

Chrysalis 691

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Chapter 691: Moving on up, moving on... etc

My conversation with the bruan'chii Grove Keeper was disappointingly short, but enlightening. There was precious little time before the wave reached a full throated roar and the tree-people didn't want to be caught out in the open. Apparently the 'mother tree' wasn't able, or didn't want to, maintain all the vegetation that she had caused to grow through the tunnels over the duration of the wave. I was a little shocked to learn that every leaf, vine and flower I saw was in fact as extension of the one tree rather than separate plants. Since she's a monster like me, I wonder what tier it takes to become powerful enough you can essentially extend yourself through huge swathes of Dungeon at will. I could have asked of course, but I think it would have been a bit rude. If I ever get close to enough to the tree herself, I might be in a position to ask a few, more pointed questions.

With the Grove Keeper and his charges returning to their grove, there isn't much else for me or my pets to do but help out with the defence of the Colony. The wave is just about to break and I can feel the heat sources in the walls building constantly. At this stage, we only have a few minutes before they start pouring out. Already the spawn rate in the Dungeon has gone crazy and the tunnels are beginning to fill with the roars, shrieks, and clashes of monstrous combat. I remember this noise, and not too fondly. Better get used to it since it'll be weeks until we get to enjoy anything like quiet again.

[Alright guys, we're going to split up and defend the nest. I'll take the spot in front of the damaged gate. I want Crinis to block the entrance to the tunnel that connects to the brood chambers, Invidia and Tiny can take the gate the golgari damaged. Make sure as few monsters as possible get passed you, alright?]

This will give the Colony a little more time to finish organising the defences. They'll be busy cleaning up the monsters that spawn on the inside of the nest anyways. Crinis raises a tentative tentacle.

[Are you sure you'll be alright on your own Master? You nearly died... again... in the last battle.]

There's a certain intensity to the little blob of indescribable horror that sends a shiver down my non-existent spine. Dammit, she's not happy.

[I get it, I understand what you're saying, Crinis. It was my fault that time, I got a bit carried away. Thankfully, we all survived and are healthy, so we can perform this duty.]

[But...]

[Crisis,] I say, drawing closer and looking down at anxiously wobbling blob. She stills as I come near, and I use an antennae to pat her on the ... let's say head? [That hole is still being closed by the Colony and there's a chance that monsters will break through and attack the brood. We can't let that happen, no matter what. This is the most important position and I only trust you to do it. You'll be able to make sure not a single monster gets through. Please, I'm counting on you to do this.]

The little ball vibrates in place as my words of place pile up until she explodes as I finish speaking.

[O-of course! Master! I won't let any disgusting filth slip by! You can count on me!]

Gweheheheh. Crises averted. The blob of impenetrable darkness wastes no time, sinking into the shadows and in a moment, she's gone, making her way around to the other side of the nest where a mighty forest of barbed limbs will soon sprout. It's a little mean to manipulate Crinis out of being mad at me, but what I told her was the pure truth. She's much better suited to tackling huge numbers of relatively weak monsters, it's her specialty. With her guarding the tunnel dug by the hated worm, I won't have to worry a bit.

[Tiny, Invidia? Got any questions?]

Tiny looks at me, looks at Invidia, looks at his stomach, then back to me, all without a change of expression. Somehow, it makes perfect sense to me. I think my brain is degenerating the more I interact with him.

[I don't know how you guys want to split up the Biomass, work it out between you. I will say, however, if you want more to eat, try not to explode as many monsters. That goes for both of you. Your full-strength punches are just as bad as Invidia's explosions right now, you know that right?]

He was about to point and laugh at this demonic companion but my admonishment wipes the smile from Tiny's face and he looks a little pensive as the two of them make their way back through the nest to the other side. I can tell what he's thinking, he's trying to weigh up his love of food versus his love of hitting things as hard as he can. I honestly don't know which urge will turn out to be the winner. He does need to make sure he gets the Biomass he needs for his next evolution. He's still a long way from the tier six evolution, much as Crinis is, but it doesn't hurt to start racking up those points as early as possible. I've still got a lot of eating ahead of me regardless of whether or not I can pile up the seven levels I need.

With my troops deployed, there isn't much for me to do except plant my butt in front of the destroyed gate and wait for the fireworks to start. My carapace is pretty much fully healed by this point, but I'm not too worried. The monsters that will spawn around here are likely to be shadow beasts and the like, only at level one at that. As the heat signs grow stronger in the walls, I laboriously put together the omni-elemental construct, the stupid thing sitting like a lump of iron in my minds. Tell you what, I can't wait until I evolve and pump up my brains some more, then this thing won't be such a pain in the thorax.

By the time I finish getting it ready, the monsters have already begun to emerge. The distant din of combat grows louder by the second until the first monsters of the wave make themselves known. All along the tunnel, from the walls, floor and ceiling a shower of dirt erupts as claws, heads, maws and monsters of all types erupt from the Dungeon veins. Instantly, the tunnel around me has as many as thirty monsters in it, each of them starving and enraged, drunk on the overflowing mana that birthed them. Without a pause to catch their breath, they begin to throw themselves at each other in a display of savage violence. Survival of the fittest is law in the Dungeon, something no monster needs to be taught.

A couple of the closer ones decide that I look like a juicy enough morsel that they ignore the weaker pray and charge toward me, shadow flesh bulging and distending with the force of their roars. I idly spin together a few fire bolts. Time to harvest a few Skill levels.

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Chapter 692: The wonders of science

They'd done it. After so much time and effort had been expended, they'd finally done it. The mage caste had put themselves through the ringer during the siege, they had battered their minds against the invaders until they bordered on shattering. It had been a painful regime of brutal mental warfare seemingly without end. What had made things even more difficult for the brainy caste of spell-slingers were the critical research tasks draining their numbers. The Colony had decided that the gates and Dungeon vein removal projects were so critical, so vital to the future success of their kind, that even the threat of imminent destruction was not enough to curtail the development of these techniques.

Progress on the gates remained painfully slow. It was clear that without higher levelled specialists in both enchantment and the as yet unseen space magic would be required to make significant headway there. On the other hand, the teams assigned to reverse-engineering the methods witnessed in the city of Rylleh had achieved a breakthrough.

As jubilant as she was, Propellant couldn't help but look askance at the team of mages and carvers who had worked together to make this possible. She studied the complex, almost wavy, interlocking series of walls in front of her once more.

"And you're sure this is going to work?" she asked them.

One of the mages stepped forward, her antennae waving furiously.

"Of course it's going to work you old bat! What the heck do you think we've been doing down here while y- HRCK!"

With extreme speed, a team of previously stealthed ants leapt from the ceiling of the chamber and tackled the mage to the ground mid-rant. Before anyone could think to intervene, the new arrivals had swarmed over the downed ant, expertly knocking her out with a precision bite to cut off circulation to her brain before the shadows enfolded them once more. In less than a second they were gone once more, taking the furious mage with them. The only sign of their presence was an ominously lingering pheromone message that hung in the air long after they were gone.

"Sleep well..." was all it said.

Even Propellant felt a chill run down her carapace at the display. The sleep monitors took their work deadly seriously. They were clearly starting to manage their evolutions and skills in a direction to better allow them to perform their role, making them terrifyingly capable. The sudden disappearance of their colleague had an even greater effect on the rest of the research, their terror was clear to see in every inch of their frames.

"Just how long as it been since your team leader slept?" Propellant asked.

"T-t-t-three days," stammered a carver.

"And how long have you been awake?" she followed up.

The little ant trembled so violently Propellant was worried her exo-skeleton was about to crack.

"She's been awake for two days and twenty-two hours," another team member helpfully supplied.

Propellant clacked her mandibles.

"Better get through this quick then. So, someone else this time, preferably someone not driven near delirious from lack of rest. Are you sure this is going to work?"

The much smaller ants consulted amongst themselves for a moment before a pair stepped forward, one carver and one mage.

"According to our calculations, there is a strong chance of success," the mage spoke with crisp words, "although we were unable to derive the exact method used in Rylleh, we believe that this is as close as we can get to an approximate recreation."

Math. The council member tried to be too repulsed by the sudden mention of 'calculations'. That stuff was far more up Coolant's alley. She herself was firmly in the 'blow stuff up and think about it later' school of magic. Whichever cursed fool on the surface had introduced the concept to the mage caste, it had spread like wildfire and split her siblings right down the middle. She turned to the carver.

"What do you think?" she asked.

The smaller ant rubbed one of the strange claws on her foreleg across the top of her head.

"It's a butt load of work, fine work at that," the ant sighed, "but it's held up in our tests so far. Only problem is, we haven't been able to try it on as large a surface area as the nest, so we can't be certain everything will be the same."

She didn't like the sound of that. Propellant wandered over to the mock-up the team had erected in the centre of the room and tried to ignore the battles going on elsewhere in the chamber. Damn waves made it so hard to concentrate. It really was precise work. The team had erected no fewer than ten separate walls in a space less than a foot wide, each one folding back on the others in pattern so complex it could pass for a magic construct. It was only possible to create such razor thin walls and shape them in such a way by reinforcing and compressing them to an absurd degree with magic. The level of earth magic on display was formidable. To replace the outer walls of an entire chamber with this layered wall formation would be... a monstrous undertaking.

They'd attempted to explain it to her, something about guiding the veins, folding them and then 'rolling' them along 'pre-determined channels of high mana sensitivity'. It didn't make a whole lot of sense to her, but she hadn't spent weeks working non-stop to develop the method.

"You've got the go-ahead," she told them. "I want the egg-laying and brood chambers to be done within forty-eight hours. We'll mobilise the entire mage caste and every carver with an earth magic Skill of rank four or above."

The team went wild with joy, slapping each other with their antennae, high-fiving and clacking their mandibles with glee. Propellant watched them celebrate with a warm feeling until she noticed the shadows extending from the walls, drawing closer to the team each second.

"BUT-", she suddenly shouted, before she lowered the intensity of her scent and continued, "but only after you rest. This work is too important to trust to tired minds. Six hours for all of you, minimum, in the meantime I'll start organising the shifts and getting the antpower we need."

The team grumbled amongst themselves about the delay, but she paid them no mind, instead watching as the darkness began to recede back to the walls.

By the Eldest, she thought to herself, that's terrifying.

"Congratulations to all of you," she told them, "this breakthrough will go down in the history of the Colony and I believe the Eldest will want to come and congratulate you personally on your achievement. Our whole family is proud of you."

The delighted team continued to celebrate and praise each other as they made their way to the mage torpor chambers, never realising the dark shadows that trailed along behind them the entire way.

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Chapter 693: Waves gonna wave

When word finally came back from the satellite nests the sense of relief in the Colony was noticeable. Burke herself was the first to receive the message and made sure to pass it on as quickly as she could. The smaller nests had held up well, suffering no more than a few probing attacks intended to keep them in place. They hadn't been able to stock away Biomass as the main nest had though, the lack of food growing into a real problem over the course of the siege. Now that the wave was underway, that problem was in the process of rapidly rectifying itself.

The Eldest and their pets continued to guard the most vulnerable points of entry into the nest itself whilst a flurry of activity continued behind them. Burke and Wills were everywhere, running messages, coordinating scouting parties and doing the legwork that kept the Colony running as one efficient unit. The two bumped into each other sprinting in opposite directions down a long tunnel and decided to take a short break to catch up on news.

"I heard about the satellites, that's good news," Wills told her, "from the sounds of things, the Queens haven't been able to maintain production over there. Our need for graduated hatchlings is dire."

"We could double the number of scouts and I'd still have work for them to do," Burke agreed, "but there's little we can do about it right now. Once the nests are secure, we can move forward from there."

"Agreed. Have you seen what the mages are up to in the brood chambers?"

Burke indicated to the negative and Wills quickly filled her in on the new technique and the massive scale of the earthworks taking place in the heart of the nest.

"That's a big deal," the scout clacked, "if they can do that for the entire nest..."

During their conversation a roaring shadow beast erupted from the wall right between the two. Reflexes and instincts highly trained, they both turned as one and snapped at the creature, ending its existence in the Dungeon as quickly as it had begun.

"... things will get a lot easier to manage around here," she finished.

Wills nodded.

"From what I hear, the carvers are raving mad about it. The constant spawns are making it almost impossible to do any sort of industrial work. Their workshops are crowded as is and now they need to cram soldiers into every nook and cranny to defend them. It's a mess."

The ants who focused their attentions on crafting were indeed being 'driven mad'. Workshops were being upended as monsters crawled out of the floor under their work stations, screamed out of the walls and generally made a mess of the place as the soldiers and scouts charged forward to battle them. The only group of production style ants that weren't too perturbed by the whole thing were the core shapers. Maintaining their concentration was hard, but the never ending monster spawns provided an endless stream of experience and biomass for their weaker creations.

If the mages were actually able to achieve what they had set out to do, life in the nest might return to some semblance of normality. And this was only the beginning. In another section of the nest, Victor and Sloan huddled together, along with dozens of other high level generals working together in teams. The enormous scale model of the section of Dungeon they were in had been expanded to include every piece of new territory the Colony had explored and the two council members were busy identifying potential choke points, trying to anticipate problems and organise the troops within the nest.

"What's the status at the gate?" Sloan asked a passing scout.

"The Eldest is still there, very little has managed to approach the gate itself," came back the report.

The two generals breathed a sigh of relief. The Eldest was buying them precious time to re-establish their defences and get some control back. The two generals were determined to make the most of the opportunity. It wouldn't last, they both understood that. How could it? Right now the Eldest and their guardians would be holding off the monsters with ease since they were level one, tier one creatures springing into the tunnels the moment they were spawned. Although the constant 'waves' of spawns were draining, disrupting and all around irritating, the Colony had grown to a point where even in the second strata, they weren't much of a threat. The *real* danger of the wave had only just begun to take shape and was yet to appear. It was the survivors, the winners, the monsters who, for whatever reason, were able to survive and thrive in the mess of the Dungeon. Be they newly spawned, fresh out of a wall, or perhaps had already had a few evolutions under their belt before the wave got going, it was those creatures who would rapidly rise in power that would become a threat.

Then, after that, would come the creatures from below. They hadn't had to experience it during the first wave, apparently the Legion had been holding off the beasties from the depths, unintentionally saving the Colony a great deal of pain. Perhaps even saving their lives. This time, there would be no such protection. The creatures from the third strata would come screaming up from below and begin to batter against the Colony in earnest. It would take a little while before they arrived, but they would.

"What about here?" Sloan indicated a particular section of tunnel with an antenna.

Victor leaned closer.

"Feasible. We'll need to coordinate with the fortification teams. We'll need to find a carver with a high level of the 'defensive fortification' Skill and place them with each design group. These barricades cannot be weak."

"Good idea," her sibling agreed, "I think we also need to ask the core shapers to take a greater role in the tunnels. This environment is perfect for them and they'll leap at the chance."

"With so many soldiers and scouts injured, it'd certainly take a load off our shoulders," Victor sighed.

The two of them were fatigued to a dangerous extent. It wouldn't surprise either of them if they were to be seized and dragged away at any moment, but they both refused to go for torpor until the bones of the strategy for tackling the wave had been constructed. The Eldest had been right about this wave. The Colony wasn't the same as it was the last time. There were well over a hundred thousand of them now. They were smarter, stronger, better prepared. If they moved fast, were smart, and gripped this chance tight in their mandibles, they could come out the other end in a far better position than they went in.

All around them, teams of generals dissected the Dungeon layout and planned. Patrols, aggressive sweeps, defensive emplacements. They targeted areas that could be controlled, areas they could build in. They paid particular attention to areas with water sources or particularly high concentrations of mana. Every expanse they had encountered was being analysed for their potential as a threat, but also as a resource.

The largest farming operation in the history of the frontier kingdoms was beginning to take shape.

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Chapter 694: Charge toward evolution

I've been out here for hours and I still haven't levelled up. Oops, here comes another one. Thirty metres down the tunnel, the dirt bulges before crumbling away to reveal a newly spawned shadow crawler. Despite having six legs, I really can't approve of these things, their faces look like a mosquito, with a piercing snout almost a metre long. My minds churn and, in a few moments, a condensed fireball whizzes forward, smacking into the creature and detonating with a wave of heat that rolls all the way back to me, lighting up my antennae and drying out my eyeballs.

Dammit.

[You have slain level 1 - ...]

Yeah, yeah, yeah. A tier one, level one enemy isn't going to do squat for me. It's pretty much not even worth the time to go and eat the Biomass. I've seen a couple of monsters make their way up the tunnel who were rank three and I happily consumed them, but for the most part I've been content to let the masses of creatures have it out with each other, occasionally deploying the flame thrower like fire magic to keep them away from the gate. Only twice has anything above tier three come close enough for me to fight and those battles were at least interesting. Despite the near deafening noise of screaming, screeching and roaring, accompanied by the visually stimulating sight of hundreds of monsters fighting for dear life within eyeshot, I'm bored. I'M SO DAMN BORED. All I'm doing is sitting here picking on small fries whilst the Colony goes insane working their abdomens off behind me.

Already the remains of the gate have been raised and sealed into place. I can still see the carvers at work now, guarded by teams of soldiers as they crawl all over the metal surface of the once mighty bulwark, doing whatever they can to repair the metal and the enchantments that were woven into the structure of the steel. I have to say, despite their best efforts, the gate still looks like garbage. Huge rents, dents and tears are still evident all over the place and the once mighty ant head carved into the surface is looking much worse for wear. If I'm being honest, it's so ugly it could pass for a centipede.

I know that me being here is buying the Colony precious time, and that it's valuable, but it's just not all that stimulating. Still, I remain. If I were to go do something else, they'd need to station a whole team of

soldiers and scouts to replace me and both of those castes saw massive casualties during the siege, and there are still thousands of injured who need time to get their legs back under them. And this is a wave, after all. I'm sure that the inside of the nest is a complete mess, with soldiers on duty every twenty metres of tunnel and clinging to walls all around the chambers.

Ah well, hopefully I'll be able to move on soon and do something a little more exciting. I have to admit, being this close to my next evolution is tantalising. Evolving is such a massive boost of power for a monster and I've been in my current form for quite a while. Amassing eighty levels is no easy feat, especially when I'm sharing a lot of experience with my pets and my twenty bodyguards. Just thinking about what juicy options may appear gets me excited. What body parts will I make mutable this time? What could I add to my perfect ant form? So many questions...

Even just planning out the possible stat distribution is exciting. Gah! I need to distract myself and think about something else.

At least all this spare time has removed any excuse I might have had to continue avoiding my status. Trawling through the numbers has always been a bit of a pain, but I have to admit it was pleasant to see the number of upgrades I've managed to accrue. Turns out fighting non-stop for days on end is pretty helpful when it comes to levelling skills. Who'd have thunk it?

Name: Anthony

Level: 73 (Rare) (V)

Might: 91

Toughness: 79

Cunning: 64

Will: 45

HP: 158/158

MP: 300/300

Skills:

General:

Master Excavation (IV) Level 3; Expert Grip (III) **Level 9**; Expert Stealth (III) Level 6; Tunnel Guide (III) **Level 11**; Iron Mind (IV) **Level 30**; **Master Stamina (IV) Level 6**; **Still Meditation (IV) Level 12**; **Snap Dash (IV) Level 11**;

Mana:

Mana Craft (V) **Level 24**; Condensed Mana (IV) **Level 18**; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) **Level 16**; Mana Hoarder (IV) **Level 22**; Master Mind Magic Affinity (IV) **Level 20**; Directed Mana Sensing (IV) **Level 12**; Expert Healing Magic Affinity (III) **Level 14**; **Omni-Elemental Affinity (V) Level 4**; **Mana Masking (II) Level 6**;

Pet:

Further Pet Communication (III) Level 7; Core Crafting (IV) Level 13; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 5;

Defensive:

Grandmaster Exo-Skeleton Defence (V) Level 11; Master Dodge (IV) level 25; **Master Endure (IV) Level 6**; Expert Grace (III) **Level 14**;

Offensive:

Unerring Acid Shot (IV) Level 6; **Master Precise Shooting (IV) Level 23**; **Doom Chomp (V) Level 23**;

Mutations:

Senses:

Perimeter Eyes +20, Far-sight Oracle Antennae +25;

Defence:

Complete Diamond Carapace +25, Braced Healing Inner Carapace Plating +25;

Physical:

Hardened Rapid Absorption Legs +25, Mana Flooded Mandibles +25, Frequent Potent Regeneration Gland +25, Loquacious Pheromone Gland +15, Vast Hungering Stomach +25; Lock Hyper-Twitch Musculature +25, Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network +20;

Acid:

Propagating Mana-Feasting Bind Acid Gland +25, Hyper Pressurised Scattershot Acid Nozzle +20; Thickened Weakening Acid concentration gland +20, Fatiguing Acid Stimulation Gland +10;

Mental:

Unyielding Coordination Cortex +25;

Mana:

Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +20, Endless Collective Will Vestibule +25;

Species: Juvenile Colony Paragon (Formica Sapiens)

Skill points: 14

Biomass: 224

A lot of Skill upgrades have come in, which cost me more than a small number of Skill points. All in all, my physical Skills as well as my generic mana Skills have seen a massive upgrade. One of the most impactful is probably the often-under-appreciated Stamina Skill, which has made it all the way up to rank four. At this level, the knowledge of how to move and rest my body in order to minimise the expenditure of energy has seeped into the deepest crevices of my mind. Combined with the Vestibule, it's this Skill that allowed me to fight for as long as I did. Grandmaster exo-skeleton defence is likely what kept me alive during that final battle, rank five Skills are no joke and my precision when shifting my body to best utilise my carapace has grown to a new height. Combined with the Endure Skill reaching rank

four, I was able to deflect, absorb and otherwise tank a heck of a lot more damage than I otherwise would have. Although I didn't achieve too many rank ups in my magic skills, the levels are progressing nicely. I can already tell that when some of these Skills hit rank five I'll see a huge upgrade in my spell casting capacity. With a few Skill points in the bank, all I really need to worry about now is finalising my mutations and capping out my core before I'm ready to evolve! I'm getting pumped up!

After hosing down a few more piddling monsters with blue flames, I continue to wait until my reverie is disrupted by an exhausted looking Sloan.

"Hey, Sloan! You look rough! Be careful you don't get caught out skipping torpor."

The general waves a droopy antenna in dismissal.

"I'm so far gone I'm sure they're on their way right now," she says, "besides, you're my last stop before I go get some rest."

"Oho! Does this mean you don't need me here on the gate anymore? Got another job that needs doing?"

She nods.

"Yes. Well, no. Sort of. I'm so damn tired..."

I give her second to gather her thoughts as the weary ant literally sways on her legs.

"You're setting a bad example Sloan."

"I know, I know. We can hold the gates here now, and there really isn't anything that we need your help with urgently, except level up. We need you to evolve as quickly as possible in order to help us deal with the monsters from the third strata when they come."

That's ... a good call. Invidia is an example of a third strata demon, albeit a finely crafted and powerful one. If a swarm of creatures on his level come charging up the tunnels, things will get really hairy, real fast.

"So you just want me to charge off into the Dungeon with my crew and try to level up? You sure about that?" I ask dubiously.

That's the sort of thing I usually do when I'm trying to *avoid* my responsibilities. Now it turns out that it's exactly what the council wants me to do?

"We're sure. Even more than that, we're going to start stockpiling Biomass here at the nest for you. Get all the experience you can, as fast as you can. Once you reach level eighty come home and we'll make sure everything is ready for the evolution."

"Sounds good to me, Sloan! I'm off!"

Whoo! By the time she finishes talking, I'm already gone, dashing through the monsters littering the tunnel and making my way around the nest to collect my pets. After bashing my head into the Legion for so long, I'm about ready to find someone my own size to pick on! Tier six, here I come!

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Chapter 695: I spied a spider

Tiny was more than happy to abandon his post for something more exciting and I think Crinis was just relieved she was able to return to me without something dramatic occurring, such as me being sucked through a black hole into the hundredth strata, if that even exists. With the gang assembled, we set off into the deeper tunnels and it was rapidly apparent that things were starting to heat up within the frozen spaces of the second strata. Monsters were fighting everywhere. Shadow beasts in various states of evolution and all sorts of other critters filled every nook and cranny that we came across, either fighting or consuming the Biomass of the opponent in the fight they'd just won. When we slid close to an expanse, the number of monsters we ran into climbed even higher until there was a full on mob that we'd need to physically push through if we wanted to move forward. We weren't interested in getting into an expanse, I know how crazy those places get during a wave, all we wanted was the experience.

Which we took, obviously.

Between the four of us tier five monsters (Invidia is already tier six, but anyway), we were able to sweep away the opposition without too many issues. The only problem we faced was fatigue, since it took a fair bit of effort to scour the tunnels of hundreds of monsters and the further we moved from the nest, the less power I got from my Vestibule. About halfway to our destination we ended up having to 'pull over' for a break. I dug away a section of tunnel wall and sealed it back over behind us so we could rest relatively free from the disturbance of the wave. It'd been a long time since I'd had to do that for all of us and it was eye opening to realise just how much larger the chamber had to be now that we had all evolved to this point. Crinis wasn't much of an issue, being a blob that can compress herself, and obviously Invidia keeps the vast bulk of his mass tucked away in a pocket dimension, but Tiny and I have become fairly sizeable. Things have really changed since he was little and used to ride around on my back. I did also have to make room for my twenty babysitters since Protectant insisted they come in with us. Irritating!

It did make me wonder, with the tier six evolution coming up, just how large am I going to get? As large as the Queen? Maybe... It's going to be weird if I end up that size, some of the tunnels won't even be large enough to contain me...

Eh, I'll worry about that when it happens. After a very welcome and overdue period of torpor, I rouse the gang and we head out once more. I need experience, which means we need to find as many higher tier monsters as we possibly can, and I can remember one such creature that we'd found who managed to escape my grasp. That's right, it's that darn mama spider! I hadn't wanted to pursue her into her cave of death last time, but I'm confident now that we can handle anything she can throw at us! The time for the domination of the eight legged to be complete is nigh! Down with the arachnid! Gweheheheh!

Thanks to my tunnel map, I know exactly where that tunnel is located and we make our way there slowly, having to fight every step of the way. Rather than dive into the expanse, we skirt around the edges until we locate the point I think is closest to the spider's lair from the outside. Of course I'm going to dig through! Can you imagine fighting all over those webs during a wave?! No thanks! Once I have a rough idea I use my mana sense and get some help from Crinis to try and guide my efforts as I start digging down to where the lair is.

Submerging myself within the ant zen, the time passes swiftly and before I know it, I can sense the looming mana of the spider boss somewhere in front.

[Alright team, time to put the plan into action. You know what to do?]

[Yessssss.]

[Yes, Master!]

[HRAAA!]

[Good. Get ready!]

I reach within, all of my minds working in concert on the task of bringing forth the dark purple mana that sits next to my core. More and more energy is extracted as I utilise my skills to compact it until the most deadly spell I know has been formed. The Gravity Bomb is taking shape! Naturally, we retreat further back down the tunnel to a safe distance as I form the spell and though I don't think it'll do much good, I do my best to mask the mana I condense. The spider will probably work out that we're coming, but if all goes according to plan, it won't be able to escape. For several long minutes I rush the mana down until the bomb is prepared and I prepare to fire it.

[Fire in the hole!]

So saying, I unleash the slowly rotating sphere of nigh on black mana. The moment it impacts the end of my narrow tunnel, it expands to its full size and the horrifying pull makes itself known. Rock, earth and cobwebs fly into the singularity constantly, being crushed and smashed into pieces. Despite being able to see the destruction take place, there's no sound other than the howling wind, as if what happened in the sphere occurred in another universe. We wait out the spell in grim silence until it flickers and vanishes, leaving behind rubble and a ball of extremely dense detritus.

[Go! Get in there!] I shout and immediately dash!

Tiny and Invidia are right behind me, with Crinis riding along on my shell. I can see through the section of tunnel we blasted open that a dense nest of webs is woven on the other side. At least, it *was* dense, after the bomb a huge section has been reduced to nothing, dragged in and obliterated by the spell.

[Invidia!]

The demon doesn't reply but immediately lets fly with his magic.

BOOM! BOOM!

A chain of explosions rock the tunnel ahead, blasting at the walls of the tunnel the spider has made her home. The webs are strong, super strong, to the point where a huge amount of effort is needed to destroy them. The rock that they rest on, however, is just plain old rock.

BOOM! BOOM!

Sections of tunnel wall collapse with a thunderous roar, dragging down the web attached to them and making a mess of what was only moments ago a spider paradise. That's right spider, all that you love shall be turned to ash! This is your punishment for the sin of too many legs! After a minute of blasting

away at her nest and blocking the exit, the spider mama has had enough. With a deafening screech, her bulbous form rockets out of the depths of her nest and into our waiting arms.

A deathly chill of poison spreads out from abdomen as she appears, tainting the air and causing the micro hairs on my antennae to shrivel the moment she draws close. I knew this monster would have some tricks up her sleeve, let's see if it's enough to save her!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 696: Seizing the levels

In truth, the establishment of the Core Shapers by the Eldest proved over time to be a master stroke. At first, there were many who decried the resources being sent to the caste instead of being used to nourish the next generation. Perhaps at first, this was indeed the case. As hardworking and talented as Elegant and Bella were in those early days, they lacked Skill levels, expertise and the raw statistical power required for complex core shaping. The Core Shapers were a sinkhole of precious cores, the most important commodity to the Colony, as it was needed to fuel evolutions and there was never anywhere close to enough to satisfy the Colony's needs. Some postulate that the lasting damage done by the Shapers draining cores at this time had a much larger carry on effect than may have been seen on the surface, but I personally doubt it.

The Council was strict with resource allocation then, just as they are now. Bella and Ellie were forced to work miracles with the pittance that they were given, raising their caste up with nothing more than scraps and fumes. Eventually, the Core Shapers rose to a place of prominence and their contributions could no longer be denied by even the most strident of critics. Able to take risks with their pets that ants could not, able to adapt to any environment or conditions by changing out their followers, able to range far on their own, relying on their defenders to protect them. The number of cores brought back to the Colony through out-of-territory resource collection missions is a staggering figure, one that most Colony members are totally unaware of. Lone Core Shapers braving the dangers of the Dungeon on their own or in small teams, venturing outside of Colony territory and battling hard to bring back precious materials.

It is a lesson in long term planning that only the Eldest had the reach to see and the wisdom to undertake. No step that they undertook in the formation of the early Colony failed to bear tremendous fruit down the line.

- *Excerpt from 'On the castes' by Historiant*

The spider was mad. Real mad. A natural response to having her secret nest invaded and subjected to repeated explosions, I have to admit. It's only going to get worse for you spider! I'm not leaving until I get that sweet, sweet experience! Gweheheheh.

According to our plan, Tiny takes his distance before blasting the spider with every ounce of lightning he has, a dissatisfied expression written plainly on his face. You want to punch the poisonous death spider that much? You idiot! Crinis extends her limbs from the shadows, making calculated strikes against the spider's legs as Invidia continues to detonate the surrounding rock, collapsing the web and diluting the home ground advantage of our adversary.

For my part, I bite, and blast with fire, and do whatever else I can to occupy the attention of this high tier beast. The spider's shrieks of rage rise to an all new crescendo and if I could stuff my antennae into my ears, I would. Instead, I bite all the harder.

DOOM CHOMP!

My muscles snap with immense power, sending the black jaws through the air so quickly I can no longer see them move. Despite her immense bulk, the spider moves with surprising grace and she manages to sway to the side, avoiding my bite by the slightest of margins before she bares her fangs at me, striking with blinding quickness. My antennae have already tingled a warning to me and my reflexes pay off, allowing me to skip backward, out of her range. Her bite Skill appears to be weaker than mine, the range and power are not nearly as devastating as my own Doom Chomp. Although... I can't rule out that it's all a bluff. This spider is sneaky and intelligent, I can't trust anything at face value. She probably wants me to think 'oh, this is a pathetic excuse of a bite, I can tank this no problem', then, when I stand in front of her, not dodging like an idiot, her true strike will reveal itself and stab through my heart in a second.

I'm on to you spider!

Maybe I'm overthinking, but somehow I don't think so. This spider is clearly capable of producing powerful poison and even an aura of death. I refuse to believe that her fangs are just for show. Remaining cautious, I snap and bite at the bulbous monster and keep her on the back foot as the rest of my team keep piling on the damage. Crinis uses her barbed limbs to twist and grab at every leg she can grasp, wrenching and biting into the armour covering the arachnid's limbs. Tiny unleashes wave after wave of electric energy on the spider, roasting the huge monster with blue lightning, his face growing more and more disgruntled each moment. Invidia keeps weaving his magical mastery, as usual, flawless execution on display as he controls his mana with perfection. Man, must be nice to be tier six, I can't wait!

Damn spider, gimme my experience!

The fight enters into a brief stalemate as the spider continues to bait and lunge whilst we maintain our vigil of wearing the creature down. Four against one, we don't need to be the ones to take any risks here. In the end, it's Tiny who breaks the deadlock by growing so impatient that he goes against the plan and decides to start swinging. I can see on his face the moment when he cracks, the irritation and anger piled up in him until he snaps and unleashes a deep bellow, cutting off the lightning and leaping forward with his fists bared.

Stupid ape! How many times are you going to try and get yourself killed?!

Tiny has gotten too comfortable getting into the thick of the fight since he got his armour, as he was no longer such a glass cannon that he'd get shattered from the slightest blow. That doesn't mean you're going to be safe you moron! Just as I suspected, the spider has clearly been hiding her strength. The moment Tiny came close enough to unleash his fist, she darts forward, her entire body suddenly blurred and hard to see, as if wreathed in illusion, as her fangs gleam with a deadly cold light. Not expecting this sudden burst of speed, Tiny's punch flies over the spider's head as her fangs reach toward him, poison dripping from the tips.

BOOM!

Invidia to the rescue. Gandalf and his luminous beard bless that little eyeball. Before the spider can close on the bat faced ape, two things happen. First, a multi-layered shield springs up between them which the monster crunches into, slowing her charge significantly as she breaks through, and second, an explosion detonates just underneath the spider, lifting her body into the air and robbing her of her grip on the floor.

Chance!

Even Tiny seizes upon this moment to deliver a devastating uppercut straight into the ominous fangs of the arachnid, shocking the monster. It's the prelude to the end as I Dash forward, my jaws at the ready.

CRUNCH!

The Doom Chomp strikes home and the giant spider simply cannot resist its penetrating power. After a few twitches, the fight is done.

[You have received experience.]

GWEHEHEHEH.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 697: 80 Achieved

The death of the spider, along with all the 'cleaning' my pets and I had done on our journey was enough to push me to level 76, tantalisingly close to the goal. I was keen to get back out and hunting for experience, but the remains of the big spider were right in front of us and I refuse to let Biomass go to waste! This is a tier six monster after all! The four of us dug in and in a short amount of time, all signs that the giant arachnid had been here at all were gone, vanished without a trace. I decide I can spare a little time and explore the rest of the tunnel in which we'd fought. There's a chance that hideous creature had some good stuff hidden in here, perhaps a Biomass store tucked away in a cupboard, or some cores that we could seize upon. Instead, I find something a little disheartening.

At the end of the tunnel, bundled tight in protective webs are eggs. Hundreds of eggs. After the Colony had swept through and depopulated the area, it was clear that the spider mama had been determined to re-establish the dominance of her family over the strata in which we found them. Although it brings me no joy, I can't allow these spiders to hatch and compete with the Colony, so I get Invidia to destroy them.

I copped out, alright?! I didn't want to go around destroying eggs!

With the deed done, I make sure Crinis grabs the core and we back out into the regular tunnels and start sweeping our way deeper. The longer the wave goes on, the faster the monsters will spawn, and already they're piling up quickly! From what I understand after talking to Granin and the others, the mana never returned to 'normal' levels after the first wave, which is something highly unusual. What's even more unusual is having waves this close together. According to the Shapers, this may point to something rather nasty occurring where we experience a series of waves, each longer and more potent than the last. If that's the case, the Colony has little choice but to level up as fast as possible if we're going to survive. We've grown to the point we can handle the second strata well enough, but what about

monsters from the third? Or fourth? If a wave is strong enough, and long enough, then they're going to get here eventually.

In fact, they're going to get here right about now.

After burning my way through a mass of tentacled shadow monsters, my pets and I find ourselves standing in a strangely clear section of tunnel that ought to be occupied by more fighting monsters. Instead we can see the signs of recent battle and the rather obvious remains of some creature messily eating what was left of their foes. Not a great sign. Following the tunnel around a corner we come face to face with the culprit, who strikes me rather immediately as not being a shadow creature.

The monster has four grotesquely muscled limbs that each end in a hardened, flesh coloured point. It's body is a bloated, constantly writhing mass of pink ... something whilst its head appears to be little but a mouth. As we watch, it finishes its battle against a large shadow centipede by leaping forward with incredible speed and landing on all fours, one of the forelimbs spearing the arthropod straight through. Not even waiting for the creature to pass away, the hideous monster shrieks a piercing, rage filled scream and starts tearing into the centipede with that enormous mouth, its spear-like limbs dug deep into the floor.

What the heck is that thing!?

[Invidia, any idea what the heck that is?]

[I do notsssss. I have never ssssseen it before.]

[Are you sure? It sure as heck doesn't look like something from this strata! It must be from the third! That's your home isn't it?]

[have no memoriesssss of that place... I have no memoriesssss before you reconstituted me.]

Huh. I guess I hadn't really thought about how Invidia had come to be in the place I fought him. I suppose it makes sense. He was captured by the golgari at the earliest stage of his growth and then reared to meet the exact specifications of the Shapers. If my memory serves me correctly, a demon isn't considered fully down until it reaches tier six, like the eyeball has. So this thing is tier five at most? Yikes. It's larger than me already and if I'm not mistaken it might be able to drive one of those damn pointy hands it has straight through me just like it did to that shadow creature. That's exactly the sort of weapon best suited to penetrating my diamond carapace!

It's like a sword versus armour back in the ancient days. Someone wearing plate armour or even chain mail is not going to get cut if you slash them with a blade, they just won't. If you had a big enough sword you might be able to bash your way into breaking some bones or getting a cut in, but generally speaking, the way you used a sword against armour was to stab. You puncture through the protective layer by putting the maximum amount of pressure on the smallest point, piercing like a needle. It's almost as if this damn demon was designed to perforate my precious diamond coating. I won't allow it!

[Take it down all! With extreme prejudice!]

Tiny didn't need to be told twice, eagerly leaping into the fight as Crinis slunk through the shadows. Not wanting to have the experience stolen from me, I instruct Invidia not to go on the offensive and instead focus on protection and healing duties. For my part, I spam gravity bolts at the monster in the hopes of

slowing it down as I gradually close the distance, keeping one wary eye on each of those four limbs. The monster screams that piercing, outraged shriek when it notices us engaging with it and turns to face us. It moves on all fours and every time it shifts its position those legs rise out of the stone floor of the tunnel and then pierce back through it like it was jelly. It makes moving a little awkward for the monster since it has to send almost half of a limb into the floor before it can find purchase, but it appears to just muscle through the problem and is remarkably fast as it repositions to meet our assault.

Four against one, big mouth! You haven't got hope!

Tiny dances forward, light on his feet with his hands raised ready to strike. Once he finds his range, he starts peppering the creature with blindingly fast lefts. The tight, compact punches are so unlike what I've gotten used to from the giant ape that I almost stumble in place. Has he ranked up his ape boxing skill? What is this textbook orthodox boxing style?

[That's it Tiny! Master the left, master the world!]

With each impact of the light exploding from Tiny's hands, the monster is knocked off balance and its anger builds to a terrifying crescendo. I don't think it's taking much damage from the blizzard of punches, but it's finding it hard to move out from under the pinning assault. Not one to back down from an opportunity, I pepper the beast with a few more gravity bolts as I close the distance with a flicker dash, my form blurring from the high speed manoeuvre. When I'm close enough to engage my Doom Chomp I notice that Crinis has also arrived, a forest of her dark limbs twisting out of the shadows on the floor to wrap themselves around the demon's legs and begin to saw away at the tightly packed muscle.

Assaulted from all sides in this way, there isn't much the poor demon can do to resist as we continuously chomp away at its health. That grotesque mouth snaps and bites at us constantly and I almost lose an antennae when it suddenly extends its jaw a metre out of its face. Whoever heard of an extendable jaw?! What the heck! Soon enough we finish it off and the experience is enough to push me up another level.

[You have slain level 31 Luvenis Avarita Daemon]

[You have gained experience.]

[You have reached level 77. One skill point awarded.]

Awww yeah! Three levels to go baby! We chomp away at the Biomass and I take a quick moment to study the profile, curious to learn more about the demons.

[luvenis Avarita Daemon: Young Avarice Demon. Perpetually hungry, always angry and spoiling for a fight. Beware the destructive power of the hardened flesh spears that tip its limbs].

An Avarice Demon huh? Nasty. Once we finish our meal, we scoop the core and continue to hunt, finding a few more of the Avarice demons prowling the tunnels, crushing everything that they find. After we clear out all that we can find over the next four hours, I finally reach my target.

[You have reached level 80. One skill point awarded.]

[Maximum level reached. You may now use the evolution menu.]

Whooh!

Chrysalis

Chapter 698: All you can eat

With the level milestone achieved, I take a quick break to celebrate and high five (with antennae) the team, before we begin the journey back to the nest. With the wave in full swing, we end up having to re-sweep most of the tunnels that had already been cleared as the empty space was either taken up by monsters who had spawned elsewhere, or freshly spawned monsters already jumping out of the walls again. It's hard to imagine, but I think I actually was starting to forget just how tiring the wave was. Just getting through these totally normal tunnels is an exhausting slog of fight after fight. The moment we deal with one monster, another one comes screaming out of a side tunnel.

It's almost as if the heightened mana levels send the monsters nuts as well as drives the spawn rate to ridiculous levels. It could just be the fact that there's no opportunity for monsters to carve out their own space and settle into some territory which causes them to be whipped up into a mindless rage.

Whatever the case, by the time we make it back to the nest the four of us, as well as my twenty unseen observers, are all thoroughly tired and done with the Dungeon for the time being. All in all it took a little over three days for us to travel and secure the levels I need to evolve. It's pretty obvious when we get back just how busy the Colony has been, the gates alone have seen a massive improvement. As we approach it's clear to see the fortifications positively bristling with ants ready to defend the entrance to the nest. If they managed to repair the acid pool, there shouldn't be too many issues holding off monsters, although if more powerful demons show up things might get hairy.

Before we enter the nest, I turn back to face the empty space above my head.

"Protectant, you need to get out here for a chat."

Silence.

"You could just talk to the air. I would rather not show myself," her scent creeps up to my antennae from nowhere.

"It's weird trying to hold a conversation with someone I can't see. Just get out here!"

With her usual sulky disposition, Protectant reveals herself and drops down from the roof to come into view.

"What can I do for you Eldest? I'd like to remind you that we are supposed to be a secret protection detail. You make our jobs harder when you constantly reveal our existence."

"Hey, I don't feel any real need to make your lives more difficult, but you need to adjust and have a little more flexibility than what the Council demanded of you. All of their nonsense went out the window the minute I worked out you exist."

I stare down at the much smaller elite ant but she makes a point of turning her head to face past me. Still don't want to give up on the mission eh? Sigh. What a pain.

"Alright, I'll get down to business then. I'm going to be spending the next few days finalising my evolution. It's going to take at least two days, maybe as much as a week. I was asleep for a long time during the last one, so who knows this time? Not me, that's for sure."

"And? We will watch over you, as always."

"Nope, not as always. I don't need protection when I'm evolving, I'll be in the middle of the nest for goodness sake! What could possibly happen to me in there? I'll have my pets watching over me just in case anything happens, having more security than that is nonsensical! You and your nineteen sisters are going to use this time to power up."

"What?!" she says, aghast. "You want us to abandon the mission, completely?! You won't keep any of us with you?"

They're dedicated, I'll give them that.

"No! After I evolve, I'm going to be tier six! We've had this conversation before, if you twenty can't keep up with me, then you can hardly protect me from something I can't defeat myself! I need every one of you to max out your cores and mutations and prepare for special evolutions. Every one of you needs to be tier five by the time this wave ends. If you want to make sure you're ready to protect me, then any tier five members can return to guard duty once I've finished evolving, but only up to a maximum of five. The rest of you stick together until every last one of you has achieved a perfect tier five, you hear me? This is an order!"

I really don't like to boss around the other ants, I'm just not comfortable with telling them what to do, but these twenty are only going to get themselves killed if they don't power up, and they won't take time to level up and mutate if I don't force them to. Even if they don't accept my logic, they can't refuse a direct command and Protectant positively wilts under my omni-directional glare.

"It will be done as you command, Eldest," she mutters before she vanishes once again.

With that unpleasant conversation dealt with, I head into the nest to find a small welcoming party waiting on the other side. Granin, Torrina and Corun are present, as well as Florence and Victor. I'm especially surprised to see the brood tender away from the young where she spends essentially all of her time when she isn't in a meeting.

["Hello all!"] I greet everyone with a combination of pheromones and mind magic, ["I didn't expect you to welcome me back at the gates. How are things in the nest?"]

"Everything is fine," Victor assures me quickly, "our plans are already well advanced and our defences here and in the satellite nests have been established."

Florence nods.

"That's right," she happily agrees, "and the hatchlings have been able to enter the Academy and begin their proper training. The school has already begun a large expansion project to accommodate the boosted numbers but we are confident we can complete the task."

Man, the brood tenders are by far the most soothing caste, always cheerful and upbeat. They work just as hard as everyone else, don't get me wrong, but they all seem to share the same calm and happy aura that Florence and Theresant have.

"Well that's great."

I switch back to speaking to everyone.

["So what brings you guys here?"]

Granin steps forward and looks at Victor for a moment. The ant nods and his voice rings out in my mind.

[The ants are getting ready to take you straight to the Biomass store they've setup for you. The council has been taking my advice about selecting a few members to nurture into high tier powerhouses to shore up your strength seriously and you are the first to get the fast road treatment. The Colony is going to provide all the Biomass and cores you need now that you've hit level eighty. I wanted to tag along with my triad so we could advise and discuss your options whilst you eat.]

["Makes sense I suppose. Lead the way."]

The nest was abuzz with activity when I left and it is completely the same now. As we move through the tunnels there are ants everywhere doing goodness knows how many different tasks. In every chamber and at regular intervals down the tunnels there are soldiers and scouts on guard, ready to leap upon every monster that spawns from the mana dense walls. Even the automated messages from the walls are on point.

"The wave is upon us!" I get blasted from a nearby unit and taken by surprise. "Work hard to secure the future of the Colony! Take regular torpor breaks!"

Nice to see that last bit hasn't been dropped. My siblings need to rest. Eventually we arrive in a smallish chamber and I immediately notice two things about it. First is the massive pile of Biomass that has Tiny instantly drooling. Second is the total lack of mana veins on the walls.

"You guys actually figured it out?!" I'm shocked and delighted.

"The mages figured it out and the inner areas of the nest have been converted. This place is close to the brood chambers and was prepared for your evolution. It wasn't much extra effort considering the work that was already being done."

Holy moly. They figured this out in the nick of time.

[All right then, Anthony,] Granin breaks in. [Get to eating, we have a lot to talk about.]

The three golgari grab a seat and make themselves comfortable whilst they watch me, somewhat impatiently as I hesitate. With a vast internal sigh, I move over to the Biomass and start to eat.

[All right,] I say, [what first?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 699: Ugh... planning

This is one huge pile of food... there's no way I can fit it all in! I kind of want to call my pets over and have them indulge as well, but I feel bad about it since the Colony has gathered all of this for me. I guess I'll dive in and if there's any left when I'm done I'll make sure the others get their fair share.

[Alright gang. Get some rest but keep an eye out. I'll make sure you get your food later, alright?]

[Yesssss,] Invidia says but I can see his eye blazing with green light as he eyes off my food.

[Yes, Master,] Crinis says, happy to attach herself once more to my carapace and allows her shape to blob.

[Hurrurr...] Tiny growls, the saliva pouring from his mouth as he openly gnashes his teeth as if eating already.

[That's gross, Tiny! Just move over there, alright? We ate a bunch of demons in the tunnels not that long ago. Mutate or something.]

With my badgering, he finally turns his back on the feast and sulks in the corner. Five minutes later, he's asleep.

[Alright then, Granin. What's the first thing you want to discuss?] I sigh as I start to tuck into the mountain of food.

[The Rescindic Principle, obviously.]

[What the heck was that?]

[The cash in,] Torrina breaks in, [it's going to be one of the most important decisions of this evolution.]

[If not *the* most important,] Granin grunts. [It's a good idea that we discuss your options since there are likely to be a few built into the choices you get when you evolve. If you have a clear picture of what you want, then it'll be easier to eliminate some options and focus in on the ones you prefer.]

[Alright then,] I grumble, [so what's the best choice? Is there a reason I shouldn't just reset everything and get a totally awesome new body? Just get it all over and done with?]

Granin's eyes go wide and I can tell he wants to facepalm but is resisting by sheer force of will. Corun doesn't quite succeed and smack himself in the face at my apparent idiocy.

[What? What's the problem? So my mutations get set back to zero, but if I sit here in the Colony and they pump me full of Biomass, I'll be able to get them all back to a respectable level in a couple of days! I'll be way more powerful, won't I?]

[Allow me,] Torrina says, mostly to the others and Granin nods before he waves her forward. [Anthony,] the talented young Shaper says, [there are a few reasons why you don't want to do that, although you *can*, the option *will* be available to you. One reason is that the further you go down the tiers of evolution, the better reset options you will find. I don't doubt that there will be many options available only to second and possibly a few from third strata monsters when you evolve this time. The *next* time you evolve, you will see a few that may normally be seen on the fourth strata. Constantly resetting your body parts is hugely inefficient and the more you evolve, the worse it gets. For tier six, it's going to cost you a hundred and forty Biomass to improve each body part from +25 to +30, but if you start your whole body from scratch, it's going to cost four hundred and fifty five per body part.]

I flinch. Ouch. That's a whole lotta Biomass. Four hundred and fifty five? *For each mutable part of my body?* That's... insane. I'd have to eat through half a strata to amass that. And at tier six, it'd have to be the third strata at that. Although the Colony could pour resources into me, the thought of that much Biomass going towards bumping up my mutations when it could instead be spent on the hatchlings, or other members of the Colony...

[Let's say you did that,] she continues, [and piled up the thousands of Biomass necessary to evolve into tier seven with all mutations at +30, what do you do then? Cash it all in again? Because there'll be better options available at tier seven, and at tier eight, and so on. A better, more efficient strategy is to cycle critical body parts and reset them every few evolutions, if you get that far. Think of everything you consider the most important parts of your body and divide them into three groups. Cash in one set now, one set next evolution and one set the evolution after that. Then repeat the process. At least, that's one way you could manage it.]

I keep eating as I think over what she said. The sheer Biomass cost of resetting my entire body has pretty much pushed me away from the idea. I mean, I *could* do it, but to get that much food into me would mean I'd probably be still trying to get those points even after I reached level one-sixty.

[You said there were other reasons?] I ask.

[The other main reason is what we would describe as Monster Dysmorphia. Which is to say that not all body parts resonate well with each other.]

[It's complicated as hell and has mainly to do with the higher concentrations of mana needed to fuel these more complex structures,] Granin breaks in, scratching his head. [In the first strata, a monster's body is more or less straightforward and the way mana is used to form them is simple and uncomplicated. When you get to the third and below, things start to get weird.]

[Weird?] I ask.

[Weird,] he nods. [Without going into too much detail, because I think you'd find it boring as heck, complex mana structures don't always resonate well with each other. In extreme cases a monster with two body parts that don't cooperate can literally be torn apart by the conflux of mana.]

[Holy Moly!]

[Which is why taking it slow and being a little careful is a sensible idea. The three of us can advise you about the combinations we know don't work, but the evolution System itself will confirm the safety of the reset, but only for *current* parts of your body.]

[So you mean, the System will check if the reset parts will work with my body now, but not the other parts that I reset?! What kind of hack job is that?!]

Granin just laughs.

[If you can talk to the System itself, then you can complain about it then. Otherwise, it's better to think about which parts of your body you want to cash in on this evolution. Keep eating, and we'll work it out.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 700: Final mutations pt 1

As I keep stuffing my face, Granin and I discuss my various body parts and what might qualify as a good option for a 'reset' in my next evolution. I remain a little cagey about a few things, such as the existence of the Vestibule, but I try to be as honest as I can during our discussions. A few things get ruled out pretty fast. No need to do anything fancy with the pheromone glands at this point, for example. I'm not

even sure what sort of new functionality I would gain for my pheromone gland. Demon pheromones? Pheromones made from flames? Geh.

In this way we eliminate candidates and before long we arrive at a shortlist. Carapace (obviously), Mandibles, Acid Gland, Legs, Regeneration Gland, Eyes. All the big ticket items. Would be great to do my brain, but it's not even mutable at this point, so it can't be reset. The carapace is there for very clear reasons. I was promised a reset of pure diamond and by Gandalf, I'm going to get it. If an option appears to reforge my mandibles into some awesome demon chitin or something of the sort then it would surely be a significant boost to the strength of my bite, which is always handy. My legs are an obvious weak point and although the diamond carapace does offer them some thin protection, changing their base properties to something more durable would help to keep me from being legless quite as often. The Regeneration Gland is a (literal) life saver and a significant upgrade there would be incredible. My vision speaks for itself. Better eyes means better life. Being able to see stuff coming is a useful trait to have, and with the reset, who knows what sort of crazy options I might see?

I personally feel like there's a strong chance that the Vestibule will come up as an option to be reset in the evolution choices, given that my current species includes the term 'juvenile'. It would make sense that the natural progression would be to a 'mature' Colony Paragon of some variety, and the key organ of this species is the Vestibule. Exactly what sort of option would be provided to reforge the Vestibule itself, I've no idea, but I think it will be powerful. There is the likelihood that such an upgrade would have adverse side effects, such as giving the Colony an even larger window to sneak their Will into my mind, but there's a good chance that the trade-off will be worth it.

[You might want to rethink your idea of picking carapace on this evolution,] Granin tells me.

[What!? My carapace is a life-saving, incredibly shiny part of my body! What could possibly be more important than that?]

Granin holds up both his hands.

[Whoa there. It's beautiful and amazing, we all get that, just take a second to hear me out.]

He waits until I settle back down and get back to shovelling Biomass into my face before he continues.

[I totally agree that your carapace is important, it's your foremost defensive tool after all, but there are two good reasons that you should hold off during this evolution. Firstly, the options you may get at this stage of evolution are inferior to what you'll get next time. In my opinion, your carapace and plating, upgraded to +30, are going to be sufficient to protect you through the third strata. If you evolve before you attack the fourth, you'll be able to upgrade to a much better base material.]

Something about the tone of his thought suggests he knows something he hasn't said.

[Do you happen to know what I might get if I hold off?] I ask pointedly.

He nods.

[There are a few different diamond flavoured materials you could see, but all of them are good. Living Diamond, Void Diamond, Liquid Diamond, just to name a few. All are seen mostly on the fifth strata but there's a chance they'll show up when you evolve to tier seven.]

Holy moly! All of those sound so awesome! Liquid Diamond?! How does that even work?!

[Alright,] I say, trying to hide my excitement and totally failing, [what about the other reason.]

[The other reason is the inner carapace plating. I actually love this mutation and I think it's done more than you realise to keep you alive to this point, but it can do more. The synergy between the carapace and plating isn't what it could be. I'm suggesting that when you reset your carapace, you reset the plating at the same time. This will let you pick options that harmonize, and allow you to reconfigure your mutations to line up perfectly, giving you the best possible outcome. Does that sound reasonable?]

He does make a good case.

[Alright, I'm convinced, and I'm also full. Step back a second for me, would you?]

The golgari Shaper hurriedly steps out of the way and I back up a bit, my gaster having swollen to absurd proportions after cramming both of my stomachs full of Biomass. Geh, I feel like I'm gonna chuck. Is this what a replete feels like? I used to wonder what it was like to be one of those ants who just hung around inside a nest and allowed other ants to fill up their social stomachs with food to the point they could move. Living food storage units...

Alright, with all of this Biomass, I should have enough to at least make a serious dent in the remainder of the evolutions I need to make. Let me check what's going on in here. According to the menu, I have seven body parts still in need of mutation, some of them more than one. Eyes, pheromone gland, Neural network, my three new acid additions and the Gravity mana gland. I think it makes sense to start with the eyes and take them from +20 to +25. Let's take a squiz at the options.

[Alright, I think I'm going to focus on my mutations for the moment. If possible can I get some privacy for this?]

It's hard to tell, but I think Granin quirks an eyebrow at my words.

[You sure you don't want any advice on this?]

[Ah, no. I think I can handle this bit. I'll be sure to speak to you again before I evolve, don't worry.]

He shrugs.

[Alright then, have it your way.]

He turns around and after a brief argument with Torrina in which she gives a massive case of stink eye, he leads the triad out of the chamber.

[Alright team, let's assume formation C!] I instruct my pets.

In an instant, Crinis has leapt into action, blanketing the chamber in complete darkness using her magic whilst also expanding her body to cover my frame in a sphere of inky black shadow flesh. Invidia uses his shield magic to erect opaque barriers before every door frame, blocking line of sight as well as physical entry into the chamber whilst Tiny takes up a vigilant guard position halfway between the entrances and my own body.

There, now there's no chance anyone will see me when I mutate. Now I can focus on the menus. Let's do this!