

## Chrysalis 21

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#### Chapter 21: Eye for an eye

Phew, that was a furiously busy day. They have said in the past that great risk bring great reward and of course that is true.

It isn't like I didn't know that already, but I'd hoped to minimise as much risk as possible, circumstances have forced me into being aggressive and thankfully it has paid off!

I check my status to behold my incredible bounty!

Name: Anthony

Level: 4

Might: 15

Toughness: 12

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 28

MP: 0

Skills: Digging level 4; Acid Shot Level 5; Grip Level 4; Bite Level 4; Advanced Stealth Level 1; Tunnel Sense Level 3

Mutations: Eyes +3, Antennae +2, Acid +2

Species: Hatchling Ant Worker (Formica)

Skill points: 1

Biomass: 4

After consuming the Thorn Lizard and remains of my Coral Slug I had two Biomass, I held onto those and found another isolated Coral Slug to battle. By repeating my trick from earlier I was able to deal critical damage by landing a shot inside its mouth, however I wasn't quite as quick and didn't manage to avoid the acidic mucus the slug managed to project at me.

Having that sticky goop fired on me was bad enough but oh boy did it burn. I had a partially melted section of carapace on the back of my thorax and lost 10 HP before it stopped melting into me. Even just that small bit of acid was a third of my health! I'm severely tempted to upgrade my carapace in the hopes it provides better protection but there are so many priorities!

Thankfully after consuming the slug (which took a good while) I was able to regenerate eight HP and mostly restore myself to a picture of ant perfection.

After using so much acid in combat the rewards have finally shown in the form of Acid Shot level 5!  
Ready to be improved.

There are still a few basic skills I'd love to purchase but I cannot pass up the chance to improve my most effective offensive weapon!

[Acid Shot -> Improved Acid Shot. cost 1 sp: The upgraded Acid Shot skill, continues to improve accuracy with ranged acid attacks whilst giving additional improvement to attacks from increased range]

Buy!

Immediately the warm trickling sensation of skill learning melts through my brain. So nice!

With this additional range boost I'll be able to make more reliable shots from greater range, improving my safety as well as my ability to reliably output damage. It's a win-win!

If only I had access to more skill points! I'll have to level up again as quickly as possible, so many skills are converging to level four! I want to upgrade all of them if possible, leaving them behind and losing out on XP would be a crime...

Now for the tricky bit.

The Biomass.

I really want to upgrade my eyesight to +4. Having superior vision to other monsters has been critical so far in allowing me to locate isolated prey and prevent others from sneaking up on me, the advantage in senses must never be lost!

However if I want to battle and gain more Biomass then directly improving my combat effectiveness would mean improving my acid, this would then leave one extra Biomass that I could spend on legs, carapace or mandibles, all of which would increase my capabilities.

Let's work with a process of elimination, carapace upgrade would probably be pointless, +1 won't make much of a difference to anything, my defence is terrible, I'd rather work on speed first.

Which means that +1 legs is tempting, I'd become a bit more mobile which would help for scouting, retreating and fighting all together, cost effective indeed. +1 Mandibles doesn't tempt me much, larger, stronger mandibles would help me dig a bit and sharper mandibles would help fight a little but not much, the only creature I've managed to bite much at all is the Thorn Lizard and they seem quite rare.

This leaves me with really only two viable paths, +4 eyes or +3 acid with +1 legs. Do I continue to place my senses at the top of my priority list? My instinct is to be more defensive. Moving into another unknown environment down below I want to have every possible advantage I can get. That means being able to see the enemy before they see me.

It's settled then.

[Would you like to purchase +4 eyes? This will cost 4 Biomass]

Oh boy....

Yes.

hhhhuuuuuuuuUUUUUUAAAARRRRRRRRGHhhh!!!!

I can't describe the itch that overcame me in that moment. I could feel my eyeballs growing, stretching and my carapace shifting to make way for them.

Please Gandalf... this torture.... Make it stop!

I hate mutating. Mutations are amazing! But mutating itself....

Eventually it settles down and my vision is once again improved.

I can tell that now since my eyes bulge further out from my head, my field of vision has improved quite a bit, I can even see my own gaster wagging behind me when I'm facing straight ahead! Impressive.

My vision still isn't what I'd like it to be but it certainly is massively improved from when I was first reborn here in Pangera.

Sniff.... You've come a long way Anthony, and soon, soon you will be home with the colony.

No time to hang about being misty eyed! I have to continue to harvest XP and Biomass as fast as I can! Those humans will come roaring down into this cavern blasting everything they see before long.

Back into the main tunnel I go, scurrying onto the roof and once more going on the hunt. If possible I want to take advantage of the bonus Biomass for new targets... Since I'm fully rested, now it may be time to try and take on one of the blade tailed rats...

The trick is finding one of them alone. They tend to move around in groups of two or three and they certainly can move fast. There is also the possibility that their thick fur, which covers most of their body will be able to nullify my acid to some extent. The only exposed targets I could aim for are their faces, feet and tails.

I'll just have to wait and see if an opportunity presents itself.

Ooo what's this? I'm sensing vibrations from a disturbance up ahead, must be another fight between monsters. I'll make my way over there. Considering how often the monsters are battling each other in these tunnels it's kind of surprising that there are any left... where are all the replacements coming from?

Are they just popping out of the walls? Are they born, as I presume I was? I wouldn't put anything past this place, it certainly baffles me with its mysteries constantly.

For example, isn't it brighter in here yet again?

The light from the tunnel walls seems to become more intense with every passing hour. I'm sure of it now. The light is definitely growing stronger. Why? I haven't a single clue.

Since I don't know, I just have to keep moving forward.

Creeping up I can see that once again a group of four Claw Centipedes has gone into battle, this time against three of the wolf like creatures with the long, almost draconic tails.

It's a fierce one this... the centipedes are outnumbering their opponents (as usual), they really are the schoolyard bully of this place, but the hounds are flashing their huge fangs and swinging their powerful tails to fend off the assault.

Time for a young ant to make an intervention...

First I make sure to stealthily move into a good position, slightly further away that I would have previously been. I want to take advantage of my new skills to stay as safe as possible.

With careful aim I wait for the perfect moment. The melee ebbs and flows, with moments of sharp speed interspersed with lulls of posing and threatening. The moment the two sides break apart a little I take my shot.

Bam!

A lightning fast stream of acid erupts from my rear field, splashing over a Claw Centipede who had just raised its claws to clack threateningly at its foes. The creature reacts immediately by retreating and flipping its many legged body over, trying to throw off the horribly burning liquid.

The hounds take advantage of the break in the enemy formation, pouncing forward to attack. Whilst two of the hounds keep three of the healthy bugs occupied the remaining hound charges at the Centipede to the left of the wounded one, cutting it off from its allies and shaping up for the 1v1.

This should be interesting, my money is on the hound.

The centipede seems to agree, backing itself away whilst rearing up its back section, threatening to stab forward if the hound approaches. This hound gives absolutely no fricks to the threat and leaps forward immediately!

Thunk!

Pressure by the aggression the centipede immediately lunges forward with lightning speed, striking like scorpion, but showing incredible agility the hound is able to twist itself the side, causing the venom spike at the end of the tail to strike stone.

Not willing to wait for the opponent to recover the hound immediately positions to the side, not lunging in to bite, putting itself at risk of the claws, but swings its thick, muscular tail with tremendous force!

Crack!

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## **Chapter 22: Once more into the breach**

The centipede is crushed into the stone floor of the cavern. Deep cracks appear on its carapace after the kinetic force rips through its body, shattering the hard outer skeleton.

I'm stunned.

That was one fearsome strike! If I was hit by that I'd be squashed into a pancake, no doubt about it.

Scary!

The centipede doesn't seem to have fared much better, it twitches on the ground, barely moving. The hound steps forward slowly, a murderous glint its eye. Almost as if its thinking 'take that you bug, how dare you threaten my greatness!'.

Before it can deal the finishing blow however something unexpected happens.

Sizzling acid streaks through the air and sprays down the hounds' left flank, immediately burning into its flesh.

Oops.

Heheheheh.

Sorry to interrupt your proud moment there hound, but I don't want this battle to end just yet.

Of course, one blast of acid isn't enough to finish off a hound, but the same is also true for the centipedes.

The Claw Centipede I hit earlier has now recovered enough to once more join the fray. It advances cautiously to reinforce its three unharmed brethren against the two healthy hounds.

This is the critical moment. With one centipede essentially down for the count but still living and one wounded hound the battle has become very even.

The centipedes seem a little unwilling to proceed with the fight now. They continue to posture aggressively but don't actively make any moves to attack against their larger opponents.

The hound I injured is mildly wounded by my acid but not badly enough to keep it out of the fight, disregarding the source of the acid it returns to the aid of its allies in fending off the swarming assailants.

At that moment.

Splash!

Another fierce arc of acid is launched through the air onto the wounded hound! It howls miserably as the burning liquid strikes it once again, rolling and scrabbling at the rocks as it desperately tries to free itself of the liquid.

A chance! At this moment the three living centipedes rush forward, hundreds of tiny legs skittering so fast the creatures almost seem to flow over the ground. Distracted momentarily, the hounds respond a beat too late and one is quickly seized in the claws of an advancing centipede.

Snarling furiously the hound tosses its head trying to dislodge the attacker before swinging its vicious tail around to slam the centipede away. Too late however as another centipede has taken advantage of the moment and struck down with its poison stinger!

In the meantime I have taken the chance to manoeuvre off the roof and down the wall, cautiously approaching the outskirts of the fight.

The poisoned hound howls in anger and throws itself at its attacker, striking with fierce claws and fangs. When another centipede approaches from the side it is brutally slapped away with a swipe of the tail.

With one hound possibly fatally poisoned and other badly burned, the hounds are very much the worse for wear. Of the four centipedes, one is hanging on by a thread and the other three are all injured to some extent.

There isn't any pause in the carnage however as the poisoned hound, seeming to sense its demise, pushes further into the fray. Emboldened, the remaining hounds also press forward on the attack.

[You have slain Level 3 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

After a few quick chomps with the mandibles the almost dead centipede is finished and I quietly drag the carcass away to a secluded fold in the rock nearby.

The battle is really reaching a climax now on the other side.

The three remaining centipedes are giving their all to survive, lashing forward with their poisoned spikes over and over again, trying to ward off the desperate hounds.

The poisoned hound is labouring hard now, barely able to put up any kind of fight as the poison takes its toll.

The final hound, suffering from claw marks and several bites, stumbles at a critical moment allowing a centipede to catch it in the shoulder with the spike, sealing its fate.

The enraged victim launches itself into the centipedes, suffering bites and claw attacks as it does so. Enduring the pain, the hound pours all of its momentum into a massive swipe of the tail, catching two centipedes and sending them slamming into the rock walls.

The stunned creatures can barely move after the incredible force has shattered its legs and deeply cracked the carapace in many places.

All that is left now is one wounded centipede and the burned hound, both are severely injured, barely able to put up a fight. Slowly they circle each other, watching and waiting for an opening.

The hound is limping, its forelegs are badly bitten by this point, the centipede isn't much better, several legs are crushed, hindering its mobility.

Almost as if a hidden start gun has gone off they simultaneously launch at each other! The two monsters quickly converge and bite forward, latching onto each other. The centipede has gripped the hound by the throat, the hound is crunching down just behind the centipedes head!

Who will hold on?!

It turns out neither, as both creatures gradually collapse, completely spent, unable to continue the fight.

Emerging from the shadows I behold a scene of ridiculous carnage. The three hounds have collapsed, exhausted and on the verge of death. Their opponents, the centipedes, are similarly disabled, unable to defend themselves.

...

Hmm...he.....hee.....hu hu ha HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

FOOLS! You were dancing in the palm of my hand all along!

Even if I beheld the entire process with my own eyes, I still cannot quite comprehend exactly how well this has all worked out for me.

All of these creatures are on a sliver of health. Effectively 1 HP. This is an unprecedented harvest of XP and Biomass!

It's a little interesting how rapidly a person's attitudes can change isn't it? Not too long ago I was an average person. I lived in a normal society and wouldn't consider harming another person, I had never been in a proper fight during my past life.

And yet, after being here for a few days I have already become accustomed to battles just like this. Being forced to fight and take the life of your own food quickly changes one's attitude on the sanctity of life...

Perhaps in my mind I justify it by saying they aren't people but monsters, but, isn't that what I am myself?

Time to worry about that later! I need to secure the last hit on these hounds before the poison steals my XP!

Moving efficiently I move from hound to hound, using my mandibles to apply bite attacks until the familiar and soothing refrain of Gandalf rings in my mind.

[You have defeated level 4 Lupus Draco Cub]

[You have defeated level 3 Lupus Draco Cub]

[You have defeated level 4 Lupus Draco Cub]

[You have gained XP]

And then I move onto the remaining centipedes. Sadly one of them was unable to hold on to life and has already succumbed to its wounds, but the others are still kicking.

[You have defeated level 2 Claw Centipede]

[You have defeated level 3 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

[You have reached Level 5, one skill point awarded]

[You have reached the level cap, evolution menu available]

wwwwwwWWWWHHAAAAAAT?!

Gandalf?! Is it true!? I can evolve?!

No Anthony! Don't get distracted, no matter how much you love the idea of evolving you have to secure this Biomass before anything happens. With all of these bodies just lying about, any creature is going to want a slice of the pie!

At this moment my antennae detect a trembling vibration shuddering through the air.

I immediately become still.

There! Again! Faintly, a thudding impact is carrying through the tunnel, originating further up, towards to the first cavern.

Wait.

No. NO. Not now, not like this.

It can't be now!

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### **Chapter 23: The invasion**

As quickly as possible I start chowing down, trying to get as much Biomass as I can.

[You have consumed a new source of biomass: Lupus Draco Cub, you are awarded one Biomass]

[Basic profile of the Lupus Draco Cub unlocked]

[Lupus Draco Cub: Wolf Dragon Cub, The young form of the fearsome Wolf Dragon, they have a high resistance to flame]

Good to know, looks like these creatures are only the young? Crazy.

Must keep eating!

The sounds are slowly growing louder now, I still can't see anything but I have a terrible feeling I know exactly what is coming my way.

If I only I had an extra hour, even ten minutes would be enough! Don't think, just eat!

[You have gained one Biomass]

Must.

Keep.

Eating.

[You have gained one Biomass]

Dammit, I'm starting to feel too full to eat. I've consumed an entire wolf dragon at this point, my stomach is full to bursting!

Wait! I just remembered a disgusting thought... Something I recall learning due to my hobby of keeping a pet ant colony at home.

Ants have two stomachs.... Scouts and workers don't always carry prey back to the nest. Sometimes they eat and fill up their 'social stomach' and then walk back to the nest and regurgitate the food for other ants to eat.



If I recall correctly, honeypot ants take this to a massive extreme, where some worker ants will turn themselves into living storage containers, their gaster swelling to ridiculous sizes as they stay in the nest and give food to their hungry colony.

So if my personal stomach is full....

Time to fill the social stomach!

Each more!

I move over to the centipedes and start wolfing down food as quick as I can.

The rapidly growing sounds are like a whip on my back, urging me to work faster. I can make out the sounds better, the clash of swords and the roar of flame are growing closer and closer.

I need one more Biomass and then I'm outta here!

Cmon'.

CMON.

[You have gained one Biomass]

Finally! Thank you Gandalf!

Gogogogogo. I need to get back to my nest and down the shaft and quickly as possible!

I try to burst out with all my speed, only to find my back section is too heavy, weighed down by all of the Biomass, it's dragging on the floor!

Noooooooo. Don't do this to me!

Scrambling as fast as my little legs will carry me I crawl and drag myself towards the wall and start climbing up.

I'm so damn heavy!

Climb, climb climb you fat ant!

Slowly I pull myself up the wall and start moving towards the side tunnel where my nest is. I can hear the roar of monsters as they throw themselves into battle and the shouts and clash of arms of human soldiers as they rip the creatures apart.

I can see my nest now, only ten more metres!

I can see something else too! Soldiers are starting to come into view!

Advanced Stealth! I need you now!

Haul Anthony, haul yourself up this damn wall!

More and more soldiers are appearing up the tunnel, advancing in organised groups they are blasting every monster they see apart with coordinated fire, moving to side tunnels launching magic and arrows down them before sending pairs of soldiers in to make sure they leave nothing behind.

This is an extermination!

Finally I reach my tunnel and rush as quickly as I can up to my dirt wall. I pass through the gap I left at the ceiling, but just before I'm through I realise I've become stuck!

My back section is too fat to fit through the gap! Dammit! I've got too much junk in the trunk to squeeze through?!

Pull man! I mean, pull ant!

Using all six of my legs I grip the wall as hard as I can and drag my body through the small gap.

With an audible 'pop' I get through, the sudden momentum causing me to lose my grip and fall off the ceiling, landing flat on my face.

I've got a tiny bit of breathing space now, I'll spend my Biomass quickly and then haul down the shaft!

[Do you want to purchase Acid +3 and Legs +1? This will cost four Biomass].

Go for it!

The horrible feeling of mutation immediately erupts, especially in my acid gland but I don't wait for it to subside, the fear staying here and getting caught propel me to keep moving.

Straight away I crawl to the shaft and start making my way down, my increased weight slowing my descent more than I'd like. I'm having to carefully shift my bulky backside, making sure I'm properly supported before each step so I don't immediately fall to my death!

Hopefully the +1 Legs will be able to sustain my bulk a little better and allow a safe journey.

When I'm almost halfway down a muffled boom echoes down the shaft above, followed by dirt cascading down over me.

It takes me a moment to realise what has just occurred.

They've detonated my dirt wall! This means they're coming past my nest and will find the shaft shortly!

I redouble my efforts, accelerating down the wall at a dangerous pace, my claws begin to slip and slide as I risk unsafe footholds on the wall to expedite my passage.

Eventually I'm able to reach the bottom of the shaft without anything drastic happening, but I don't feel safe yet.

I'm worried they want to explore this place and make climb down, which means I can't remain here for too long. I leave the bottom of the shaft and make my way into the narrow tunnel that connects to the vast underground tunnel.

Before I exit this place I have one important task, I can only hope that I have enough time.

[Would you like to use the Evolution menu?]

Yes I would!

[Congratulations on reaching the maximum level for your current species. Evolution will allow you change your form and increase your stats as a monster.

Warning: evolving will make securing XP and Biomass more difficult as fewer rewards are given for preying on creatures less evolved than yourself.

Your evolution options are as follows:

- Mature Worker Ant (formica)
- Condense Monster Core]

Oh ho! Two different options? I don't have a lot of time here Gandalf, hit me with the details!

[Mature Worker Ant - advance from a Hatchling of your kind into an adult. Base stats will significantly increase, new skills will be unlocked.

[Condense mana absorbed by the individual into a monster core. The core allows monsters to store and utilise MP, can also be utilised to empower custom evolution. 100% of mana required has been obtained]

Ooooookay. So the option that will provide a significant increase in stats for me right now is to advance into a mature worker of this wood ant species.

I'll put that aside for now. The second option is very intriguing. So monster cores are a real thing in this world after all! What's more it allows me to store MP! Presumably storing MP will put my tiny feet on the path to being able to use magic! This is exciting!

Mind you, according Gandalf I've stored 100% of the mana required? When the heck did I do that? Perhaps I've been absorbing some just by walking around, or maybe the water in the rock pool? Was that shocking taste my body drawing in mana?

Advancing to a mature worker ant will give me the greatest boost to my survival chances immediately, gaining stats and perhaps some useful skills. Condensing the core and opening the door to being able to use magic is incredibly tempting however! It won't boost my survival chances in the short term but in the long term it may pay off huge dividends!

This could be a time to take a risk to seize the late game!

[Would you like to spend this evolution to Condense your Monster Core?]

... Yes!

My vision immediately goes black.

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### **Chapter 24: Core of the problem**

I don't know how much time had passed before I regain consciousness. The light slowly returns to my eyes and sensation to my limbs.

Deep inside my thorax (the middle bit) a hot, boiling feeling is slowly fading away, drawing in a dense ball of heat. Probably my new core.

Groggily I get my legs underneath me and start slowly moving through the tunnel again. No matter how weak I feel, I cannot stay here to rest, pursuers could be dropping down the shaft to investigate even now. I have to move.

Gradually my muddled thoughts begin to straighten themselves and my coordination slowly returns. As I navigate my way across the rocky tunnel I check my status.

Name: Anthony

Level: 1 (core)

Might: 15

Toughness: 12

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 30

MP: 10

Skills: Digging level 4; Improved Acid Shot Level 1; Grip Level 4; Bite Level 4; Advanced Stealth Level 1; Tunnel Sense Level 3;

Mutations: Eyes +4, Antennae +2, Acid +3, Legs +1

Species: Hatchling Ant Worker (Formica)

Skill points: 1

Biomass: 0

Holy mother of downgrades? Why am I level one Gandalf?! My hard work, my accumulated experience, all the ridiculous good luck I've had? It hasn't been easy to survive to this point you know?! Where is my justice?!

Bitter feelings are rising in my heart as I survey my new status, but when I notice that my MP has gone from zero to ten it raises my spirit a bit. Looks like my hunch was correct and the monster core is the vital ingredient to mastering magic for me and my fellow creatures down here. This could explain why so many monsters were drawn to the pool in the first cavern I was in. By drinking the water which was somehow suffused with mana they were able to absorb it and hasten the formation of their core.

When I think about though, I've sacrificed a significant upgrade to my stats in order to condense the core which has given me, in effect, only ten MP that I can't use. Was this really the correct decision?

I have to advance now into what is likely more dangerous territory than I have experienced already, those increased stats would have been super handy!

I can't help but worry I've made the wrong choice, the prospect of being able to use mana was just too tantalising in my eyes.

Returning to level one may not be that bad, doesn't it mean that I'll be able to level back up to five and evolve again? Which also means I'll be able to gain more of the precious skill points as I do so?

Perhaps this is actually better. I'll have a second opportunity to amass skill points as an unevolved creature which could allow me to gain more levels and skill points at a faster pace than evolving would have.

I have one skill point available right now but I don't want to spend it yet. I have several skills at level four which will need to be advanced once they reach level five. I won't even look at the skills menu in case mana shaping or spell chanting has appeared in the list. I may not be able to resist the temptation! Be disciplined Anthony! Don't let your precious skills waste away!

Gradually I've regained full control of my body and shaken the dust off my mind as I reach the end of the tunnel. Beyond here lies the vast underground space I glimpsed earlier.

Taking a deep breath I walk out into the open air once again.

Really this place is so huge.

The roof is sixty, maybe even seventy meters high, so high I absolutely refuse to climb on it. One slip and I would certainly plummet to my own death. To my left and right the walls curve away into the distance to a place I cannot see, my eyesight isn't good enough, even at plus four, to be able to see the ends of the walls.

This is something I've been thinking more on. As an insect, I don't have regular eyes like a human, but compound eyes. This means a few things, firstly, my eyes don't need to be wet, so I don't have to blink, more to the point I can't since I have no eyelids. Secondly, my eyes don't have one point of focus, unlike a human who can see the one place they are directly looking at in great detail, my eyes are able to look in many directions at once, but the detail is poor.

This explains why I've been so frustrated by the blurry nature of my vision, especially over a distance. It probably also explains why I've been able to avoid having anything sneak up on me, since I'm essentially watching every direction at once.

I still believe upgrading my eyes has been the correct choice for me and they'll probably be the first body part I mutate to +5. Since skills can evolve at +5 I'm very excited to see what will happen when a mutation reaches that level. Will I be able to advance my mutations into some crazy new thing?

Any clues Gandalf?

...

Ah well. I shouldn't be surprised at this state. For all his immense wisdom the grey one has been very taciturn, or perhaps he's just shy?

A little extra advice would surely be helpful though...

Enough stalling. There isn't anything left for me to do but move into this new territory.

Moving slowly I more down the slope, leaving the shelter of the small tunnel and exposing myself to the open air of this incredible cavern.

Cavern isn't even a large enough word to describe this place, it feels like a fully enclosed world, like a biome or terrarium.

As I descend, picking my way through the rocks I strain my eyes to see as far into the distance as I can. Strange twisted trees, huge oversized mushrooms and a carpet of plant-life underneath face me everywhere I turn. The whole ... forest ... pulses with the now familiar ambient blue glow.

These scene is just so alien, for the first time I really think to myself, this is absolutely another world.

I nervously poke the grasses and plants with my front claw, snipping at them to see if they react. When they don't respond I move toward a giant mushroom. These things are easily twice the height of an adult person.

After a moments' hesitation I use my claw to prod it. After there isn't any reaction tentatively give it a chomp with my mandibles. What is this thing?

The stalk of the mushroom is soft and fibrous, giving way after my bite. The second my mandibles tear a tiny gap they immediately flare with pain and I pull back swiftly. What the hell was that?!

Where I've torn the mushroom a purple sap is slowly starting to ooze out. Is this some sort of acidic sap? Checking my HP it appears as if I've taken minor damage. Phew. Although it may seem silly to lose HP chomping on a mushroom, every piece of information I can gain about this place makes me feel a little more comfortable.

So the mushrooms have acid ooze inside them, do not bite.

Nice.

Feeling strangely encouraged by having my face burnt by a mushroom I begin following the wall around to the right, scouting the edge of the forest. I need to move away from the shaft in case the humans use it but I want to stay close to the rocky wall so I can dig myself a hiding place further around.

I won't feel truly comfortable unless there is a place I retreat to if I get into trouble.

After ten minutes or so I'm beginning to wonder just how many creatures there are down here, since I haven't seen a single one!

Is everyone asleep?

CRAW!

Well there is my answer!

A piercing cry blasts out and echoes off the walls. Like lightning I stuff myself between some rocks, trying to get as much cover as possible. A few seconds later I get sight of the source of that terrifying cry.

First one, then another and another blurry shape peels off the ceiling and unfolds massive wings before plunging down in the forest. In the distance I can see each of the creatures has a wide fanged maw and

reaching, grasping claws on the ends of their feet. Seven of them in total have dropped down like comets and from all the scuffling and roaring they are clearly battling against something down there.

After a few minutes the flying monsters can be seen lifting up above the trees once more, but they seem to be struggling with something. Moments later their still struggling prey becomes visible as the flying monsters drag it into the air.

It's a massive centipede, easily twice the size of those I saw in the tunnels above. Its body is covered in savage claw wounds and it can do little more than thrash weakly as the triumphant hunters ascend with it in their claws, back to their hidden nest in the ceiling above.

SCARY!!

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#### **Chapter 25: New frontiers**

I'm willing to admit it. I was a little overconfident. With my skills improving and my core being condensed, I was feeling quite strong. Not that I could devour all in my path but that perhaps I could hold my own as I explored.

NOPE.

Did you see that centipede? It was massive! Clearly the evolved form of the creatures I'd seen above. How is that fair Gandalf?! If I'd evolved into a mature ant worker would I be three metres long and two feet thick?!

How much Biomass is that thing worth?!

Not to mention, as soon as it exposed itself death immediately rained down from above!

I shudder to think what would have happened if I'd been crawling about on the ceiling or gone further into the forest.

I steel my resolve. I knew the creatures would be stronger when I came down here. I also understood the risk I took when I chose to spend my evolution on my monster core instead of boosting my stats immediately.

I refuse to believe there isn't something in this enormous underground world that I cannot hunt!

Advance Anthony!

Relying on my stealth and my superior senses I will survive!

Refusing to be cowed by the sudden display of lethality from this place I resolutely advance in to the forest.

Stealthily, of course.

As I move properly amongst the foliage, with these bizarre trees and fungi above my head I could almost believe I was on the surface, since the rock ceiling is too obscured for me to see from here.

The strange foliage of the trees is interesting. I presume the trees don't need sunlight to survive, since there isn't any down here, so why do they have these strange fleshy leaves? Rather than having many individual leaves the trees have huge, long ones that hang down, some of them almost to the ground. Most of the leaves are a deep shade of purple but others tinge into red, creating a remarkable display of colour everywhere I look.

Presumably these trees are gaining energy from the veins of light, I'm guessing now these are mana veins, that twist everywhere through the floor, branching into their endless patterns.

Until I'm 100% certain that these trees aren't venus ant traps I'm going to carefully avoid touching those leaves. It wouldn't shock me to see that even the plants down here can be deadly.

It isn't long before I begin to detect vibrations with my antennae. Crouching low, trying to take advantage of the vegetation that covers the floor I move carefully in the direction of the disturbance.

I can't chicken out, there is only one way to gather information and progress in this place and that is to move forward and seize my chances.

Like a stalking panther I keep my posture low and move in a wide arc towards the noise, my eyes watching every possible angle simultaneously. My antennae poke forward, sticking out of the brush ever so slightly, feeling for vibrations.

[Advanced stealth has reached level 2]

Fantastic! An advanced skill level up. It has taken a very long time! I assume that advanced skills require far more use before they level up than their basic counterparts. Thankfully this skill, which I rely on the most, has levelled at the perfect time! With renewed enthusiasm I continue to stalk the vibrations I sense.

I find what I'm looking for in the shape of a hulking Croca-beast! Why the heck are there so many of these monstrosities around here?! Thanks to pristine white robes of ascended Gandalf that it wasn't an evolved version!

I have to admit, I'm still terrified of these things.

This was the first monster I'd ever seen, and it was eating an ant alive when I saw it!

If ants could have nightmares I'd still be having them over that.

This particular Croca appears to be wounded. Across one of its arms there is a wide slash, dripping with green blood as well as a few other slashes. It appears this Croca-beast has been involved with some heavy fighting, the beast is breathing heavily through its massive maw of curved fangs.

Don't focus on the teeth Anthony!

This is a golden opportunity, a heaven sent chance. I'll never get a better chance than this to take on one of these horrible crocodiles one on one. This is a chance to finally put my fear of these creatures behind me as seize the bonus Biomass I wasn't able to get before.

Let's do this!



Before I can talk myself out of it I turn and blast the Croca-beast with acid. Come at me you giant croc!

My plus three acid fires out at lightning speed, splashing down the wounded monsters side. I was careful to aim the acid so that it would impact onto the wounds, hopefully causing more damage by seeping inside.

The furious beast roars with pain, its massive jaws wide open as it turns to face me. As it does so, POW.

Another acid shot directly into the creatures face! About half the acid goes directly into the creatures mouth, the other half blasts past the target, but I'm satisfied with the shot. How do you like that?!

If these monsters are going to keep letting fire acid directly inside their mouths like this I'm going to have to patent this move. The dreaded 'Anthony mouth shot!'.... Sounds wrong somehow...

The Croc thrashes its head wildly as its throat burns with terrible pain. Combined with the terrible wounds it had already sustained this is clearly a bad day for this particular beast. Having decided on the origin of the ranged assault the Croc charges forward with its massive bulk, green scales glittering in the light.

Holy moly!

Quick as a flash I leap to one side, all six legs skittering as fast as they can do dodge past the brutal dash. The Croc has both hands out, long claws gleaming with cold light. As I attempt to dodge past it takes a massive swipe at me!

Slash!

As I leap to one side I can feel the air brush past me from the fearsome strike. If that had connected it may just be lights out! I'm afraid this Croc has more life in it than I had assumed!

Focus Anthony, there isn't a way to back down now.

As the creature corrects its balance and turns to face me once more I turn my head slightly to get good vision behind me and suddenly brace my legs.

Fire!

The creature stuns me by predicting the move, lunging to the left as the jet of hissing liquid flies through the air. Smarter than you look eh Croc? Had it been uninjured it may have escaped completely but with its reactions dulled and its body not moving the way it wants, it isn't able to fully escape the spray.

The bubbling acid is now eating away at the monsters chest as well, in addition to the damage being done by the earlier two shots I refuse to believe the Croc has much more in the tank.

I keep moving, if I stand still the far larger monster will have a much easier time closing in on me for the kill. In a straight up fight it's obvious who would have the advantage!

The Croc is labouring hard but murderous intent is oozing from every pore as it glares at me, circling it from range.

Such a fearsome monster this Croc! Although it may be shorter than an average person, it is clearly heavier, its powerful frame stocked with muscle. Not to mention, to someone like me, who is probably only as tall as a person's knee, this creature towers over me. The intimidation factor is real!

As if it knows that the clock is ticking against it the beast growls fiercely and charges, aiming to cut me off as I keep circling around it.

I have to dodge! But left or right?

All six legs kick into overdrive, moving so fast they almost begin to blur. I continuously feint this way and that, trying to throw off the creature as it rapidly advances, building a fearsome momentum as it does so.

As it draws closer the Croc rears back with its right arm, claws fully extended, if I take this head on I'm dead! Where do I go? My heart is pounding in my chest until I think it might explode.

But somehow I'm able to stay cool.

In a flash of inspiration I rush decisively in a direction the Croc would not have expected, directly into it!

The claws swoosh over my head, catching on one of my antennae and shearing part of it straight off!

The blast of pain makes me feel nauseous but I double down and bite hard on the Croc's leg, hauling with all of my strength and weight to pull it down before it can regain its balance.

[Bite has reached level five, upgrade available]

Not. Now. Gandalf!

[Chrysalis](#)

## **Chapter 26: Conqueror**

Actually scratch that, now Gandalf! Now!

[Would you like to improve Bite to Crushing Bite? This will cost 1sp]

Quick!

Before the Croc can react I rear back and chomp down on its leg once again, trying to inflict some damage and drag the creature off its feet.

As I prepare to bite, something shocking occurs!

My mandibles begin to glow faintly and I can feel a new strength building within them. Is this my new skill?! Some sort of active attack?! Finally!

When I bite down with all my power the feeling of crunching scales reverberates through my jaws. This bite is so much more powerful!

The success of my strike has shocked me, causing me to pause momentarily and the Croc leaps at this chance!

Sacrificing its own balance it turns and falls, swinging out with its tail and catching me a solid blow across my body!

BAM!

The impact sends me flying three meters! Once again pain explodes in my side but I push it away. I cannot lose this fight, I will not lose this fight!

I've taken a fair bit of damage from that impact, my carapace has been cracked in a few places and I think one of legs may be broken.

As I steadily pull myself to my feet I check my status, yep, HP has been cut in half!

The Croc must be suffering just as much. This is the final showdown!

Indeed my opponent is struggling hard. Suffering continuous damage from my earlier acid attacks, not to mention the internal damage from the acid to the mouth, and now my new crushing bite has caused a severe wound to its leg. As I watch the Croc is attempting to get back onto its feet, I won't let it!

One leg dragging uselessly behind me I stumble forward to pressure the foe, lunging and darting at it, not letting it relax and stand. The Croc has a newfound fear of my mandibles, not willing to let me get a good bite in it keeps swiping with claws and snapping its jaws, preventing it from standing up.

Time is on my side in this battle, as long as I stay out of reach I'll be able to outlast it.

The Croc knows this too however, rolling and twisting it flails out with its tail one more time, the long appendage whipping out with lightning speed!

JUMP!

With only five functional legs I leap as high as I can and pull my legs tightly under my body. Missing by millimeters the tail brushes the air beneath me, the incredible momentum of the strike throwing the Croc onto its face.

Chance!

Nipping forward I climb onto the crocs' back where it cannot reach with its claws or teeth and forcefully chomp with all of my force!

Don't hesitate just chomp chomp CHOMP!

The Croc struggles violently but I grip with all of my strength and continue to bite. Gradually the accumulated damage it too much for it take. It moves less and less before finally growing still.

[You have defeated level 7 Garralosh Infantem]

[You have gained XP]

[You have achieved level 2, one skill point awarded]

[You have achieved level 3, one skill point awarded]

...

YEEEEEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSSSSS!!!!

Anyone walking past would be treated to the truly bizarre sight of a monstrous ant, standing on the back of its defeated foe and lifting its two front legs in the air, roaring silently with triumph!

I manage to make a few grunts of male dominance.

Did I just absorb the dragon soul?! I feel mighty in this moment! I have conquered my fear!

That battle was so intense! I was driven to my limits, experienced tremendous pain. Actually, I'm still experiencing tremendous pain!

Ouuuuuuuch!

One of my antennae has been cut clean off! It stings Gandalf! It stings real bad!

I have to eat quickly and regenerate my HP. There isn't any more time to stand here posing.

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

[Basic profile of the Garralosh Infantem unlocked]

[Garralosh Infantem: Garralosh Infant, The young offspring of Garralosh, this advanced creature is powerful, beware the crushing jaws]

Infant?! These things are infants?! What the heck is Garralosh? Are all of these the offspring of just one creature?

Worry about it later, keep eating!

Stuffing all of my stomachs full I'm able to gain a further three Biomass from the ... Infant... giving me a total of four and two skill points.

What a haul!

After consuming the creature my HP has recovered to 23/30 as well, giving me some level of comfort.

I don't feel comfortable staying out here in the open. I decide to search for a section of soft ground and excavate myself a nest in order to rest and spend my points.

It takes only five minutes before I find a patch of soft earth further into the forest. Working as quickly as possible I dig out a small nest, digging straight down and then across to make an L shaped recess in the ground where I can hide. Not willing to take chances I cover over the opening to reduce the chance of me being spotted.

It's hardly a perfect camouflage but I'd rather have this at the minimum than no protection at all.

Phew.

I'm still coming down from the incredible intensity of that fight. I came close to death on multiple occasions but was able to pull through and win tremendous gains.

This rush and thrill are like nothing I've experienced before. I can understand now why some people are such thrill seekers back on Earth! But this goes beyond anything they could hope to experience, this was a real life or death battle!

As it exciting as it was, I don't want to get in the habit of challenging powerful monsters. I wouldn't have gone into that fight if the Croc hadn't been injured in the first place. This was a lucky encounter and I can't let my victory get to my head.

Now to spend my incredible wealth!

With my newly improved Crushing Bite skill I decide to upgrade my Mandibles twice, using three of my Biomass and spend the last one on upgrading my carapace to +1.

This will broaden my offensive options and provide a tiny upgrade to my defence.

After enduring the mutation process (I hate it soooo much!) it's finally time to spend my precious skill points.

Two skill points to spend, this is unprecedented wealth. My power is growing at an accelerated pace!

Checking my skill list finally I see all the skills I had before with one new addition.

[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

Mana manipulation: cost 1sp, basic skill to manipulate absorbed mana]

It's heeeeeeeeere!

Mana manipulation will open the gateway to magic powers! I couldn't possibly be more excited for this!

I have one more point to spend, I don't see the value of slashing attack, my claws are designed to grip surfaces, not fight with. Since my mandibles have seen such an improvement I will double down and take the Chomp skill to stack buffs on my bite attack. The chomp skill adds piercing power and grip to my bite attacks, with my shiny new +2 chompers and crushing bite skill I might be able to do some serious damage in a fight now.

Once again the warm trickling sensation engulfs my brain. Why is learning skills so pleasant but mutating so horrible?

Once all is said and done I admire my new status.

Name: Anthony

Level: 3 (core)

Might: 15

Toughness: 12

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 30

MP: 10

Skills: Digging level 4; Improved Acid Shot Level 1; Grip Level 4; Crushing Bite Level 1; Advanced Stealth Level 2; Tunnel Sense Level 3; Chomp Level 1; Mana Manipulation Level 1;

Mutations: Eyes +4, Antennae +2, Acid +3, Legs +1, Mandibles +2, Carapace +1

Species: Hatchling Ant Worker (Formica)

Skill points: 0

Biomass: 0

Look at this incredible growth. My mutations are getting really nicely spread. It's a little inevitable considering the way the system is designed. If I want to upgrade my eyes again I need an entire five Biomass. For the same amount I could get two or three upgrades for other body parts, providing a better upgrade to my overall strength.

Now that I've reached this point I've taken the lowest of the low hanging fruit. My legs and carapace are still only +1 but I really want to try and get my eyes to +5. The main reason for this is to see what happens when a body part gets to +5. Will they be able to adapt or improve in some way, like my skills do?

Learning the ins and outs of the strange game like system that applies to me here in this world is the most important this for me to do right now.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 27: Long roads**

Thanks to my last encounter I'm finally starting to gain a little confidence in this new world. Perhaps I'll be able to survive and find my colony after all!

I mean ... I've always been confident! Heh.

...

All right then. Time to focus on the next task at hand. Along with my purchase of the Mana Manipulation skill some knowledge on how to apply it has been planted in my brain.

It's a little disconcerting to think that purchasing a skill is directly modifying my brain and memories. Exactly how intrusive is this system? I don't really have the luxury of being able to worry about it now, so I push any doubts out of my mind.

According to my new understanding, the mana absorbed by my body comes from the air and is stored in my monster core. In order to use that mana I need to bring it out of my core and shape it. Hence the Mana Manipulation skill. With this skill I'll be able to take the first step of using my MP to do something cool.

Time to make an attempt.

If I concentrate I can feel my core within me, sitting right in the center of my mid-section. It feels like a tight ball of heat, faintly pulsing with energy. That would be my mana. Before I attempt to draw my mana out, I want to have a firm image in my mind of what I want to happen.

Something simple for the first attempt, OK? Let's go with ... I want to release it as a cloud from my mouth. Just a harmless puff of mana from the mouth, easy.

Concentrating hard I focus all of my mental energy on my core, sinking my mind deep within myself. My core is still tiny, probably the size of a grape. I'll probably get chances to grow it in the future, my max MP is only ten right now, surely that isn't enough to do much.

My consciousness locks onto the core and then draws within. I feel like I've been transported inside a crystal world. Fractal angles reflect off in every direction. Within this space, the mana is floating lazily, turning in slow circles. Without anything to direct it, this is the state it will maintain.

I can feel the moment when the energy within begins to respond to me. Gradually it begins to move, to flow in the direction of my thoughts. This is so damn hard! Forcing with all of my mental might the mana moves reluctantly out of my core and through my body.

I feel the force welling up in my throat now, like water caught in my oesophagus. Opening my mouth wide a small puff of glowing, transparent gas is released and quickly disperses into the air.

GASP.

That was so fricken difficult! I feel exhausted just from that!

I get that my ability to shift mana is as low as it gets but I'm completely wrecked after just one harmless puff of mana? Magic is HARD.

Even more then I want to master it!

Quickly checking my MP consumption I see that I've only used two points. All of that effort for only two points is a little depressing.

Never the less, the more I practice, the faster my skill level will rise and the easier it will be to practice, causing the speed of my training to get quicker and quicker.

An exponential growth loop. The faster I get through these early levels, the faster my future my growth will be!

Summoning all my determination, I once again focus my mind on my core, trying to replicate the effect.

HHHHHRRRNNNNNGGGGG.

\*puff\*.

GOD. Gandalf this is ridiculous! How did you master these mystic forces? Do I need a beard and staff?!

I manage to practice another three times to use all of my mana but on the last my mental energy runs out and I don't manage to force the mana outside of my body, causing it to dissipate harmlessly.

I'm so exhausted by this process that I decide to have a bit of open-eye to recover. I wish I had some way of knowing how much time has passed, being born here with a smart phone would be way too convenient.

When I wake up I assume it hasn't been that long, possibly three hours. I'm guessing based on how full my stomach feels. Digesting all that Croc will take some time.

I've also regenerated six out of my ten MP. I won't bother trying to use it all up until I get back to full. If I were to make another three attempts right now I'd only be wearing myself down mentally before going out, which would be too risky.

Even after emptying all of my MP practicing I still haven't gained one level of Mana Manipulation. I can already tell that mastering magic in this world will be a long project.

I can only take on that challenge if I manage to survive!

Time to head out and scout!

Emerging from my nest I take a little time to conceal the entrance before I leave, covering up the hole with some dirt and vegetation. I may not even return to this nest but if I can create a few hiding places as I move around it will only improve my chances of survival.

With that job done I take a quick note of my surroundings. There doesn't appear to be any creatures nearby, nor can I detect anything with my antennae. Thankfully as I've been digesting my Biomass, the insured antennae has begun to regrow. If I continue to secure food for myself my sensory organs will be returned to their former glory, at the moment they are only running at about 70% of capacity, thanks to my injury.

I can't get too mad about it, I gained so much from that encounter, the price I paid was easily worth it.

The priority for this mission is scouting and information gathering, not combat. Unless I'm able to identify a truly juicy opportunity I'll be passing it up in favour of information gathering.

There's been enough risk taking for the time being!

Satisfied that there isn't anything nearby I start to move out, keeping low to the ground. The massive cavern is just so wondrous to me. Such a ridiculous amount of open space under the surface just doesn't make any sense. I mean, I'm not sure exactly how large caves underground were on Earth, but you could probably fit a city inside here, so long as you lopped the top off the buildings.

It just doesn't seem possible for it to be natural.

As I move through the undergrowth my eyes are constantly focused in all directions. I especially don't want to be paid a visit by those horrible gargoyles from above.

I notice that the terrain in here isn't completely flat. Here and there I can see hills and large rock formations, reaching up towards the ceiling. It wouldn't surprise me if many creatures made their homes in these places, nesting in a more secure location will always be safer but also invite competition. I think I'll skirt around them for now.



Now that I'm inside such a large space the weakness of my eyesight is once again weighing down on me. It would be possible for me to climb a tree and be able to see a very long distance if my eyes were good at focusing on distant objects, like a humans.

My compound eyes are fantastic for focusing on all directions at once, protecting my from ambush but they are not good at seeing things far away, even if the range has been upgraded by my +4 mutations. This means I can't get a good idea of the whole area at once by looking from a high vantage point or through a clearing in the trees, I have to move and get somewhat close whilst building up a map of what I see in my mind.

[Tunnel Sense has reached level 4]

... Which is exactly what this skill is useful for. By maintaining my sense of direction I can get a rough idea of what landmarks are placed where.

About time you levelled up, Tunnel Sense!

Some skills really do take much longer than others to skill up.

Wait!

Somethings coming.... I can feel it through my feet and antennae. Possibly something big. Looking around I scan the terrain. The thick, pale mushroom stalks sprout straight out of the rock here and there supporting the multi-coloured caps above them. The strange trees take up spaces between them, their twisted roots creating a gnarled carpet, spreading out from the trunk and piercing into the stone floor.

I can use those!

Instead of running and perhaps getting caught, I'll need to rely on my stealth to protect me as I'm out scouting. This creature could have incredible hearing, or sense the air vibrations caused by my running. They could be incredibly fast and chase me down. I just don't know. Better to hide.

Quietly I move to a particularly large tangle of roots and slowly climb through them, concealing myself against the dirt and behind the strange wood. With careful positioning of my head I'm able to see some of what transpires nearby.

Thud. Thud.

The sounds of heavy footfalls is growing closer and louder. This is definitely a huge monster. When I finally lay eyes on it I almost pass out.

What the hell is this thing?!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 28: True lords of the domain**

An enormous, scaled hand reaches forward and grips the hard ground. Each scale is a polished, dark green colour that practically glows with the reflected light of the forest.

Vicious claws tip each digit, curved blades that taper into a fearsome point. What sets my poor heart beating the most is that each of these claws is probably the size of my head.

Thick, powerful ropes of muscle on the hand drag the rest of the monster forward.

The long pointed jaw, studded with teeth precede the recessed, chilling eyes of the beast. Many teeth can be seen even with that massive mouth being shut, giving the impression of a menacing grin. There is a cruel intelligence gleaming within its gaze, striking fear into the heart of every creature unfortunate enough to cross its path.

Across the back of the monster the overlapped scales are broken up by bony protrusions that end in spikes easily a foot long.

With its body kept curiously close to the ground, its movement is sinuous and swift. As it passes by I can see a second set of shorter, but powerful arms halfway down its body are supporting its low profile.

The creature growls and huffs explosively as it passes, releasing a sudden flare of red flame, causing me to almost squeak.

Finally the powerful rear legs come into view. It's clear from their positioning that this creature could easily stand on its hind legs should it choose to but has evolved in such a way that it can move swiftly and low to the ground like a crocodile on earth.

The monster is roughly twelve meters long from snout to tail.

Twelve. Meters.

That's almost forty feet. That's like four basketball hoops stacked on top of each other. That's almost the length of a bowling lane.

Sure that length includes the creatures long, muscular tail but....

ISN'T THAT TOO STUPIDLY BIG GANDALF!?

That monstrosity is so huge I could never hope to challenge it! What the heck is a giant like that doing crawling around up here?!

I mean, judging by the appearance this is clearly an evolved form of the Croca-beast (I just can't bring myself to call those huge monsters an infant). The crocadilic features are clear to see, but what I didn't expect was the extra set of arms, the breathing fire and the stupidly huge increase in size.

These things are so much larger than the Croca it almost beggars belief. Is it entirely possible that this titan is actually two evolutions away from the Croca?

Judging by the size of those scales I don't think my acid would even be able to chew through it. This creature is like a tank. Its weight alone must be several tons!

If there is anything here larger and more deadly looking than this thing I'll head back up and take my chances with the humans!

Vibrations shake my tiny legs as the tremendous weight of the monster continues to impact heavily on the ground with each departing step.

It's at this moment a renegade thought pops into my mind and I immediately move quietly out of my hiding place and begin to shadow the colossal croc.

For some reason I thought of pilot fish on Earth.

These fish would attach themselves to a larger creature, like a whale or a shark, and follow it around, keeping it clean and eating the leftovers. The larger animal gets a free cleaning service to keep it healthy and the smaller creatures get protection and food.

I'm not about to waltz up to this behemoth and offer to brush its teeth, but I may just have found an amazingly safe way to move about for the time being.

Safe Anthony?! You must be outside of your mind!

Well wait a moment.

It's highly likely that almost every creature around here is going to want to avoid this thing like seven plagues stacked on top of each other. Everything that doesn't get out of the way quick enough will have to get past the big boy before they could have a chance at me.

As long as I'm not noticed by the croc, then I'll be extremely safe! Thankfully Advanced Stealth has shown its prowess in keeping me hidden, and if I continue to trail along and hide I may get another level in that skill while I scout around.

There are risks to this plan but they are manageable ones.

I skitter along in the wake of the titanic monster. Due to its sheer size it moves fairly quickly, causing me to have to move a lot faster than I can realistically keep up with whilst minimising noise, however the bulky creature makes so much noise on its own my pattering little legs barely register in my own ears.

For the next hour I continue to scuttle about whilst remaining hidden from my unsuspecting body guard. The bizarre scenery of this forest continues to astound me as we travel. At one point we passed by an enormous flower, vibrant petals wide open to reveal a gleaming jewel in the center the size of my own head.

I was completely stunned at the sight but the croc continued to stomp past, unmoved. I didn't get much time to inspect the flower, but I got some strange vibes from it. The petals spread in a dense overlapping fashion across the ground as the center of the flower faced directly upwards. Something about the way those thick, fleshy petals unnerved me, they almost appeared like a welcome mat, rolled out to invite a guest towards the center of the flower where the incredible diamond like jewel grew.

I also received an unexpected benefit when a large centipede suddenly scuttled out of some bushes in front of the Titan-Croc, as I'd begun to think of it. One of those large, evolved centipedes would be a tough fight for me, one I possibly couldn't win. To my new friend the Titan-Croc? Not even worth mentioning. Barely slowing down, the Croc brought one of its claws crashing down on the centipede, squashing it into paste instantly.

What surprised me most was that the Titan-Croc didn't even stop to consume the precious Biomass, not even pausing before it continued to advance. I remembered at that moment what Gandalf had told me in the evolution menu, that more evolved creatures received less Biomass from those less advanced than them.

Possibly this centipede was useless to the Croc.

But that didn't mean it was useless to me!

Its possibly a sad reflection on my present life, that I would gleefully run over to the smashed remains of a gigantic centipede to eat. The tremendous force of the claw had crushed the poor victim like a human stepping on a bug, causing the guts to burst out everywhere.

Errrrghhh...

Even I'm losing my appetite...

I won't give up the chance for Biomass!

Remember always, if you would ALMOST rather be dead, then you need to eat and live!

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Adultus Unguibus Scolopendra, you are awarded one Biomass]

[Basic profile of the Adultus Unguibus Scolopendra unlocked]

[Adultus Unquibus Scolopendra: Adult Claw Centipede, this branch of evolution of the basic claw centipede vastly increases the base creatures might, without providing much boost to cunning]

Interesting, this seems to suggest that there are other branches of evolution for the claw centipede? I ponder this concept as I quickly munch a bit more.

[You have gained one Biomass]

Right! I've barely consumed even a quarter of the creature before I decide my protection is getting too far away and I need to leave and catch up.

Just before I do, I notice something glittering in the remains of the Adult Centipede.

Just behind the base of the monsters head is a small, shining gem like orb.

Is this ... what I think it is?

Moving closer I grasp the object in my mandibles.

[Compatible monster core detected. Would you like to reinforce your core or reconstitute a monster?]

It is! A monster core!

I don't have much time to think about what Gandalf had to say, my protection is getting further away every second!

Reinforce my core!

The spherical orb immediately melts into thin air and a burning energy swirls through my body before being drawn down into my core like a swirling vortex. Faster and faster the energy circulates as it spirals ever downward whilst my own core grows hotter and hotter.

Eventually all of the energy is consumed and with my core still burning inside me I hurry off after the Titan-Croc whilst checking my Status:

Name: Anthony

Level: 3 (core)

Might: 15

Toughness: 12

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 30/30

MP: 9/12

Skills: Digging level 4; Improved Acid Shot Level 1; Grip Level 4; Crushing Bite Level 1; Advanced Stealth Level 2; Chomp level 1; Tunnel sense Level 4; Mana Manipulation Level 1

Mutations: Eyes +4, Antennae +2, Acid +3, Legs +1, Mandibles +2, Carapace +1

Species: Hatchling Ant Worker (Formica)

Skill points: 0

Biomass: 2

[Chrysalis](#)

## **Chapter 29: Croc Landing**

New learnings!

So I'm able to consume the cores of my fellow monsters in order to reinforce my own, and this has the effect of increasing my max MP?

Fantastic! This means I'll be able to practice one extra time when I do my mana manipulation practice. It also means I've learned one more thing about the system that governs my growth in this place.

If I want to gain more and more MP then I need to consume monster cores to do so.

That feels like it would be a massive challenge though, in order for a monster to have a monster core it must have reached max level and spent an evolution on it. By definition that means the monster will be strong, not something I'll usually be able to mess with.

I was lucky this time. I can't expect I'll be able to gain more monster cores this easily in the future.

Enough thinking! Time to chase after the Titan-Croc.

Even if it isn't rushing, the sheer size of that monster means it moves fairly quickly and I really have to hustle to get back into my shadowing position behind the massive tail trailing behind the beast as it moves.

It isn't long before we finally reach the place this unstoppable beast has been heading toward this whole time.

The forest suddenly gives way and an open vista appears before me.

It's a lake.

A huge body of water, glowing with incredible light occupies a large clearing. After travelling for over an hour we have moved toward that center of this huge cavern, but something tells me we haven't even reached it yet.

This lake is easily a hundred metres across, I can even see small rivers and tributaries running off it. I suspect this lake is fed from an underground source, the water flowing up from beneath the rocky bed and then overflowing to create these small streams.

What really dazzles me is the twisting ropes of blue light that rotate slowly around each other in a slow dance within the water. Almost like a double helix pattern. These ropes appeared to be connected to the source of the lake and drifted around, pushed by some invisible current.

Mana!

I had seen this phenomenon before in the rock pool above but it had been far, far weaker, the twisting ropes had been almost invisible. Even so, the water had been suffused with mana, causing it to draw monsters from all over the cavern to drink and absorb the energy, trying to condense their cores.

This water must have truly dense mana in it!

Just like before, all manner of creatures had been drawn to the water source to drink and absorb the energy. Perhaps a good chunk of these monsters had already condensed their core and were just restoring MP they had used up, I would have to test that idea!

Within my range of view I could already see a huge range of monsters, some I had seen before but others I had not.

A large tangle of the basic centipedes is here, I think I glimpsed inside a slightly different one, something about its colour or shape but it was concealed within the writhing bodies of the more basic kind and I couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was nothing.

An evolved version of the Wolf Dragon cub is here, larger and more intimidating than before, it has what looks almost like a lion's mane around its neck, thick proud fur that projects pride and status.

I could swear that the creature's eyes were on fire, it's hard to make out the details but the air seems to be shimmering with heat haze right around its eyes.....

Surely not?

There are other creatures I've never seen before. A gorilla looking thing with massive, thick arms and a bat-like face, smaller monkey like creatures swarming and screeching around its feet.

Over there I can see a few of those gargoyle like monsters I'd seen descend from the roof.

Past them is what I believe is an evolved Thorn Lizard, not much larger than the original but looked more densely muscled and its spikes more menacing than before.

Another creature had the appearance of an armoured bison of some kind. Built with its legs low to the ground and thick plates of a rock looking substance protecting its face and back.

More and more I spotted new types of monsters around the lake, the sheer variety of them was dizzying. Just how many different types of monsters were there down here?

It was going to be a real pain trying to remember all of this!

Unfortunately, most of them look too strong for me to deal with, I'll have to continue to choose my targets very carefully.

As the giant Titan-Croca approaches the waters' edge the nearby monsters wisely create space for it. I can see the area the Croca has settled in is a large, flattened muddy zone where the monster can stretch out its full length and lap up the mana charged water at leisure.

It sure looks good to be the king!

Even with all of these monster types here around the lake there isn't anything that looks like it could go one on one with this guy.

What the heck was a Garralosh that could produce such fearsome offspring?!

Since the peace of the water seems to hold here as well I move a little ways around from the Croc and approach the waters' edge to get a taste.

zzzzzzZZZAAAAAP!

Wow!

Pah!

That tingling, burning sensation is back in full force! The difference now is that after the feeling floods through my whole body it then recedes back, like ocean water from a beach, drawing further and further in until it settled completely inside my core.

Checking my status I can see that my MP has regained two points.

Right on!

I take another sip in order to refill myself to max and then sit for a moment until the intense sensation fades.

Since I'm here at this lake and can essentially refill my MP for free, this is a perfect opportunity to train my mana manipulation skill. I can grind non-stop until hunger forces me to go out for a hunt!

Excited, I start snooping around for a place soft enough for me to construct a basic hiding hole and get stuck into digging as soon as I can.

I manage to find a good spot close to where the Titan-Croc is currently flopping, I'm thinking that the presence of the dominant monster will help dissuade others from sneaking about here looking for prey.

With my small chamber excavated I start training my Mana Manipulation immediately, bringing it out of my core and directing it to my throat, letting it build up before releasing it in a small puff of magical energy.

Phew!

It is still punishingly difficult, requiring fierce concentration on my part. Thankfully after my third attempt Gandalf chips in some moral support.

[Mana Manipulation has reached level two]

Hooray!

I've been waiting for those words!

I eagerly begin my routine again and there is a barely noticeable change in the difficulty of drawing the energy out of my core and directing it to where I want it to go.

One level was never going to make much difference I suppose...

However, with the support of my improved skills I'm able to completely exhaust my mana (and my mind) with six complete sets of practice.

Completely drained, I drag myself back to the lake and start drinking to refill my MP. It takes a while to do this since I find the experience of absorbing mana from the water to be quite intense.

The only thing I'm really disappointed in right now is that even though I covered so much ground when following the Titan-Croca about, I wasn't able to find the pheromone trail lain down by the scouts from colony at all.

Not even a sniff.

I ponder this as I continue to drink from the lake.

...

Wait!

If monsters from all over this area of the cavern have come here to drink, then there exists a possibility that members of my colony have also come to this location! I highly doubt a scout would pass such a rich mana source as this and not mark it down for the rest of the colony to come and get a taste!

This could be it!

Once my MP has been refilled I immediately start to scurry around the lake, tippity tapping the ground with my antennae as I do so (the severed one has continued to regrow and is about halfway back now, thankfully!) seeking the welcoming scent of my tribe.

Other monsters eyes me suspiciously as I make my way past but I don't pay them much mind, even accidentally walking over a Wolf Dragons' tail without realising. Thankfully the monster was too shocked to react quickly and too reluctant to break the water truce to do anything as I continued on my way.



When I get halfway around the lake my antennae start to tingle with a response to the now familiar scent. It's here!

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 30: Juniors are for light duties**

The expedition had been proceeding smoothly so far, something Mirryn was exceedingly grateful for. The royal guards and the Legion had cooperated in the clearing of the upper levels and hundreds of lower levelled monsters had been destroyed in preparation for the wave.

It normally wouldn't take long for such high level warriors to move through this area of Dungeon. To the higher levelled Legionaries this place was simply no threat at all, they could probably walk through with six monsters hanging off them and hardly take any damage.

To be completely thorough and clear out every side tunnel, every passage and all of the branches systematically took a lot of time and effort. With two forces as sharp as the Guard, who only accepted the best, and the Deep Legion, who lived for this kind of fighting, the task was done as quickly as it realistically could be done.

"Don't they look relaxed over there" grumbled Donnelan, indicating the senior Legionaries standing by the tunnel wall chatting and laughing together.

"I wouldn't stare too much if I were you, and keep your voice down" Mirryn whispered back, keeping her hands on her crossbow and her eyes on the tunnel, "Aurillia is rumoured to have incredibly advanced hearing skills. If they hear you whining you'll be digging latrines into the rock".

"It just doesn't seem right that us lower levelled trainees with weaker jobs have to do all the heavy lifting whilst the full Legionaries stand about and watch. I've launched so many fireballs in the last ten hours my fingers have almost burnt black" Donnelan moaned.

Donnelan usually wasn't the type to whinge and complain when he was on the job but fighting monsters and being on constant alert for the better part of half a day was enough to get anyone in a foul mood. To make matters worse, even the trainees were high enough of a level that they received very little experience for using their skills or killing monsters this high up in the Dungeon.

"Hold on a little longer you sook" Mirryn admonished, "we'll make it down to the first Expanse soon and set up the advanced camp. We're scheduled to rest once the fortifications are in place".

"Great, more digging".

Mirryn could only roll her eyes at Donnelan's continual complaints. She couldn't blame him too much. Mages who specialised in fire magic like Donnelan were often called "Blast Mages" because they were effective in wiping out large amounts of lower levelled creatures, Donnelan had been forced to work much harder than she had.

"How are you two travelling? Managing to stay awake?" laughed one their Centurions, Alexi, as he approached to check on them.

The two trainees immediately saluted. "Just fine Centurion!" Donnelan declared, his voice full of vigour, "I'm ready to serve another ten hours, easily".

Alexi snorted. "No you're not, in another hour you'll be snoring on your feet."

The well-built officer gave them both an encouraging slap on the back.

"Remember, for you and the other trainees this mission is a rite of passage. Expect that you'll be worked extra hard. By the time we're done you'll feel dead and reborn at the same time".

Mirryn winced and Donnel audibly groaned, causing Alexi to laugh again.

"Don't worry too much, me and the old fogeys will start to pick up the slack once we reach the first Expanse", Alexi leaned closer to whisper conspiratorially, "you may not know this but us higher ranked Legionaries are built to function a lot deeper in the Dungeon than this, it hard to show our stuff up here".

Donnelan choked back a laugh. "What? Because the monsters are too weak?" he scoffed.

"Nooo", Alexi drawled, "because the mana up here is too thin. The ambient levels in the Expanse is just baaaaarely enough. You'll see some good stuff then. Watch out for the commander especially, he's a living legend for a reason you know".

"Alexi!" came a shout from across the tunnel.

The three of them immediately snapped to attention. "Yes Tribune Aurillia!"

The older woman was glaring at Alexi with a heat he could almost feel. "IF you're done running your mouth to the trainees centurion, then I suggest you take the trainees to the supply cart and locate three shovels. We'll need latrines dug once we reach the Expanse!"

Donnelan almost wept.

As the two trainees trudged away, cursing silently at their Centurion, Titus was chuckling quietly to himself.

"You think I shouldn't be so hard on them?" Aurillia asked, one eyebrow raised.

Titus shifted his grip on the massive axe resting on his shoulder. Instead of answering the question he asked one. "Do you remember your promotion expedition?" he said.

Aurillia grunted. "How could I forget, you ground us into paste, put us back together and then ground us down again".

Her answer drew a fearsome grin from the commander. "Now you're one of the finest officers I've ever seen. We don't coddle Legionaries Aurillia, we liquefy them so we can pour them into our mould. If those kids aren't crying themselves to sleep tonight we haven't worked hard enough".

"And Alexi?"

"..." Titus frowned, "I'll have a word with our chatty Centurion myself".

Aurilla winced. After a 'chat' with commander Titus, Alexi wouldn't be speaking for some time. The healing alone might take weeks.

"Is the Royal Guard clear on their duties until the wave, Tribune?" Titus asked.

"Yes commander. We can leave protecting the Dungeon entrance and the upper tunnels to them. I'll have to thank the Queen personally when we get back, her Guards really know their stuff".

Titus grunted. It was true the Guard were highly skilled, but he wasn't sure it was necessarily the best idea for the Queen to send her most competent defenders into the Dungeon to manage the upper tunnels.

With all of the upper tunnels swept it was time to make the push into the Expanse. This is where the true strength of the Dungeon began to reveal itself, as well as its wealth. Monster cores were just one of the valuable materials that could be harvested from the depths, minerals, powerful crystals as well as the raw XP the monsters provided all commanded a price.

The deeper the expedition progressed into the Dungeon, the easier Titus began to move. After so many years of campaigning, it was difficult for him to spend such an extended amount of time on the surface. He wasn't built for up there, writing letters and managing the budget. With his axe in hand and the mana burning in his veins he felt much more comfortable.

Within the hour the expedition was prepared to advance further into the Dungeon. Titus positioned himself at the head of the caravan, leading his Legionaries towards the forest.

After ten minutes of marching with the occasional pause to crush a few monsters that came their way the tunnel opened wide suddenly to reveal the vast underground space that had been named the Forest Expanse.

The glowing forest spread before them in a wide arc, their faces illuminated by the blue light of the forest.

In orderly fashion the Legionaries moved swiftly to set up camp.

Earth mages moved quickly to raise walls using their powerful spells to create temporary barriers made of the soft earth of the cavern floor. The trainees were charged with unloading the supplies from the carts, erecting the tents and of course, digging the latrines.

Titus watched his troops go about their tasks with a critical eye. One hundred Legionaries made up this expedition, twenty of those were trainees on their promotion delve, the remaining were full Legionaries. Twenty five auxiliaries were also part of the force, responsible for medical aid, logistics and of course, the cook.

The Deep Legion would construct a forward fort here, barricading the tunnel leading towards the city of Liria and defending it during the wave.

From here they would also launch their scouting missions to locate the ant colony.

Suddenly Titus heard a monstrous roar from the edge of the forest. Bursting through the trees was a mature Lightning Fist Ape, its huge gorilla like fists thumping into the stone as it charged, full of rage towards the Legionary force.

The commander could only sigh. This high in the Dungeon it was common to see monsters with stunningly low Cunning. He was hardly surprised to see a Lightning Ape engaged in such a suicidal

charge, of the evolutions possible to the spark chimp, the Lightning Fist Ape was the only one that actually lost cunning in the process.

In exchange they gained tremendous Might and a strong affinity to Electric mana shaping, which they usually discharged through their fists.

As the monster hurled closer the rest of the Legion showed no reaction as the commander stepped slowly forward. When the beast was directly in front him, its fetid breath washing over his face, Titus finally moved.

With one hand he hauled his famed axe, the enormous blade more a block of steel than a refined weapon, before he brought it down just in front of the charging monster.

When the axe impacted the rock there was a thud, then a pause, before a massive roar erupted, as if a meteor had struck the earth.

When the dust settled a thirty metre long groove had been cut into the cavern floor, the severed corpse of the Ape, cut directly in half straight between the eyes, lay either side of the cut.