling over the next few days, so I thought I'd consult my resident experts? Isn't that what you wanted?]

She nods.

[It is. Although I kind of feel like you're doing this out of courtesy rather than because you feel any real desire for our help. Regardless, I'm happy to discuss your plans. Are you still aiming for the rank five elemental fusion?]

[Yep,] I confirm, [I'm getting close, too. Fire magic is already there. The others are getting closer by the day.]

Corun shakes his head.

[Rank five? I mean... why though?]

Torrina rolls her eyes at him.

[Still, Corun? He made up his mind, leave it alone.]

[Nobody goes for tier five,] he protests, [that's so many Skill levels for such basic magic!]

[But it synergises well with my current build,] I tell him firmly, [I've split my mental power across too many brains to be able to handle the more powerful magics. With this fusion, I'll be able to maximise the offensive output I can achieve from my sub-brain setup.]

He blinks.

[That sounds like a lot more sense than I'm used to hearing from you, Anthony.]

[I'm trying to get better at being assertive. I think it's working?]

[It's working fine,] Torrina assures me, [and I agree with your choices. If you continue to progress and rank up your other core Skills, your bite, movement and defensive ones mainly, then you shouldn't have any issues up until it's time to evolve. Just make sure you consult with us before you do it.]

[Why?]

[I presume you mean to absorb *that* core, before you do?]

That core, Garralosh's, is buried in the wall next to where I'm standing as a matter of fact. Old habits die hard and stashing cores in my own chamber has worked for me so far.

[Yep.]

[Tier five to tier six is a big evolution for a monster,] she tells me seriously, [not that any evolution is unimportant, but the jump in evolutionary energy available at this tier is huge, and you'll be sitting at tier six for a long time. One hundred and sixty levels takes a long time to get, even if you're being fed by others.]

[As if the Colony would stand it if I made them all force feed me experience,] I laugh, [that's a totally shameful level of laziness.]

She shrugs.

[I think they'd only be too happy to do it, and it might not be the wrong call. You can do a lot of work at tier six. At that tier, normal delvers would need to dispatch several teams of experts to beat such a monster. Even elites in the second strata wouldn't dare go one on one with a tier six. At tier seven? That's basically as powerful as it gets up here. Though, you wouldn't be able to remain at this depth for long, you'd be a powerful deterrent to attackers.]

I hesitate. Would it really be okay to have the Colony feed me experience? Bring already crippled monsters up to me to last hit like they do for the Queens?

[No,] I say, [it feels wrong. Besides, the Queens need that sort of treatment because they have important work to do in the nests and can't be risked. The regular members of the Colony need

experience and Biomass also. I'm perfectly capable of getting my own and not stealing from their plate. Every ant is part of strength, not just me.]

She watches me carefully.

[It's your call,] she says, [I won't tell you what to do, ever. All I will do is present ideas.]

[That one's out,] I say.

[Have you considered what path you'll take for the rest of your mutations?] Corun asks.

I consider for a moment.

[I'm not sure exactly where I want to go. I have a few thoughts,] I hedge, [but I don't know what to do that'll best suit a monster like me.]

[I'm not surprised,] Corun chuckles, [there hasn't really *been* a monster like you. High tier ants are basically unheard of outside of the founding Queen. Quantity and not quality are the usual way the ants like to play. You're a bit unique in that sense.]

[So you don't know of any sweet combos I can use?] I ask, a touch disappointed.

[That's not exactly true,] he muses, [there's tons of research done on other insect archetypes, just not ants. Some of it should apply though.]

[We studied what we could before we left,] Torrina assures me, [and we brought some documents with us, I'd love to go through them with you.]

She starts to rummage through a document satchel strapped to her side and I begin to feel a headache coming on. I didn't realise there'd be book learning! How long does she want to take?

[Look,] I break in, [I'll take a look at the options and sort something out and then we can go through the more advanced stuff together later? Ok?]

Torrina frowns at me doubtfully, which is hard to notice on a golgari what with the stone skin.

[They're your mutations,] she tells me, [you can do what you want. Just try to make sure that you always build on what you already have. Even weaker mutations that have lost their usefulness can fold into a new plan.]

[Think about it carefully, Anthony,] Corun urges me, [next time we'll give you the full rundown, alright? Your sixth tier is going to be fearsome, I guarantee it.]

[Alright, thanks, I appreciate it. If there's nothing else. I'll get to itching.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 602: Improve Thyself!

Time to bring on the exquisite pain of self-improvement. I have a ton of Biomass to spend and the time to roll around on the floor looking like a fool. Let's get to it!

But what to improve next? I've still got a ton of things that need to be upgraded to +25. Improving my eyes is an option that leaps out at me. My initial struggle on Pangera was my pathetic ant eyesight, and

while getting it to +20 along with a few choice mutations has certainly helped alleviate the situation, it's still not exactly where I'd like it to be. Having said that though, improving my eyeballs isn't going to do a whole lot for me in this strata. This place has two main features, being dark as heck and being cold as a tomb. Eyes may not be the play.

My Gravity magic gland is a touch neglected, I could bring that up to speed, but again, my focus is in other directions at the moment. If I lean on my gravity magic gland too hard then I'll only be slowing the progress of my elemental Skills. Perhaps I can better spend my points elsewhere.

The more I peruse my list of options, the more I'm drawn to the business district. There's a lot of potential upgrades available there, and the number of organs could potentially allow me to build some synergy between them, to further improve the potency of my corporate sector.

The three new additions were the acid nozzle, which gives me more flexible aim, the acid concentration gland, for thickening the acid, and the stimulation gland, which speed up the process of reloading. So far, most of my mutations have concentrated on improving the organs at doing their core job, but I feel like I want to be a little more creative this time.

Eager to check out the possibilities, I dive right in and start poking through the more off beat options in the menu. First, I take a look at the nozzle. The pressurised tube helps to throttle the produce as it emerges, acting like someone squeezing the end of a hose to increase the range. It's done good work, but I'm satisfied with the range, time to see if we can add a little heat, a little spice, to this aspect of the zone.

The list is exhaustively long, all sorts of things strike my eye. For such a small gland, it's quite versatile. Many of the options allow it to place some sort of effect on the nature of the spray. Widen the acid blast, fire the acid a flatter arc, as well as more generic options that improve the ability of the nozzle to flex, broadening its ability to effect aim. I'm not interested in that ordinary stuff. Give me the sauce, Gandalf! I want something a little off the wall!

As I ponder the list, I try to think about what I want my acid to do in a fight. The sticky effect has done good work for me in the past, it was key in slowing down my opponents, restricting them and allowing my former squishy self to stay safe. But now things are different, the stickiness just isn't enough to hinder the kind of enemies I fight now, they're just too strong for a mutation of that level to have enough of an effect. Not to mention, I'm more than happy for my foes to get up in my grill and take a shot. My diamond carapace and inner plating are more than capable of absorbing punishment! Not to mention my self-healing abilities are becoming better and better.

No, kiting my opponents isn't what I need, so the stickiness has outlived its usefulness as the primary factor in my acid. The magic eating is still effective. Being able to dissolve shields, chew away magical effects and even weaken incoming spells without using my brains is super useful. Big fan of this aspect, I'm glad I reinforced it when I mutated my acid gland to +20. But now I need to find something else to add into the mix.

What's it gonna be.

I scroll through the list, trying to find an option that brings my existing mutations together whilst offering a new flavour for my merchandise. I flick over to my other acid based organs, trying to find what

I want from my acid. Eventually I end up going back to my main acid gland. At +20, it still needs to be improved to +25 and I suppose it makes sense that I start here as I try to jazz up my production line.

Options, options, options. What sort of acid do I want? There are a lot of choices that jump out at me. Acid that burns? Acid that freezes? Acid that freeze burns?! That's new. Acid that chews through inorganic matter better? Acid that eats light. Like... how? Why? Regenerating acid that reproduces itself? So like, after you shoot it, it actually makes more of itself until it runs out of stuff to eat? That's... strong. What else we got? Don't want to commit early.

Dammit Gandalf, you always make this so hard! I swear if I look through here long enough, I'm going to find a mutation that causes the acid to chew through time or something. Ah, there it is. Makes the target age as it eats their future. What the hell is that?! Come on Gandalf!?! Are you outside your mind?! Why would you put an option like that in there? Reading closely, it seems as though the effect is rather weak. You'd need a ton of mutations, and then basically submerge someone in a tank of the stuff in order to meaningfully age them. Fair enough then, that seems like a balancing factor.

Let's go back to this acid that makes more acid as it eats stuff. I feel like this could be useful. It synergises well with my existing mutations. The stickiness will have more of an effect, because it'll just keep multiplying, getting more and more gloopy. As for eating magic, it'll keep eating away at whatever mana it touches until that mana construct is gone, even if I don't keep firing it. I'm starting to warm to this idea...

I can blast out a wave of acid, and even if I don't hit much, it's still going to grow and become a problem. Let's not forget that thanks to my concentration gland, the acid itself is quite damaging, even if I don't have any direct damage mutations. The effect will be light at just the first mutation, but if I commit to it over this evolution and the next, then it should be able to do some work.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 603: Outward Bound

After fiddling around a bit, I end up settling on the following mutations:

My Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +20 will add the self-propagating trait and become the Propagating Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +25.

That is... quite the mouthful. Hopefully it becomes a little more readable when I compress these traits down. I'm assuming I get to do that again at +30. In addition to that, which will take a good 115 chunk of Biomass out of my reserve, I've made upgrades to the rest of the business district to bring the whole thing together.

My Acid nozzle has had its pressurised trait reinforced and then gained the scattershot mutation. My theory being that if the acid is able to make more of itself, then applying a little bit of it to a wider area will allow me to bring the slow burn of never ending acid to a massive number of foes. Alternatively, I can use this mode to blast a scattershot onto a particularly large enemy, creating dozens of acid hotspots that will only grow over time. That's taken it from +10 all the way to +20 for a cool 155 Biomass.

The Acid Concentration gland has so far been used to power up the traits inherent in my main acid gland, thickening the mixture, so to speak. That's great, and I reinforced that at +15, but for +20 I

wanted to emphasise damage, and the concentration gland had a wealth of options to boost the effectiveness of my produce in that department. The usual suspects make an appearance here, elemental damage and so on, but rather than take those options, I had the gland inject a little extra spice into the mixture, a little addition that will reduce the defence of whatever the acid hits to the melting effect. Should help kick the deeps of the acid to the next level.

That's another 155 Biomass which turns my Potent Acid concentration gland +10 to the Thickened Weakening Acid concentration gland +20. My acid stimulation gland is still stuck at +10, but I'll have to deal with that for the moment. Not to mention, none of my new acid components have reached +25. It's going to take a heck of a lot more Biomass before I'm finished revamping the commercial zone.

With a weary sigh, I check over my selections once more and then give Tiny a subtle nod. He nods back, a serious look on his face, for once, and moves to block the entrance to my chamber. Once she notices what's happening, Crinis detaches from me and manifests her body to block all line of sight to me from the outside. Not even my annoying body guards will be able to see what goes on in this space!

Operation "Blackout" is in full effect...

Confirm!

HARCK!

FTTTT... SHABA...

COLLIBLAMAWAGAAAAA!

It itches so bad! Dammit all!

Not far away.

Corun and Torrina make their way through the Colony discussing theories and options that they'll need to present to Anthony the next time they get the chance. They could talk for hours on this topic, this is their purpose, as well as the entire focus of the cult, after all, but they got the sense Anthony wasn't quite as interested in pouring through the details, so they were determined to work out the kinks in their research before speaking to him again.

After a few minutes an easy silence fell as they both lapsed into their thoughts.

"Hey, Torr," Corun broke his silence.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"What do you think Anthony meant when he mentioned itching?"

She pursed her lips and frowned for a moment as she considered.

"I've no idea," she admitted, "do ants get itchy under their carapace?"

"You want to ask one?"

They both hesitated. The ants could get quite touchy when it came to their carapace.

"Maybe ask him next time," Torrina suggested.

Corun nodded. That sounded like the best plan.

Deep beneath the surface...

It took a few seconds for the dizzying sense of vertigo to fade, and with it went the nausea. Morrelia took a deep breath and resisted the urge to raise the faceplate of her runic armour to take a better look around.

"Don't," the stern voice of her father rumbled from her side, causing her to jump.

"Commander," she ground out, her temper flaring, "surely you have better things to do than babysitting new Legionnaires?"

"It's only normal that my personal guard be near me, is it not?" Titus spoke levelly.

Morrelia felt a spark of the berserker's rage ignite in her chest and she shoved it down, brutally. Not for the first time she wondered if she shouldn't have tried so hard in her training. Her apparently glowing reports from the Iron Church and her field Centurions had given her father the perfect excuse to keep her close at hand. She'd protested vigorously when she'd learned of her assignment to the commander's guards. In fact, she'd been so mad she'd dared to pay a visit to her mother in the hopes that the woman would overrule her husband.

A total waste of time. Her mother had been delighted to see her and wrapped her in a bone-crushing hug the second she entered her office, but when she'd told her of her grievance, the Consul had simply laughed at her and shrugged it off.

"He might look like he's carved from stone, but did you really think your father would risk losing you?" her mother had asked seriously.

When Morrelia had argued, she found herself gasping on the floor, crushed under the weight of her mother's aura.

"Let it go daughter," came the command, delivered in ice cold tones, "you are strong, your promotion is not unwarranted. Besides, I too have no desire to lose any more children."

And that was that. She'd hoped that over the years she might have closed the gap between her and her mother, but it looked as if it had only grown wider. How that was even possible when the woman spent all her time in an office, she had no idea. How did she even get that strong?!

"Welcomessssssss to you," a sibilant voice slithered through the air and defiled the ears of the Legion.

She didn't know what it was about it, but she felt unclean just hearing that voice speak.

"Who -" she began.

"Later," Titus said.

He strode forward, the light in his eyes giving away his burning anger to those who knew him as well as his daughter. He hated dealing with these creatures. Maybe once he was done with ants he could persuade the leadership that it was time for another crusade. The demons were a cancer that should have been exterminated centuries ago.

The axe on his back responded to his anger, stirring in its sheath as it echoed his rage back at him. With a push of will he forced its influence from his mind.

You'll never win, he thought at the entombed demon within. You are destined to lose to me for the rest of your existence.

The soul trapped in the weapon bellowed its fury and tried to claw at his mind, but Titus endured the blows and forced it back into the axe where it prowled like a wounded dragon. Being back in its home strata had woken it up more than it had been in decades but Titus had no fear. He'd conquered the demon when it was alive and he'd dominated it every day since.

Without turning, he could sense the stern demeanour of the thousand armoured figures at his back as he strode forward to negotiate their passage. The Legion had arrived in the third strata. Soon their work would begin.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 604: Back in Action

When the itching finally fades away, Crinis peels herself off the walls and regroups back onto my carapace to reveal something I didn't expect to see. Protectant, her cover dropped without me having to drag her out of the shadows for once, stands right in front of me, in the centre of the room. Exposed to my senses, she wears a nervous air, as if the simple fact of been able to be seen makes her uncomfortable.

"Didn't expect to see you, Protectant. What's up?"

Her antennae twitch in surprise.

"The rest of the nest? The surface nest? The surface? About two hundred million tons of rock and soil? I don't understand the question, Eldest."

Sometimes I forget the ants aren't up to speed with the lingo.

"I just mean to see what's up with you. I mean - forget it. Why are you out of cover? I assume you have something to say?"

"Where have you been?"

The question is more direct than I expected, but it's pretty much what I thought she'd say.

"Right here," I'm still not going to bow down to these babysitters.

"We couldn't see you."

"I know, that was the point of Operation Blackout."

As I announce the name of my scheme I can see her antennae go crazy with barely suppressed excitement. These damn security guards are as bad as the council. They love nothing better than a truly awful plan title.

"Why did you need to hide from us?"

I can almost see her force her intrigue away in order to focus on the point at hand.

"Sometimes an Eldest needs a little privacy. You'll just have to deal with it."

"It makes it hard for us to do fulfil our purpose."

"What did you think was going to happen to me here in the nest? Forget it, you'll just need to cope. We're heading out to do some grinding deeper in the strata now. I want to make sure you and your team keep levelling and progressing your mutations. You can't protect me from anything if you're too weak."

"We'll keep ten on you at all times," she says sullenly.

They hate the idea of getting stronger for some reason.

"That's fine. The others should probably hunt in teams of five, or ten depending on the level of the opponents. Let's move."

Tiny is the first to move, leaping to his feet from where he sat at the entrance to the chamber, his muscles bunching with excitement as he does his little gorilla boxing shuffle, throwing mini-punches into the air. The ape is pumped up and ready to fight. In fact, even Invidia has allowed his Cheshire cat grin to appear. Seems like the whole crew is ready to rumble.

Who am I to deny them? We speed out of our chamber and race through the nest, taking the fastest route through the mighty gates (still being reinforced) and taking new paths deeper into the strata. It's hard to move too quickly in the second strata, what with poisonous little barbs attached to almost everything we see. By now we've become far more comfortable traversing the tunnels and we need less breaks to heal Tiny after he stumbles into something else that wants to kill him.

In this way, we make solid progress as we descend, clearing out tunnels and stripping them bare of Biomass. The pure black mana pulses from the walls, filling the air like tar. I swear that it's getting thicker. Is there going to be another wave soon? Somehow I get the feeling it'll be harder to deal with this time, exposed to the second strata, and the third beneath it as we are now. If we can master the technique that Rylleh used to push the Dungeon veins out of their territory, we'll manage to survive it much better, I should ask how we're progressing with that the next time I get a chance.

For now, I don't need to focus on that. There's only me, my pets, my babysitters, and the need to smash as many monsters in as short as possible a time frame. We need dat sweet, sweet experience! Elemental constructs whizzing with mana, I step forward and unleash all the mana I have into our foes as we press forward. Slowly but surely, the levels come.

In the third strata.

"Do you know what we're going up against?" Myrrin asked her friend.

Morrelia frowned and resisted the urge to spit.

"No," she said sourly, "the old man loves his secrets. Aside from the fact we're in the third strata, I don't even know where we are. I don't think anyone does. The commander is keeping his cards close to his chest."

The two remained standing to attention along with their full Legion as they awaited permission to exit the citadel they had arrived in. Even though the Runic Armour shielded them from the elements, the searing heat scalded their skin and the taste of ash filled their mouths. Morrelia had never been in the third strata before, and she wasn't particularly enjoying it now. That was understatement. She'd barely seen any of the place, and she hated it.

The Legion was thoroughly drilled, to the point that when the commander strode back into the hall in which they waited, not a one of them moved. But the tension in the air certainly raised a few notches.

"Finally," Morrelia muttered as she strode forward with her fellow guards.

Her centurion, a grizzled veteran named Pompeus, shot her a dark look and she sighed internally, knowing that she'd get another grilling. She wished he wouldn't waste his time, she'd done everything she could think of to get thrown off this duty, but Titus wasn't having it. She had too much respect for the Legion to keep pushing the boundaries and fallen into line, but a few muttered complaints were inevitable in this situation.

"We've got our marching orders," the commander told them, "form up the troops for an address, we move out in an hour."

Immediately, auxiliaries were sent running to inform the centurions as Morrelia and her comrades fell into line behind the commander. She spotted Myrrin in the crowd and rolled her eyes which caused the younger woman to stifle a laugh behind her visor.

In a matter of moments, things were ready and a thousand heavily armoured, heavily armed members of the Abyssal Legion looked to their commander expectantly. Titus wasted no time.

"Legionnaires. Welcome to the first deployment of our newly formed Legion. We have many old faces from Liria, new recruits from around Pangera and a smattering of veterans from the deep world. I welcome you all."

He paused to stare at them for a moment and each soldier met his eye with firm resolve.

"We've not had long to acclimate, only a few weeks. Like most units, the real work of forging us into a cohesive whole will be done in the fires of battle. We have been deployed to the Plains of Lang, directly beneath old Liria. During the last wave, the local kingdoms were annihilated by a monster uprising, though there are several Dungeon communities that still stand."

Morrelia felt her stomach twist when she realised where they were. The ruins of Liria, the horrific army of the beast Garralosh. These were not pleasant memories for her.

"It appears as though the Dungeon hasn't done enough damage here. We've been called in by allies in the Empire of Stone to deal with a local infestation. A colony of ants has taken hold of the area, several months old and from what understand, has evolved in a fairly unique way. We will reach the engagement zone in three days, at which time we will launch a cooperative assault with our allies. Our goal is the complete and total extermination of the colony. Not a single insect is to survive the purge. Understood?"

A thousand fists crashed into a thousand chest plates. Morrelia followed suit, but felt numb on the inside. The Colony? She was here to kill the *Colony*?! Anthony?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 605: Elementary my dear... deer

Dungeon warfare is probably the most studied and practiced craft on Pangera. The Rending was a rude introduction to the intricacies of the three dimensional conflict beneath the surface, but the sapient races of the surface proved to be quick studies, and the basic strategies were established, most likely independently, all across the world.

Fighting Monsters is always a losing prospect. They can't be exterminated, they simply respawn and nothing that is known will prevent the Dungeon from doing that. But population control is possible, and indeed, it is the primary occupation of those who are tasked with defending the surface from a repeat invasion. By culling populations, scattering concentrations of spawn points and draining mana from areas of particular density.

These tactics can be effective, but the work is relentless. Without constant monitoring, depleted respawn points will reform elsewhere, populations will swell and mana will flow, like water, to pool in another location. War with the monsters is an exhausting, never ending chore that all civilisations of Pangera must engage in ceaselessly.

But this is not the true conflict.

There are a multitude of empires, kingdoms, city-states and alliances within the Dungeon and their wars, battles and spats are endless. Several Historian colleagues of this author have spent decades attempting to map the history of inter-sapient conflicts and have floated the idea that there has been no time during the post-cataclysm era, that all of Pangera has been at peace. As stunning as it is to think about, the records appear to line up, there has never been a time when the Dungeon hasn't been home to an inter-Sapient conflict.

Which means the strategy of warfare within the Dungeon is a highly developed art-form. Even the relatively simple act of breaching walls has become an intricate process. The more rigid the doctrines become, the more predictable the outcomes. It's said that the Grand-Strategists can predict the outcomes of a decade long war before the first blow is struck.

Regardless, it's a fascinating area of study that I don't think I'll ever tire of.

- *Excerpt from a letter by the historian Agronidas of the Tower.*

During the hunting, I keep in regular contact with the Colony through a chain of swift running scouts and from the sounds of things, they're as busy as ever over there. What I haven't heard about, is the arrival of an invasion force, which I find a touch surprising. I've spent two days hunting down here! When are they going to get off their butts and attack us already?!

I mean, I don't want to sound ridiculous, but I'd almost prefer for the assault to come now, rather than endure this mysterious silence. It's unbearable. Every moment I expect the penny to drop and a violent struggle to survive to begin. In the meantime, all I can do is keep pushing, keep grinding, trying to get as strong as possible, as quickly as possible.

We've been relentless and everyone is suffering from flagging energy levels, even me. At this distance from the colony, I don't get a whole lot of energy from the Vestibule, at least my babysitters are useful for something as they provide me a trickle.

Still, forty-eight hours of relentless fighting hasn't been for nothing. The levels are piling in and I've managed some tasty rank-ups. I put a bit of effort into chomping down on the endless shadow creatures and pushing my Omen Chomp into the next rank. It's been close for a long time, but I've been so focused on icing, burning, crushing, or slicing my opponents magically that the ol' fashioned mandible chomp has fallen by the wayside a little bit. But if I'm going to be battling more of those armoured chumps, then a little extra shell cracking power is going to come in handy.

[Omen Chomp IV -> Doom Chomp V. This advanced bite technique allows the wielder to further harness their inner energy and use it to inflict harm through the medium of teeth, mandibles or fangs. Range and power are both increased at this rank, and the wielder gains insight into shaping the energy utilised in the strike.]

When the trickle of knowledge flowed into my brain, it was quite a surprise to find that the ethereal, energy based mandibles that manifested when I employed the Skill could, in fact, be manipulated. I can't do a whole lot with it right now, but I can make the mandibles a bit sharper, for added puncturing, or a bit more grindy, for... grinding... I suppose.

I have to say, the jump from rank four to five does provide a significant boost in power, from what I've seen so far. I'm quite curious to see what sort of qualitative leap in strength the sixth tier will bring. Bit of a shame it's going to take a hundred and sixty levels to get there!

My other Skills have been progressing well. Very well, in fact! Without anyone else to prevent me from hoovering up the experience, I've made good progress. Nothing pumps the Skill levels quite like battle does! Ice magic affinity has pushed all the way to rank five! Whoo! I'm also making solid progress (heh) on my Earth magic. It won't be long until that too reaches the fifth tier, then I can move onto the final remaining element.

[Master, I sense prey!]

[Oh ho! Anything interesting?]

[I'm detecting a powerful concentration of death mana. Could be one creature, maybe a small group.]

[Ugh. I hate those things.]

[Experience is experience, Master.]

[Yeah, I know.]

The deeper we push into the second strata, the thicker the stench of death becomes. It isn't as if the shadow mana fades away, it's simply joined by another, more malevolent force. With the rise in death mana, we naturally see a rise in a type of monster I'm not at all fond of.

The undead.

The group creeps down the tunnel in order to get a better eye on the enemy, only to find they already have their eyes on us, in a sense. Only fifty metres away, sunk to its knees in a thick soup of what I can

only describe as evil sludge stands a proud looking deer monster. Or, it would have been proud looking, if its eyes weren't missing and large chunks of its flesh appear to have simply sloughed off somewhere along the line.

I don't have to focus particularly hard to sense the rising cloud of death around the monster. Curiously, it just stands there, staring at us. Hey, free xp is free xp. I'll take it! My sub-brains work together, pumping mana from my core through my stone magic construct to produce the new energy which is seized by my main mind to weave together a deadly spike of hardened, compressed stone.

The stone spear is a simple, brutal, yet effective weapon, especially when using condensed mana. I've seen these rocks puncture holes in all sorts of things. They should be fit for purpose here. Not wanting to waste the opportunity my patient target is providing, I whip together half a dozen spears before launching them all at once. The end result is... messy. Each spear is over a metre long and as thick as an adult human wrist. They pierce straight into the deer, which makes no sound, and sink deep into its flesh.

[You have slain...]

[Nice!] I cheer.

"CONTACT!"

[What did you say?] I ask Crinis.

[That wasn't me, Master! Mana signatures lighting up everywhere! It's a trap!]

[BOOK IT, PEOPLE!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 606: First Contact

The classic deer in the headlights trap! I should have seen it coming a mile away!?! Since when is a monster that helpless ever left alive in the Dungeon for more than a minute? This is the Dungeon for goodness sake! An ecosystem with more competition in it that this one surely doesn't exist! It's so dark here I can't see the individuals that have leapt forth from the shadows, and I don't mean to stick around until I can.

[Move it, Tiny! We are NOT sticking around to say hello,] I order my unruly pet.

The giant bat-faced ape was flexing his fists, eyes glaring wild and fierce as he sought for something to pummel. I'm not having any of it. Unknown enemies? We are getting out of here! I can feel Crinis writhing on my thorax, desperate to attack those who would do me harm, but I act quickly to reel her in.

[Crinis! We're leaving!]

[But, Master!]

[No buts!]

Thankfully, Invidia is smart enough that I don't have to order him to retreat from a disadvantageous fight. The demon is already moving and I follow his spherical, winged form as we rush back the way we came. Which still leaves me with one problem.

"Get the hell out of here, Protectant. I want your people ahead of me as we run! And don't you dare go against me here! If one of you dies, I swear I'll resurrect them so you know you can't escape my wrath!"

The threat is completely hollow, I'd never desecrate the remains of my siblings, but it seems to work. No member of the secret brigade appears and throws themselves in harm's way, so I assume they are running ahead of me.

CRACK!

With an explosion of light, an incandescent beam of sword light blasts from the shadows and flashes toward me, carving deep gouges in the stone floor on its way. Holy heck! Dodge! My antennae blaze with future signs of severe danger and my nerves fire, throwing my body to one side before I have time to think about it.

I skitter to one side, a tangle of legs that scabble against the stone to regain purchase. The moment I do, I DASH with all of my strength, picking up speed in an instant and rocketing forward as I sense more shapes emerging behind me. Whoever they are, they're *fast*. Not to mention, hot! Not in a physically attractive way, though I haven't seen them yet, but in a literal sense. My antennae are tingling at the insane amount of heat they generate.

They can't possibly be people! They'd be cooking themselves from the inside out at those sorts of temperatures!

Have I been accosted by some sort of lava people?! I wouldn't put it past Pangera to have lava people! Desperate to gain information as I flee, my brains whip together a fire elemental construct and I hastily craft a flame thrower, powering it with weak, uncompressed mana. I'm not interested in damage, I just want to see!

Rocketing behind an outcropping of stone to dodge yet another of those *fierce* blade lights, I rotate my body, ever so slightly, and let rip with the fire. A jet of pure orange flame roars out behind me, pushing back the darkness for a brief second. I see glimpses, flashes of detail. Then the dark returns.

I've seen enough!

[Invidia! I need barriers and mental distractions! Pile it on!]

[Their mindsssss are like stonesssss! I sssshall take them regardless!]

[What do you mean, stone?!] I cry but the little demon doesn't answer, already pouring his considerable mental might into slowing down our enemies.

What I saw in that brief flash didn't fill me with joy. Rather the opposite. Large bodies wrapped in steel and stone. Some sort of armoured suit? In the brief glimpse I got, I could see runes and the tell-tale signs of mana flowing through the materials. Whoever they are, they are rocking some high end tech! I think Smithant would get quite a bit out of a conversation with this lot.

CRACK! BOOM!

If they didn't try and kill her on sight, that is!

[How are we looking, Invidia?]

[*Almosst!*]

Almost!? When it comes to magical mind warfare, this demon is a freak! What's going on! I let my other constructs disintegrate and pull together some mind mana as I scabble my way around corners, using the deadly vegetation of the second strata to cover my retreat. Once the mana is ready, my sub-minds weave together a bridge and start extending it to the nearest attacker.

I sink my mind deep into the meditation Skill, trying to let my emotions fall away so I can focus. My minds drink in the calm that follows, the ragged edges vanishing as my nerves fade away. Even so, I feel a ruffle on unease as the mind bridge fails to latch. I don't have time to examine how or why, I just get a vague sense of the spell slipping off their mind instead of snapping into place as it should.

Some sort of mind defence enchanted into their helmets?! Holy moly, I didn't even know that was possible! Who *are* these people!? Well, if I can't slow them down with mind magic, I guess they'll have to settle for the finest produce found in this strata!

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

A rapid fire cannonade erupts from my back zone, the new scattershot mode engaged, causing a wide spray of acid to blast everything within twenty metres behind me. It doesn't slow them. I can feel the dense mana powering their suits flowing unimpeded as they employ their movement skills to rocket through the tunnels, their forms a blur in the dark.

That doesn't stop me though. With its new properties, my acid doesn't need to make a splash (heh) the moment it connects, it's yet to show its true power after all.

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

The barrage doesn't stop as my pets and I tear through the tunnels, our foes hot on our heels. I don't know how much of what I fire actually connects with our pursuers, but it doesn't matter. I know that *some* of what I fired hit home, and as long as a little bit did, they are going to experience the magic of my acid.

I keep firing until I have nothing left in the tank.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 607: The Welcome Stranger

Those chasing in my wake don't seem to appreciate my gifts. Angry shouts and a barrage of blade light explode from behind me, shattering the stone and sending shards bouncing from my carapace. I don't think they like my souped up merchandise. They'll like it even less soon enough... Gweheheh.

Wha?!

BOOM!

My senses tingle and my legs fire before I understand why, just in time to avoid the fireball that streaks beneath me, searing the fine hairs on my legs before detonating against the tunnel wall in front of me. My vision becomes filled with smoke and dust, my antennae muddled by the residual heat. Even so, my future sense sends flashes of sensory input into my mind and I leap to my left, just in time to avoid the glittering broadsword that slices down.

Clang!

The blade flashes before my eyes and pierces deep into the stone between my mandibles, slicing through the stone as if it weren't there. Holy heck! My mandibles flex and snap shut with concussive force.

Doom Chomp!

The dark jaws of energy manifest and close with brutal swiftness. Irritatingly, the blade snakes up from the ground and draws a shining arc in the air that my jaws crunch down on and stop. They just blocked my Doom Chomp with sword light? Is that even a thing?

Turns out, it nearly is, but not quite. After a moment of strain, the light shatters and my jaws complete their path, crunching shut. But holy mcjiggers is that armour tough! I feel like I just clamped my mandibles down on a rod of reinforced concrete! What the heck is that stuff made of? Regardless, I wasn't able to penetrate the bulky suit in my first bite, but the person wearing it doesn't look comfortable. With a heave, I lift them from the ground and spin my body to one side, tossing them like a dwarf directly back into the path of the oncoming pursuers.

And they're gaining. It looks like there's ten of them and with this one making the sacrifice play to hold me up, they've closed the distance to just a dozen metres. At this sort of range, they can dash to cover it in an instant. If I turn my back on them now, I'm going to tank a heck of a lot of shots from them before I get far. We might have to stand and deliver.

[Form up! Crinis! Time to peel off and get busy. Tiny! I want you on the front line making a mess, just make sure you don't die. Invidia, you're on support. You have permission to bring the boom if necessary.]

That bulging eye flashes green and curves with delight.

[Yesssssss,] he gloats.

"Protectant and company, I want you in the back. If you try and step out against foes like this, you'll get cooked. Your Skill levels aren't high enough. If you think you have a chance to pick off one of them and take them out of the fight, go for it. No chances though, operate in two groups of ten."

Luckily I can think at my pets and speak with pheromones at the same time. Instructions relayed, I turn to take up the frontline position against this obstinate foe.

[Sse Se Se Ssssse!] Invidia chortles to himself with a sibilant hiss as I feel the prodigious power of his mind go to work.

He's been banned from using his explosive magics since he tends to suck up all of the experience when he deploys it. Finally let off the leash, I can feel the mad little eyeball drawing out enormous flows of mana, spinning together into deadly flowers that he scatters amongst our enemies.

Now that I face up to them, I have to wonder, who are these people? These armoured death soldiers of doom!? They sure as heck don't look like any Golgari that I've ever seen. So who are they? Is this just a hunting team, on a delve? They seem a little too well armed and armoured for that. The massive plates of living rock and steel that make up their suits are impressive as hell, every inch of the damn things look enchanted to the brim. But their weapons are just the same! Two of them even sport massive tower shields that positively hum with mana. This lot are of a way higher league than what we've seen before.

Tiny, Crinis and Invidia step forward and begin to make their presence known. Here in the depths of the seconds strata, Crinis is at her most powerful, the thick shadow mana allowing her to manifest her tentacles almost anywhere she pleases. As she rises from my back and begins to take her true form, dozens of twisting limbs break away and slither through the air, only to vanish into the darkness. Tiny unleashes his lightning across his bulging, muscular form, his roar of defiance shaking the ceiling.

Invidia just glares at the enemy and unleashes his creations.

From the darkness comes a shout of warning and in a flash the figures dash together, huddled behind the two shields that unleash a burst of radiant light before...

BOOM!

The magic of Invidia strikes home and shakes the tunnel even further. To my shock, the barrier of energy the shield soldiers erected manages to hold strong against the spell. Brandishing their shields high, the two step forward in unison, pushing their barrier forward as the others fan out behind them.

The longer I'm part of this conflict, the less I like how it's going. At the very least, I can take some comfort from the sight of the acid I fired growing on them. Not in an emotional sense, but in the literal. Clumps of acidic, sticky goop cling to their armour where it sizzles and steams, eating into stone, metal and mana alike. Given enough time, it's sure to wreak havoc with their enchantments.

My sub-minds are busy, frantic even, spinning together an ice magic construct and continuing my attempts to latch onto the mind of one of these attackers. Whatever they've done to their helmets, it's still working, the spell just slides off them without taking hold. We've got to learn how to do that!

Ah well, if the mind magic won't stick, let's see how they like shards of ice with a side serving of my mandibles!

DOOM CHOMP!

Rearing back, I put my carapace into it this time and force my will into the energy flowing out of my body. The dark mandibles manifest once more, but flatter, built for impact. The two shield bearers step forward, fearless, the dome-like shield enveloping them still. You want to underestimate this ant? You won't be the last!

CRACK!

My jaws strike home and once again they come to a stop, forcing me to strain against the force pushing them back. Unwilling to allow me to attack their shield, the two soldiers and those behind them lash out, weapon strikes and spells zipping through the air toward me.

Fortunately, I'm not alone! In a heartbeat, multiple shields condense in the air before me, snapping together from the ambient mana. It isn't enough to hold back the strikes sent my way, but it is enough to dull them. When they finally reach me, the blows dissipate against my diamond carapace, barely scratching the surface.

I retaliate in kind, spears of ice forming around me that I send zipping through the air toward the others as I clench my face zone, trying to shatter this damn shield!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

Explosions ring out and I can't be sure if it's Invidia at work or Tiny. More and more stone dust trickles down from the ceiling, some of it into my eyes as the repeated detonations shake the Dungeon.

[Scum! How DARE you strike Master!]

Crinis has had enough. From every surface of the chamber springs a forest of barbed tentacles, each one seeking out a target to dismember like a limb seeking missile. Put on the defensive, the enemies scatter, lashing out with their weapons to try and thin the sheer number of grasping vines. Even now, they don't panic, and that bothers me more than it should. And will this shield break already?!?!]

From the back of the tunnel, behind our enemy, I hear noise and my heart sinks as I realise that more are coming. When the first one steps into view, illuminated by the glow of fire and lightning, I swear that I sense something familiar. Armoured like the others, but with two wickedly curved blades, one held in each hand, the figure rushes forward to help the others, armour igniting into a burning red, like the fury of a berserker made manifest.

That's exactly when Protectant decides to strike.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 608: Hat's off to you

The approaching red-armoured figure clearly hadn't expected to be descended upon by the heretofore hidden ant squad. Even I was a little shocked to see them, to be honest, and I'd known that they were there the entire time. I've looked a little deeper into the methods that Protectant and her squad uses to keep themselves from being noticed, much to their discomfort. I've come to believe that the council hasn't asked them to ignore my instructions explicitly, but trained them to think that protecting me from myself is literally half their job.

Which hurts. It's probably fair, but it still hurts.

So, even when I ask them to do, or not do, certain things, they look at me askance and I can almost hear their internal dialogue, wondering if I'm about to get myself killed. But, their stealth organs are an incredible piece of work, some of Gandalf's finest. It's an immensely powerful application of mind magic. One that infiltrates passively, slipping through any defence that I've seen and making the recipient ignore their presence. Even for me, when my Vestibule is clearly receiving energy from the twenty super

spies, it won't let me pinpoint their existence, because my mind doesn't want to acknowledge that they are real.

There are limitations of course. If they get too close, if they intrude on another creature's senses too much, then the charade falls apart. With a high enough Will stat, the effect can also be resisted, somewhat. The other cost being that purchasing the organ basically sucked up all of the evolutionary energy they had available when they went from tier three to four, leaving them with comparatively low stats.

Even so, working together in a team of ten, they leap from concealment to seize upon this eager figure, one who had run too far ahead of her group and thus made herself vulnerable. I watch from my position in the fight as Protectant and her group meld into my perception, already leaping forward to strike the strangely familiar figure.

A two-weaponed berserker? I know one of those, but why would Morrelia be here trying to kill us? And surely all berserkers use two weapons, they don't seem like the defensive type. I mean, they wouldn't be berserkers if they were, right?

This internal monologue continues as the figure is brought to the ground, wrists seized by two separate ants as the others swarm atop the armour, biting and gnawing as they try to penetrate the thick plate.

"Protectant!" I holler, "get the helmet off!"

My pheromones flood the room and reach the group instantly. They react instinctively, leaping to follow my directions as they use their mandibles to pry at the helmet, trying to rip it clear. The soldiers in front of me don't respond well to one of their own being jumped. On either side of the shield bros, a pair forms up and activates a new type of Skill. Movements so in sync they almost look like robots, the four bring their blades down in a shining arc, the weapons swung so quickly I can't see them move. What's more shocking, is the blade light *merges* forming together to create a single beam that slices towards me, thicker and more threatening than before.

Two of these beams cut towards me, one from each side and I have so little time to react. Luckily, Invidia is there for me, his shields snapping into place a moment before those deadly arcs of light hit home. But this time they don't hold, the concentrated sword light bursts through the shields and slams into my carapace, digging into the diamond coating and forcing me to release my grip on the shields.

That hurt! Not wanting to take any chances, I pump my system full of regeneration fluid just as my antennae register what Protectant is telling me.

"We have it, Eldest! The helmet!"

Nice! Held in readiness all this time, the mind bridge I had formed snaps into place on that now unprotected mind. I push hard with my mind mana, flooding their mind with my own consciousness. Who are you?! What the hell are you doing here?

Wait a second... This mind feels familiar.

[RUN!] Morrelia screams at me.

I snap the connection.

[We are getting out of here, people! Back up now, now, now!]

"Protectant, get your people stealthed and get the heck out of here! Get behind me!"

Luckily, nobody decides to take this moment to question me. Tiny swings his massive arms to create space and leaps behind me, dragging Invidia along in one meaty fist. Crinis slithers back toward my carapace, but at the same time weaves her shadow magic to suck away the little light left in the room. The ten babysitter ants that had revealed themselves break away and scuttle along the walls, racing behind me as they fade back out of view.

[Tiny, punch the roof! Invidia, help him out!]

Tiny unfurls his wings and leaps upwards, slamming into the stone overhead with one colossal fist just as more explosions detonate around him.

[Crisis, pull us out!]

[Yes, Master!]

An ominous rumble echoes from overhead as Crinis extends her limbs to grasp each of us and then grab the tunnel ahead of us. She slingshots us forward as an ominous crack sounds out and the stone shatters, collapsing behind us and burying the tunnel in tons of rubble.

What had only moments ago been a furious fight is now nothing but darkness and pressure. This really hurts. I mean, I don't really mind being surrounded by dirt and stone, but this is a little more claustrophobic than I'm used to.

[You guys okay?]

[I am alright, Master.]

[You're so squishy, you probably didn't lose any hp.]

[That's rude.]

[Sorry. How about you Tiny? Invidia?]

[He isss heavily wounded.]

[Try and heal him up, I'll dig my way to you.]

Wearily, I pull together an earth mana construct and begin to weave some spells to try and create a little space for my mandibles to move and soften up the solid rock in front of my face. It takes some time, but gradually I'm able to create space by chomping up the stone, pushing it behind me with my legs and compressing it there. When I finally make my way to where Tiny is buried, I find the big ape collapsed onto top of Invidia, shielding the eyeball with his body from the stone that crushed into his back.

The two of us manage to heal him up and I wiggle my way to the front to continue digging us out. The entire time, I can't help but wonder what exactly happened back there. Super powerful armoured soldiers? Morrelia there with them? What's happening? And if there are two groups of these soldiers, then are there more? What about back in the nest? Have the Golgari come?

I'm worried. Buried in the stone as we slowly chew our way out, I'm worried.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 609: The fire and steel

When he'd rounded the corner and seen the swarm of insects bear his daughter to the ground, Titus had felt the mana in his blood ignite with rage. When they'd fled, and the ape monster had brought down the tunnel, burying his legionaries, burying *Morrelia* in tons of stone, it wasn't fire, but ice that filled his veins.

The roar of fury that escaped tore from the commander was only defeated by the roar of the planet itself as the tunnel collapsed. Without a pause, Titus dropped his axe to the floor and charged forward, tearing into the rock with his bare hands. The axe, warm and ready for the blood of battle, began to cool, disappointment flooding its fiery soul. Next time, it promised itself.

The other members of the commander's personal guard, along with the Legionaries following behind, rushed forward to assist. Titus saw none of it, heard none of it. All he saw was his daughter vanishing beneath the rubble. His muscles screamed and the metal of his Legionary armour groaned as he reached out with his armoured hands to pull away tons of rock at a time. He worked with such concentrated fury that the others were forced to step away, lest they be crushed by a stray boulder.

Titus worked as if possessed, without fatiguing in the slightest. When he uncovered a red armoured foot, he redoubled his efforts, moving even faster when earth magic specialists arrived to assist. *Morrelia* was unconscious, her helmet half-jammed back onto her head, protecting her just enough. Even so, blood ran from her nose as Titus hauled her from the rubble and into the waiting arm of the medics.

There was nothing more he could do for her, so Titus turned back to retrieve the rest of his Legion.

"Tunnel collapse, nasty business," Alberton muttered.

Titus didn't reply. The two men sat outside a hastily erected med-post, waiting for word that *Morrelia* had awoken. It had taken several hours to clear the tunnel completely. No sign of enemy casualties was found, not even ichor. There *was* evidence that they had dug themselves free, along with residual traces of earth mana, healing mana and another, unknown mana source. That last one was causing a great deal of muttering amongst the mages.

"I'm sure she'll be fine, Titus," Alberton tried to comfort his friend.

Titus wasn't listening.

"Have you ever read of an ant-type monster cultivating pets?" Titus asked, his brow furrowed and eyes distant.

The Loremaster looked at his old friend as if he were on stimulants.

"No? I don't even need to reference the records to check that. No known pattern of ant behaviour includes pet rearing. It's just not how they operate."

Titus' eyes flickered as he put himself back in that moment, running down the tunnel, axe in hand. Morrelia had been attacked in front of him, but past them were others, an ape, a shadow being and a large ant.

"I'm confident in what I saw," Titus said, "a large ant, probably tier five, with two, possibly more pets, each tier four or five."

Alberton stared for a moment, frozen in shock.

"Tier five? An ant-type?" he muttered, "but that's... absurd! How would one ant accrue the kind of resources to evolve that far, and so quickly?"

"Don't forget the pets," Titus said, his voice low and intense.

"Yes, yes. The pets also. That's a staggering amount of cores... It just doesn't make sense. The Biomass necessary would allow for hundreds of individual ants... Let me think now. Have *any* known species recorded a non-insect resource expenditure..."

The wizened old legionary continued to think out loud, half-finished sentences referencing the dozens of books on ant-type monster morphology he'd studied over the last month. It mattered little to Titus, he had what he wanted.

The very first encounter they'd had with this infestation, and it already showed multiple paths of divergence from known Dungeon patterns. That gave him pause. It was known for thousands of years that the Dungeon didn't make wholesale changes to successful, recorded species. Slight changes, occurring over hundreds of years, was the normal, expected sequence. Whatever this was, it wasn't normal.

With a loud crash that startled the loremaster from his thoughts, Titus brought his mailed fist down on his armoured knee and stood. This action signalled strategists, advisors and centurions that had been lurking nearby to rush toward him, babbling for attention. He silenced all of them with a glare.

"I want our position fortified right here," he ordered, "get the medicus in place as a priority. I want logistics established within six hours and bridge-link in ten. Provisional gate can be erected one kilometre down tunnel."

As he spoke, people peeled off from the small crowd around him, sprinting to pass on orders.

"I need geomancers and Dungeon seers in every scout group and want those scouts out *yesterday*. We've had contact with the target colony, any move upwards from here might take us into contact, I want all squads to act accordingly."

He turned and spoke to Aurillia, waiting to one side.

"Once we have contact I want you to liaison with the Gulgari representative as soon as you can. They aren't telling us something and I want to know what it is before it gets some of my legionaries killed."

His loyal tribune nodded and ran off to prepare for the chicanery that was likely to come.

Titus *hated* politics, but he especially hated it when his supposed *allies* were withholding information. He continued to dole out instructions until the crowd of centurions, legates and tribunes had scattered, leaving him with Alberton standing outside Morrelia's med tent.

The loremaster looked his commander in the eye, his face grave.

"It's an abomination, Titus, has to be."

"A reincarnator? You're sure?" Titus questioned, no judgement in his voice.

"I can't think of anything else it could be," his friend nodded, "nothing else makes sense. From what you've said, it was too intelligent, employed too much magic, and operated in ways that ant monsters just *don't*."

"And it's hanging around its colony," Titus mused.

Alberton leaned closer.

"This could get bad, commander. If it's a normal abomination, then it'll go blood crazy before too long, we have enough to deal with it. But if it works together with its colony..."

"Could be a force multiplier," Titus sounded grim.

"Exactly. The last thing we need is an ant colony with some sort of sapient leadership. Every time the Legion has engaged that sort of threat, we've needed to go full deployment."

"Resources are stretched thin, that might be hard to do."

"They'll do it, Titus. Trust me."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 610: A hive of activity

Deep in the second strata, a furious scout was running as if all the demons of the third were after its delicious abdomen. She had left her relay station thirty minutes ago and was almost out of gas, her mutations specialised in speed, not so much endurance. It was a close run thing, she staggered the last few steps, her stamina finally spent, but that was as intended. The Colony knew exactly how far she could run, just as far as every other scout in the chain, and she passed on her message successfully before being taken to a chamber to rest, another ant dispatched to take her place in the relay.

Word spread quickly, the pheromones filling the nest within minutes. There was no fear, only grim determination, and in the case of Leeroy, desperate hope.

"The Golgari are coming," Victor announced.

"Those rock-heads are late, I was almost getting bored," Burke said.

"We've got a lot to do," Victor shook her antennae, "almost too much. Even with the extra time, we still aren't ready. The new nests aren't fully fortified, our number of tier four combat castes isn't high enough and the core shapers aren't back yet. I'm worried."

"What about the Eldest?" Coolant asked, "what do we know about their status?"

"Runner came in a few minutes ago," Burke told her sister, "Eldest got tangled with something in the depths and is on the way back. Next runner should have better information."

"If it's a second invasion force," Victor muttered.

"Plan for the worst, hope for the best," Burke slapped her on the thorax with one antenna, "that's what we keep you generals around for, right?"

"Thanks," Victor grumbled, "leave all the planning to us, as usual. How did this happen anyway? It's not like the generals have the highest Cunning stat of the castes..."

The three council members turned to look at the corner of the grand meeting chamber. As if sensing their gaze, Cobalt looked up from the stone model she'd been crafting in the stone.

"Don't look at me!" she protested. "We've got enough on our plate trying shore up the defences! These things don't just invent themselves you know!"

"What are you working on right now?" Victor asked.

"A system that can relay pheromones long distances at rapid speed that we can place in the relay stations. That way we won't need runners, giving us a faster response time and freeing up those scouts for more important work..."

Victor considered for a moment.

"I can't argue with that. Keep up the good work." She turned to the other two. "I'll get back to planning then. No way in heck I could work something like *that* out."

"Stick to what you're good at," Burke replied, "speaking of, I'd better check in with the stations. If things go according to plan, we should be getting more detailed reports over the next ten minutes."

Her words proved to be prophetic, as several exhausted scouts sprinted into the outer edges of the nest, passing on their intelligence before staggering away to rest. Everything confirmed what they already knew, and drew a more detailed picture of the attacking force. Within thirty minutes, all available council members had gathered, putting their collective minds to studying the war map assembled on the council table.

"Did it have to be three dimensional?" Victoriant wondered.

"No," Cobalt replied.

"So why is it?"

"Because we could," the carver said.

"Forget that," Sloan snapped, "we need to focus here. From our reports so far, we're looking at a Golgari force that's five times the size of what pursued us when we rescued the Eldest. Not to mention, initial scout reports state that from what they've seen, these troops look significantly higher level."

"They brought out the proper soldiers," Leeroy leaned forward in her chair until her eyes were nearly pressed into the model. "I can't wait to fight them."

"You'll be waiting a long time," Sloan muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Now, let me draw your attention to this area,"

The general used her antenna as a pointer to indicate a particular section of tunnel at the lower end of the model.

"The Eldest passed beyond where our mapping teams have explored, but their last known position was at the end of this tunnel branch. Reports are still sketchy, but the Eldest informed the relay scouts that an unknown force attacked in the depths. Exact composition, strength and intention of this force is unknown, but we can't afford to underestimate it."

"That's right," Victor picked up where her sister left off, "at this moment, we are looking at deploying our forces to defend in depth evenly across the two known fronts. Information is critical at this early stage. Wills, what have you got for us?"

Newly returned from the field, the second scout council member cleaned her antennae, still dusty from the tunnels.

"We've got ten thousand scouts in the field, either in relays or in active scouting teams. Our stealthiest members are moving to track the progress of these two forces, but we still don't have eyes on the second. From what we see of the Golgari, they are coming in packed with supplies. Large trains of wheeled carriers pulled by what we assume are monster pets, not to mention a large contingent of mages. I expect they mean to set up a forward base."

"If they put a gate down, that could mean infinite reinforcements," Brendant observed.

"You think they want to challenge us on numbers?" Advant asked, incredulous.

"I think they're taking us seriously," Brendant replied, "which is *not* a good thing. Have we made any progress studying the gates we took from Rylleh yet?" She asked the two mages present.

Propellant shook her head.

"It's enchantment on a level that we haven't come across before. We don't even have a single mage who's managed to learn the relevant branch of magic specialisation yet. We're attempting to brute force as much information as we can, but it's very slow going and taking a lot of resources."

"To be honest," Coolant followed up, "I think our members would be better spent levelling their Skills and trying to unlock spatial magic before continuing this path of study. We can't afford to be this inefficient."

Victor wasn't prepared to let it go.

"If we can harness these gates, learn how to build them, how to work them, then our colony will endure forever, even if we lose this war. They'll never be able to catch us, we could spread across the planet."

"I think if they learned that we could make them, every sapient on this planet would join in the hunt to make us extinct," Coolant shot back.

"Enough! You two are too loud!" Vibrant smacked the table with one leg, the sharp sound ringing through the chamber. "Let the mages decide what they think is best! They're the mages! We have a heap of work to do preparing the defences and getting ready to fight, so let's go *fast*! I'm tired of talking!"

With that stunning declaration, the powerful soldier turned and dashed from the chamber, leaving behind nothing but a blurry outline where she used to be. The remainder of the council watched her go for a moment, all thinking the exact same thing.

"Did you ever think she'd get tired of talking?" Antionette wondered.