

# CHRYSALIS

## Chapter 2 Coming to grips



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The world before the System Descent is mystery to us now, any records of that time disappeared during the Rending or were lost in the centuries since. How did those people judge each other, unable to view themselves with perfect numerical accuracy as we so easily can today?

Was that society a more equitable place? When the worth of a human being can be weighed with such precision, strict roles and structures are easy to maintain, perhaps back then, when the qualities of each individual were more nebulous, it allowed greater freedom, greater choice in a persons' life? Many believe the System elevated us, empowered us to fight back against the great cataclysm, but many of the wise question this narrative, we know what we gained in the Descent, but we can no longer recall what we lost.

Exert from page 15 of "Ruminations on the pre-Descent society" by Illarion the heretic.

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Okay. So I have a skill point and a body point to spend? If this is a game-like situation then I would be able to open some sort of menu in order to spend my points and improve myself. How do I access this menu here in my tunnel though?

Erm. Level up!

No, that didn't work.

Escape! Escape key!

... Nothing.

I mean, worth a shot right?

Sigh.

Status!

Whoa!

Name: Anthony

Level: 1

Might:15

Toughness:12

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 30

MP: 0

Skills: Digging level 1; Acid Shot Level 1; Grip Level 3; Bite Level 2

Species: Hatchling Ant Worker (Formica)

Biomass: 1

Skill Points: 1

Wow, this is really interesting! My status huh?

The first time I saw these numbers I thought they looked high but perhaps they are actually really low? I can't imagine a hatchling ant worker has an impressive status in any way. And what are these skills?

Grip? Does this mean I can hold onto things well?

[Grip: Ability to hold onto surfaces and objects without letting go, for example, walking on walls]

The triumphant return of Lord Gandalf! My lord! My savior! Truly your beard is the most luxurious, your eyebrows the most bristly!

So I have some sort of help system built into the status to explain the skills when I think of them? This is amazing!

So my grip skill improves my ability to hold onto stuff with my six legs, including walking on walls and the ceiling? I totally forgot ants could do that. I'll have to try it as soon as I get out of here, why would you walk on the floor if you had the option to use the wall or roof?

What do my other skills do I wonder?

[Bite: Improves the ability to accurately and forcefully apply a bite using fangs, mandibles or teeth].

[Digging: Provides sub-conscious guidance when digging to increase efficiency and effectiveness].

[Acid shot: assists accuracy when attempting to attack from a distance using a natural acid from the body].

Okaaaaay.

There are many species of ant on earth that were able to shoot formic acid from their rear zone. I must belong to a monstrous species of formic acid spraying ant then. This could be very helpful, it gives me an option to attack without getting too close to my opponent, a course of action that I think would, at the moment, lead to my instantaneous destruction.

So I can bite, crawl on the roof, dig and shoot acid? That doesn't seem like a lot of tools to survive in an environment like this.

What I'm missing most is information. I have no real idea where I am, I have no idea what kind of creatures live in this place other than ants like me and Croca-beasts, I've no idea where the surface is or if the surface even exists in this world. I can't communicate with anything since I'm fairly sure I don't even have vocal chords, so even if I found someone prepared to talk to a monstrous ant, dialogue would be impossible.

This means if I want any information I'll have to get it myself. Out, in the tunnels.

Hmmm.

Scary! That's so scary, Gandalf!

You want me to go out there with who knows how many unknown horrors as a lone little ant monster?! Madness, madness I say!

Phew. Came down Anthony, stay cool. Panic will not help this situation in any way. Stay rational, stay cool, stay alive.

So, the final question is, what can I spend my points on and how?

[Would you like to spend your skill points?]

I would! I absolutely would oh wise and magnificent Gandalf, bringer of hope, bringer of light, may your beard be ever fluffy!

Just like with my status, a window opens within my mind.

Skill points: 1

Biomass: 1

[you can use skill points to purchase new skills or upgrade existing ones]



[Biomass can be spent to improve or modify aspects of your physical, monstrous form]

[Skills available to purchase:

Stealth: cost 1sp, improves your ability to hide and move unseen

Dash: cost 1sp, Increases speed over short distances but increases stamina drain

Slashing attack: cost 1 sp, more accurate and powerful slashing attacks

Chomp: cost 1sp, bites pierce more and are more difficult to shake off

Tunnel sense: cost 1 sp, improves sense of direction when underground]

[Body improvements available to purchase:

Exoskeleton +1: harden your exoskeleton to improve resistance to mundane damage

Mandibles +1: toughen mandibles and improve their ability to pierce

Legs +1: improve agility

Eyes +1: improve eyesight

Antennae +1: increase sensitivity to air current and scent

Acid gland +1: thicken the concentration of internal acid]

This is a lot of options! It's very difficult to choose! I have to think logically here.

Being able to run faster would help be escape my enemies, tunnel sense would make it harder for me to get lost whilst underground, chomp and acid would help me fight more effectively...

I must prioritise my survival. I can only improve and grow here if I can survive. Taking abilities to help me fight would only be suicide, if I attack a monster I can't defeat then it'll be game over straight away, improving my speed will be a dead end if I run into something that is faster than I am. Without information, how am I supposed to know what creatures I can fight and how fast any of them are?

As a newly hatched ant worker, I have to assume I am close to the weakest creature here!

Ok I have made my decision.

Select, Eyes +1 and Stealth!

[Would you like to purchase Eyes +1 and the skill: Stealth?]

Yes, please.

Immediately I can feel a maddening itch burst over my eyes, like a thousand mosquito bites erupting at once.

Gaaah!

Don't do this to me Gandalf! I can't even scratch this itch, I might poke my own eyes out!

Fortunately it doesn't last for long. After a minute I can feel the itch recede. It's hard to tell if my sight has improved here in my dark hiding place but I definitely feel that my eyes are a bit bigger than they were before.

So this is body modification? One minute and bam, you have improved from before? This almost seems like cheating. How many hours of effort would a human on Earth have to put in to improve themselves even a little bit? Even then, it isn't like they could do something like improve their eyesight.

I have to get more of these points! With enough body improvement points I may be able to overcome my natural weakness as a relatively harmless species and live with more security here in these tunnels!

Why would I select stealth and eyesight improvement you may ask?

Excellent question!

If we say that it's too dangerous to assume I can fight anything whilst we also assume it's too dangerous to assume I can run from everything then the only path through which survival can be assured is to not be seen in the first place. If you are seen, you are dead! I have placed my hope in stealth in order to live long enough to learn more about how to survive in this environment!

As for eyesight... You know, having really terrible eyesight sucks! Being used to human vision, it's super disorienting to switch these pathetic ant eyes! If

something isn't moving I can barely see it at all! Remember that ants are a communal species, thousands, tens of thousands of weak individuals combine to create something strong. Each individual ant has terrible senses but when acting together they are difficult to hide from.

I am alone, however! How am I supposed to survive when I could trip over a dragon which was having a nap?!

Ridiculous!

I will make improving my eyesight a priority and I won't stop until I can spot a cockroach twitch through five metres of solid stone.

Okay.

I've been hiding here for about half an hour now, with my points spent there is no longer any reason to delay.

Take courage Anthony, advance forth and explore!

Very carefully I scrape away at the dirt that I collapsed to enclose myself. Eventually I clear a narrow opening to the tunnel I was born in and poke my antennae through very slightly.

It feels clear, I can't smell anything and I don't detect any vibrations. Here goes nothing then. Moving quickly now I widen the opening and squeeze myself through. Turning on the spot I can't see anything in either direction, the tunnel stretches into darkness, curving slightly at the edge of my vision.

The path to my right is where I saw the beast eating my brethren, I'd rather not go that way since I know for certain there are threats in that direction, which leaves me with only one choice: go left.

Now to initiate the next phase of my plan!

Very slowly, since I still can't coordinate my six legs very well, I begin to walk towards the wall, then I begin to walk up the wall, then I step onto the roof until finally I am hanging upside down, gripping the roof fiercely with my tiny claws.

Success! By hugging the roof and moving upside down, combined with my new stealth skill I may have a greater chance of remaining undetected and passing unseen!

Muahahaha!

It could just be the blood rushing to my head but suddenly I feel more confident than I did before. Onward Anthony!

Despite my now burning spirit I continue to move cautiously down the tunnel. Using my antennae and front legs to look for solid footholds before gripping hard with my feet and moving forward. This takes a fair bit of concentration so progress is relatively slow but I'm okay with that, every moment that passes without being attacked feels like a small victory to me!

Now that I can see slightly better I can make a little more sense of some of the details I noticed before. All around the tunnel, twisting and branching like vines are glowing blue lines, like veins running through the rock. Some thicker, some thinner, some so thin they can almost not be seen, splitting and reforming endlessly in a random pattern.



Every few minutes a pulse flows through the lines, brightening the entire tunnel momentarily as it flashes through. It feels eerily as if the tunnel were alive, but for some reason, the light feels comforting to me, almost energizing.

Just another thing for me to learn in order to understand in this place.

Illuminated by the glow of the tunnel I can see my carapace has begun to harden and turn black. I recall from my ant keeping hobby that newborn ants have a soft white exoskeleton which gradually hardens and gains colour. Seems like I was huddling in the wall longer than I thought.

After an hour of cautious movement, I follow the tunnel around a curve and before me the tunnel walls fall away into a tremendous cavern.

This is huge! You could fit a few sports fields in here surely?

What's more, through my antennae I can sense fluttering vibrations and a myriad of scents assault me all at once.

Monsters!