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Chapter 211: Farewell surface

[How long will you be gone for?] Enid asks worriedly.

[As long as it takes to remove the threat] I reply.

This is why I don't like coming up here to the human camp. No sooner did I appear than people started gathering and pointing. Then the priest came at a run, his face flushed with excitement and began exhorting the people to pay their respects to me. In a flash I had people raising their hands or kneeling nearby as I nervously waited for Enid to show up.

I'm thankful the crowd maintained a respectful distance from me. It seems their fear of Dungeon monsters isn't completely gone.

[Do you have any idea what is actually causing these monsters to attack the surface?] she asks.

[I'm not sure. I have a few suspicions, but I don't exactly know what we are up against. The colony, and by extensions you humans, are not safe while the Expanse below us continues to send out these monsters. They need to be removed]

Enid frowns as she ponders my words. Why am I even here? I could have just spoken to the Queen and then disappeared underground, nobody here in the camp would have been the wiser. It isn't as if they see me very often, I'm almost always underground already.

I guess Enid herself has been helpful and respectful. I don't really have any reason to keep her in the dark. Since this expedition has a direct impact on their own safety, I suppose it doesn't hurt to tell them.

Just.... Give me a little space people!

[The people here seem remarkably well disposed towards ant monsters. Is that safe?] I'm forced to ask as a child attempts to sneak forward and touch me only to be snatched back by an adult.

Enid looks at me oddly for a moment before replying.

[You and your colony have kept these people safe on several occasions. The only reason we have been able to settle here and start making a life for ourselves again is that you and your colony are here, taming the land and protecting us. Of course, we are grateful. With Beyn here that gratitude is only getting more ingrained]

Damn priest...

I'll need to have words with him at some point, but for now, I'm worried he may just take it as some sort of divine visitation. The guy is just odd. I bit his arm off, how did he end up such a fervent supporter?!

Enid hesitates before speaking again. [There are a lot of valuable resources that can be extracted from an Expanse. I was a merchant before, and I know the value of many things that can be found in the Dungeon. If you see something that looks special, bring it to me, and I can tell you about it].

Hmmmm.

[I'll think about it].

Other than Biomass and monster cores, what else does the colony require? On the off chance that something useful can be found down there, I might keep this in mind. Still, in my mind, it's far more likely to be helpful to the humans than it is to us.

After a few more words I bid Enid goodbye and carefully back myself up and leave. The people reluctantly part to let me through, the priests' voice raising to an even higher crescendo before I manage to disappear out of sight. Somehow, not being able to hear exactly what he's saying makes it feel worse.

Safely back the nest I feel much more comfortable. My people! It doesn't take long to explain the situation to Mother. As always she expresses concern for my safety but encourages me to do what is best for the family.

Naturally!

This ant doesn't let his family down. No chance.

Farewells handled, Tiny gathers the still slumbering Vibrant unexpectedly gently in one massive paw and Crinis hops onto my back. Time to depart!

I'm feeling exciting for the upcoming challenge but at the same time a little nervous. We are throwing ourselves into the great unknown in order to protect the colony from harm. Something about it just makes my ant heart sing. Going to have to watch out for this feeling in case it motivates me to do something stupid. I get up to enough of that on my own.

At any rate, there isn't anyone else in the colony who could handle this level of danger, so it has to be me and the crew.

In order to ensure we don't miss any waves we take the long way down, sweeping the tunnels clean and using the creatures we find to get a little extra xp in the bank before we get to the Expanse. If we can level up even one skill by one point it might be help by more than we expect. To this end I use my new bite attack, Ripping Bite, exclusively. This ends up is some.... Messy combats. Crinis seems to approve but I personally aren't as much of a fan. At least the skill is accruing experience.

In this way it takes us a number of hours to reach the Expanse, deep below the surface. When we approach Vibrant finally begins to show signs of stirring from her slumber. Her body has undergone a number of changes during the journey, including a rather dramatic increase in size (at last!).

I can't wait to take a look at her status and she what she decided to choose!

As we post up outside the Marsh Expanse I decide to put Crinis on guard duty whilst the rest of us open up the shortcut, clear out a small section of tunnel and nestle down for a short break.

We need our wits about us for this next test. If Vibrant is going to be fighting alongside us I want to make sure she's got the right stuff after evolving.

It doesn't take long for her to wake up and regain her normal energy.

"Hi senior! How long did I sleep?"

"Well I'd say it was...."

"Wow! Where are we? Did we move somewhere?"

"Uhh.. Yes. Tiny carried you. We came down ..."

"Thanks Tiny! I wasn't heavy was I?" she rushes over to Tiny, tapping him vigorously with her antennae.

The big ape just looks down at her for a moment before reaching out with one big finger to poke her on top of her head.

"Hey! Hee-hee! You're the best Tiny!"

...

"Just come over here for a moment would you?!" I grate out.

Full of beans, she bounces over to me and stops, still managing to wiggle from one foot to the other as she awaits my instructions. No matter how far she evolves I don't think her high energy level is ever going to change.

"I want to take a look at your core and see what your stats are like. Is that ok?" I ask.

"Sure-sure!"

Alright then.

Bringing my antennae forward it's time for core surgery once more!

After a bit of fiddling about I put together her status:

Name: Vibrant

Level: 1 (core)

Might: 52

Toughness: 38

Cunning: 25

Will: 22

HP: 76/76

MP: 110/110

Skills: Advanced Digging Level 3; Advanced Acid Shot Level 6; Grip Level 4; Crushing Bite Level 5; Advanced Dash Level 2; Exo-Skeleton defence level 3; Stamina level 2; Piercing Bite Level 4; Leap Level 2;

Mutations: Enhanced Reflective Exoskeleton +10; Savage Mandibles +5; Accelerated Legs + 5; Focused Eyes +5; Foresight Antennae +5; Burning Acid Gland +5; Widened Command Aura (formica) +5; Frequent Explosive Energy Gland +5; Pheromone Language Gland +5; Slow release Regeneration Gland +5; Inner Carapace Plating; Speed Aura Gland;

Species: Major Soldier (Formica)

Skill points: 6

Biomass: 5

What the heck is this? Her physical stats are already higher than mine?!

And by so much?!

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Chapter 212: Assault begins

The new evolution has certainly seen a massive rise in Vibrant's stats! And some of her organs look incredibly unique. The command organ? Did she get that from being a special ant from birth?

Gah! I should have investigated her core ages ago! That's what I get for not being curious enough!

"How do you feel Vibrant?"

"Great!" she cheers.

I have to say, she's not so little anymore, almost the same size as I am. The only reason I would be bigger is because I used the shortcut method of raising my Might stat quickly by packing on more size rather than condensing the muscle, which increases strength without increasing size. My guess is that Vibrant has taken a much more balanced approach and therefore has much more power squeezed into a smaller body.

Looking at her skills and upgrades, it's clear the direction that Vibrant has been taking. Physical strength, hearty defence, looks like she picked up an Aura gland during her most recent evolution, speed naturally, being Vibrant.

Looks like she'll be taking the path of pouring her mana into fuelling a range of Aura glands rather than using it to directly fuel magic. I should look at recommending that path to Tiny actually. The lightning mana he has is put to good use but the all the raw MP sitting in his core doesn't do anything whilst his lightning glands are topped off. He'd be more effective in a fight if he had somewhere to put that energy.

I'll have to think on it.

Due to his low intelligence I'm worried about Tiny's future evolution paths. Every time he's evolved he's lost Cunning. If it continues down that path he's going to wind up an extremely well-muscled, bat faced vegetable.

"Well you're probably strong enough stats wise to fight and front line" I muse.

"Yay! I can fight with Crinis!" the no longer little ant cheered with delight, her antennae wiggling in the air uncontrollably.

I could only be pleased for her pure enthusiasm. As exhausting as her seemingly infinite energy could be, she was as pure as a diamond compressed from snow made of glass.

"You'll need to be careful" I warn her, "nibble at the edges, don't go straight on. You're fast and reasonably tanky but you can't take the horde face on. If you get in trouble, pop your healing gland straight away, don't save it. We can get you to safety and let it recharge before you need to go it again."

"Yep-yep!" the still wiggling ant exclaimed.

She's doing her best to listen to my advice but her energy is just way too high right now. Sigh. I'll have to remind her again later, hopefully she won't do anything too stupid in her excitement.

[Tiny, Crinis, Vibrant will be joining you on the front lines for the attack. Try to keep an eye out and keep her safe. I want her on the edges of the fight and not in the middle. If she gets buried in the melee, try and get her out.]

[Hurr!] Tiny grunted affirmatively.

[Of course Master. No harm shall come to her] Crinis declared with confidence.

....

I'd be more assured if you could actually see her Crinis... Maybe she could keep a tentacle on Vibrant or something?

I'm sure it'll work out.

["Alright everyone, it's time to form up for the attack. Tiny in the front, Crinis with me and Vibrant on the flank. Our mission is complete subjugation. All Crocs must be handbags or tasteful jackets by the time we are done. Nothing too out there, I'm fashion conservative."]

The others look at me strangely.

[What is a jacket master? Explain it to me and I shall prepare a thousand for you this day!] Crinis cries.

I should give up on the jokes. My talent is wasted on this room.

["Just kill all Crocs. They are our primary target. If we remove them all I think the wave attacks on the colony will stop"]

"Okay!" Vibrant says, almost shivering out of her carapace with excitement.

Crinis wiggles her way onto my back before retracting her tentacles and entering her deceptive, innocent tennis ball mode. Tiny eagerly takes his place in the front, already sparking with anticipation and thumping his chest occasionally, trying to contain his energy.

I don't the marsh is going to be expecting what's coming.

The oppressive aura is still here, bearing down on us with full force. But we are stronger than before, motivated to protect the colony. I don't care what sort of monster sits in the middle of this Expanse, suffocating the area with its baleful aura and sucking in the monsters. I have a few tricks up my carapace that should fix it's little red wagon!

Full of motivation and gusto we depart our little hidey hole and advance into the marsh expanse. Before us the lush green of the vibrant plant life stretches as far as the eye can see, from one side of the

expanse to the other. The hillocks of sodden earth that rise out of the dark waters look like moss encrusted tortoise shells, covered in vibrant flowers and the occasional tree.

Overhead the tall mangrove like trees, with their enormous webbed roots, spread a wide canopy. Half glimpsed shadows can be seen shifting about on the broad green leaves here and there. This right here. This will all belong to the family.

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Chapter 213: Contac

The Marsh Expanse is still teeming with monstrous life. I can see monsters creeping out of connected tunnels, making their way deeper into the recesses in order to meet up with whatever is compelling their behaviour. Even without the steady trickle of captive beasts, there is plenty of stuff to fight around us.

The ever-present, ever hungry flora dots the mounds and rises out of the waters regularly. The plants don't seem to want to eat each other much but they are always waiting for a juicy meal to wander past, ready to fall into their clutches.

Then there are the crocs.

Lounging there and there, yawning mightily with their enormous jaws, the Croca-Beasts Titan Crocs and beyond can be seen almost everywhere. Never too many in one place, but little posse's of three or four, wading through the waters or lying on the raised earth.

I think there's more of them here than the last time we came. Or maybe they are gathering on this side since we raised a ruckus last time.

At any rate, they haven't seemed to have spotted us.

I think the best course of action is two lure them into the tunnel group by group, keep the combat out of sight so we don't draw the lot of them down on our heads at once. Nice and steady, that's the play.

....

So why is Tiny over there punching a Titan Croc in the face?

DAMMIT!

["Let's go! Move quickly to support Tiny! Crinis! Don't let him get surrounded and try not to get flame throwered!"] I cry as I rush forward.

This stupid ape! How could I forget his habits so quickly?! Last time we were here I was pleased by his self-control and ability to control his seemingly endless hunger for battle. The reality is he was unsettled, even a little intimidated, by the oppressive aura that hangs over this Expanse.

How did I expect a maniacal, famously thick battle addict to react to his first taste of fear? An emotion that he probably hadn't felt in his entire life? After taking out his frustration on smaller and weaker, unsatisfying foes and getting a power buff from taking the time to actually increase the level of his skills, not to mention the massive boost he received from finally mutating to over +5.

Now he's back, large and in charge and he couldn't wait to punch some face in.

So he didn't!

The second he laid eyes on a Croca the urge to redeem himself in a battle of old fashioned fisty cuffs must have been irresistible!

He didn't get far. The closest group of Croca beasts was within a hundred metres. When they saw the giant ape eagerly flinging himself forward, swinging from tree branches like a demented, overweight Tarzan, they roused themselves to fight. Claws out and jaws agape they met Tiny's charge with all the fury they could muster.

Fists ablaze with light, Tiny smashed their faces in within ten seconds and then stood pounding his chest as he roared out a challenge to the Expanse as a whole.

.....

Because of course he would.

When we rush up to his side Tiny is still bellowing his challenge and it's safe to say he has drawn a fair bit of attention.

All around us small gangs of Crocs are staring with undisguised hostility at my pets and I. I'm quietly confident even the plants are giving us a full dose of the stink eye, even though they don't have eyes.

....

I think I'm feeling a headache coming on...

Actually. You know what? Who cares!? Instead of chipping away at the enemy tactically over an extended period of time, THIS stratagem has little more chest hair! I'm with you Tiny! Bring it on!

I immediately kick my sub brains into gear and get them weaving up a water transformation construct. It shouldn't take long for them to get it set up and pumping out water attributed mana. If any of these monsters decides to start spitting flame at us, I want to be ready.

["Get ready folks, they're coming in!"] I cry.

Four small groups of Croca's begin to advance towards us, curiously untouched by local plant monsters. Counting rapidly I size up our opponents. Ten Croca-Beasts and two Titan-Crocs. Not even a warmup!

These low tiered monsters can't hope to hold a candle to us. It's what will come next that worries me.

Come on brains! Get kicking!

The monsters swagger towards us, their toothy grins and grasping claws screaming confidence. It's almost strange. I'm starting to think these guys haven't been challenged, in this marsh for some time. Have they become the local bully boys? Leathery skinned, super ugly Mafioso?

Gonna get a rude awakening now!

[Crisis! Eat!]

[Of course Master!]

With her tremor sense, Crinis is able to detect the subtle vibrations of movement through the ground and air. As the Crocs flex their way towards us, eagerly anticipating the meal to come, Crinis slowly lifts herself from my back on thin tendrils and drifts forwards.

Such an innocent looking little ball of endless despair. Who could possibly imagine that this tennis ball sized black orb would contain so much terror?

Certainly not the crocs.

[Tiny, Leave it to Crinis, you've had some fun already]

In response to my order Tiny frowns sadly and kicks the dirt. He hasn't had nearly enough fighting yet, but I know his games. It isn't possible for him to get enough fighting in the first place!

[There'll be more soon bud, keep that engine warmed up]

The big ape nods his head, still looking sad but the fire in his eyes is burning bright.

Some of the Crocs approach through the water, their long tails sinuously trailing behind as they adeptly swim, whilst others move from island to island, gradually closing the distance at a slow walk. The smaller Croca-Beasts lead from the front whilst the two Titan Crocs follow from behind, dwarfing their lesser evolved allies as they move.

As soon as one scaly foot lands close enough to Crinis, she acts.

Unfurling herself with blinding speed, tentacles begin to lash out in all directions, peeling out of her body endlessly until there are dozens of them grasping towards the closest foes. By the time the Croca-Beast realises what is happening it's already too late, once the first tentacle latches onto its leg its fate is sealed.

More tentacles lash out, slashing through the air like whips and striking the beast, coiling tightly around it. Snarling viciously the monster tries to resist, pulling and slashing at the inky black shadow flesh with its claws but it is to no avail. Razor sharp barbs emerge from the tentacles and begin their dark work.

Knowing what Crinis' upgrades can do, I'm not entirely sure I'm prepared to watch what's about to happen....

[Stay away from Master you vile beast!] Crinis roars.

Then she engages her 'ripping barbs'.

Where once her barbs would dig and tear into her victim, now they can move, shifting back and forth at high speeds over a distance of a few inches.

In effect... I guess you could say it's like a chainsaw.

.....

Slack-jawed with fear, the other Croca beasts watch as their struggling compatriot undergoes what will only describe as the 'Crisis Experience'. She'll probably get a few more levels of dismember from this.

When it's all said and done her main body inflates and unfolds again to reveal her cavernous maw. The no longer struggling Croca is unceremoniously dropped within and as a ghastly crunching sound emerges from her main body, those inky black tentacles begin reaching out once more.

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Chapter 214: Battle begins

The smaller croca beasts look quite apprehensive to be approaching the grasping tentacles of death but with their larger cousins pressing them from behind they have little choice but to continue to approach.

Crinis has spread her net of tentacles in a ten metre arc towards the approaching foes, her tremor sense giving her some idea of the positioning of the enemy. The Titan Crocs bringing up the rear snap their jaws and bark out a brief message to their lesser kin, who grit their oversized teeth and rush forward as one.

It seems they've grown tired of the slow measured approach and want to surround Crinis with overwhelming numbers. Nine of the beasties are rushing towards her now, claws extended and long crocodile jaws open wide for a taste of my pet!

Fortunately Crinis, the smartest of my core children has foreseen this situation! She was already a complete beast at fighting a horde of enemies, but with her new mutations that ability has only been intensified!

Those jet black grasping tentacles react quickly to the pounding feet of the approaching Crocs. Before the monsters can even swipe their claws the tentacles begin to divide, splitting into thinner limbs that then divide some more, creating innumerable appendages that slither through the air towards the hapless crocs.

Just as they were about to commence their attack, claws extended and saliva dripping from their agape jaws, the crocs become lashed with hundreds of tentacles. Due to her upgraded shadow flesh and tentacle manipulation skill, Crinis has become quite adept at the manipulation of her limbs and the strange stuff that makes up her body has only grown tougher and more flexible as she mutates it.

The crocs don't stand a chance. The moment they are entwined in those razor thin tentacles their hope is lost. They struggle and roar but the shadow flesh proves to be resistant to their feeble struggles. The tentacles slowly fuse together again, thickening, until they manifest the barbs once more.

With a horrid whine the ripping begins and it isn't long before Croc after Croc is being deposited into the mouth of the ever hungry murder ball.

That is just... so rough, every time I see it.

["Tiny, I want you to take on the Titan Croc on the right. Vibrant, you go support him. Crinis, you and I can take out the one on the left"] I command my troops.

"Roger!" Vibrant shouts.

[Huh] Tiny grunts happily, the fire burning in his eyes.

[Of course, Master!] Crinis cries with glee.

The two giant crocs seem to be having second thoughts about their previous confidence. Watching their allies be shredded and chewed up by a single ball of ink will have that sort of effect I suppose. It's too late to back out now because we are on the charge!

My transformation construct is ready and primed, churning out a steady stream of water mana which I begin to weave into spells. I don't actually think Crinis or Tiny will actually need help to dispose of these Titan-Crocs but it feels nice for everyone to get involved. We have a long fight ahead after all, we all need get warmed up!

Unable to escape the two six-legged crocs rear back to their full height and roar in unison. The low rumble of their cry rattles the air and all around us crocs turn to focus intently on the goings on. With my superior vision I can already see a few slipping into the water and making their way towards us.

Oh boy, I think it's on now.

With no reason to hold back I begin pouring my mental energy into spell shaping without holding back. I need to make sure my allies don't suffer in this fight!

Tiny is the first to reach his enemy, leaping high and crashing down with a titanic strike. A narrow miss! His light enveloped fist plunges down and the ground beneath our feet shakes with that shattering impact. The Croc seems to realise just how lucky it was in that moment it dodged, staring wide eyed at the ape before it, failing to capitalize on this moment of weakness. Vibrant takes advantage of its distraction and dashing in to chomp it on the leg viciously, tearing into the limb and causing the beast to growl in pain.

On my side I fling a few water bolts at the Croc, staggering it with the sheer kinetic force of the water smashing into it. Water sprays everywhere from the blasts, drizzling down onto Crinis who completely ignores it as she 'walks' towards her opponent on her several tentacles. This is her new skill, the tentacle walk. It may not seem like much but she certainly is moving with much more ease and grace than she was before. Whereas before she basically dragged herself along, now she glides with deadly purpose.

Before her main body her limbs are already seeking, reaching and grasping towards her worried opponent who is only just recovering from the impact of my water bolts. Hastily the Croc throws open his jaw and unleashes a jet of orange flame!

Searing heat washes over me as the flames are turned onto Crinis at point blank range! Fortunately she was forewarned of this danger. As soon as she feels the heat burning her shadow flesh she retracts her limbs as quickly as possible, folding them into her main body to protect the more vulnerable parts of her body.

This was what I instructed her to do. Shadow beasts seem to have something of a weakness to fire so I wanted Crinis to be able to limit the damage she might take in battle with the Titan Crocs.

But I don't simply intend to let her sit there and take the flame thrower, that would be madness!

Water Cannon!

A solid stream of water materialises above my head and streaks through the air before smacking straight into the Crocs mouth!

Got him!

The flames are almost immediately extinguished as the Croc slams its mouth shut, steam leaking out from between its teeth!

[Go Crinis!] I shout.

I keep the water cannon trained on the dumb Croc as it uses its large upper arms to shield its face from my relentless water attack. If he opens that mouth again he's gonna get another dose!

Freed from the pesky flames, Crinis slashes out with her tentacles, attaching herself to the Croc in moments. With the limbs undivided, they are thick and powerful. Before the Croc can even scream they begin to twist and rend the beast, dragging it bodily towards the waiting maw, bristling with enormous fangs.

Well, she needs to heal up a little I guess.

On the other side, Tiny has beaten their foe into a pulp with his fists as Vibrant ran interference, nibbling on legs and being a general pest to the large croc.

Our first battle has ended in glorious victory, but I can see more of the monsters making their way over, including a few new variants I've not fought before. It's time to take on the real troops!

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Chapter 215: The new croc on the block

["Eat up gang, not long until the next wave is here"] I warn my troops.

Crinis has already eaten of course, stuffing her face with ten Crocas and an entire Titan Croc. If I get my hands on that dimensional stomach during my next evolution I swear I'll dance for a week straight.

I'm so envious!

Also, where the heck is my food!?

I'll have to settle for nibbling on some this next group coming our way. With my omni directional eyes I can see that there are crocs approaching from multiple sides. Having seen us shred the weaker ones so comfortably the smaller Croca Beasts are staying back, cowering behind their more powerful cousins. Titan-Crocs, the massive, lumbering six-legged beasts are the bulk of what is coming our way but they certainly aren't the biggest.

Mixed amongst them are clearly more highly evolved children of Garralosh. Even larger than the Titan Crocs (will I have to rename them?!), their dark green scaled bodies ripple with strength as they ponderously move on their six limbs. The larger legs and somewhat prehensile arms sport vicious claws and their long jaws still bristle with razor sharp looking teeth.

Where they differ from their slightly more diminutive cousins is firstly the eyes. Just in front of their regular eyes they have an extra set which gleam red with some sort of energy. Secondly, their tails. Right at the base of their tail it splits into two, both tails seemingly shifting independently of the other.

It kind of makes me wonder what was going on in Garralosh's head when they designed these evolutions for her children. More isn't necessarily better you lousy Croc! Just slap an extra set of eyes and tail on them and call it quits?! How lazy is that?! All the effort and thought I poured into shaping the new generation of workers is being mocked by this slack effort!

Wait, no. Don't judge too quickly, Anthony. The Titan Crocs had the surprising inclusion of their fire mana gland, there's a chance that these guys will have something interesting going on besides just an increase in size and new tails.

I have to say, the crocs look right at home in this environment. The lush greenery, dark brown earth and muddy waters feels like the perfect backdrop for these Croc monsters as they slide through the water, mostly submerged, or lumber between the trees. I can see why they like this expanse, it suits them.

Too bad I found it! Soon all of this land will belong to the colony! Muahahaha!

["Tiny and Vibrant, you guys take on that side together. Begin with an acid bombardment, Vibrant then nib at the flanks like we discussed. Tiny, don't hold back, I want to see some sparks you understand?"]

"Yep-yep! I'll get 'em!" Vibrant declares cheerfully, snapping her mandibles at the approaching enemy.

[Hmm] Tiny grunts as sparks begin to crackle across his body.

[Ok Crinis, you and me on this side. Watch out for more fire. We don't know what these bigger crocs can do, so we need to be careful and go full force from the start. Don't hold out on me!]

[Never, Master!]

[That's what I like to hear!]

As soon as I'm finished talking I begin drawing out my Gravity mana and compressing it. I'm not going to play around with these unknown evolutions. I'll take one of them out before they can even start the fight.

Flipping control of the water mana construct to one of my sub brains I task the other with feeding me a steady supply of the purple gravitational mana from my own internal supply. Within my body the energy pulses vibrantly and begins to flow out, responding to the direction of my thoughts. Next to the mana gland, my core glows brightly, already recharging the mana I had spent on water bolts earlier.

As the gravitational energy is delivered to me I start shaping it, crunching it down, pressing with the wait of my consciousness, then beginning to outline the structure of my spell. All of the hours of practice I've put into this task are bearing fruit as the spell takes shape fluidly. It's still hard, like painting a three dimensional masterpiece with only my thoughts, but my mind isn't what it used to be. Almost double my normal human Cunning means my mind is able to move in ways it simply wasn't possible to do before. More precise, more powerful, my mind slides the compressed mana into place then starts powering the spell.

This one is a special spell, a new trick I worked on during the last week. I tested the spell on a few monsters and was entirely disappointed with the effect. For the mana invested and the difficulty of the spell to construct, I'd hoped for a lot more.

The spell shape is a double layered sphere. A small, dense ball of gravitational energy, inscribed with arcane sigils that slowly rotates within a shell made from an outer sphere. The inner sphere is hard to make but the outer one.... Yikes. Suffice to say it looks pretty impressive floating in my mind.

During testing I learned how to fire the spell. It essentially manifests in front of my face and flies forward in a straight line. Once it impacts the target the energy contained within the inner sphere flows to the outer one and the target becomes surrounding by a gravity field that pulls them in all directions.

... it's nasty.

But other than making monsters uncomfortable and inhibiting their movement, the spell didn't do a whole lot of damage. Then I thought about the forceful version, what would be different with the powered up spell?

... it's really nasty.

I call this spell of gruesome death, the Gravity Sphere!

BAM!

With a surge of will I manifest the spell and fire it towards the closest Double Croc (so named for their new eyes and tail). The beast didn't expect a spell to come flying at it from such a harmless looking ant monster and failed to dodge.

I feel sorry for you buddy.

The spell takes effect immediately, the outer sphere expanding to encompass the entire form of the Croc in crackling purple mana as the energy from the inner sphere is discharged.

Then the horrific pull of gravity begins to exert itself on the monster from every direction. The creature roars with rage as the monsters around it step aside unsure what is happening.

I wonder how long he'll be able to resist it. At least that's one Croc taken out of the fight.

[Let's go Crinis!]

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Chapter 216: Magical An

As my first victim languishes within my spell that is quite literally trying to pull it apart in every direction, I turn my attention to the rest of the monsters coming our way. So far there are six Titan Crocs and three of the larger Double Crocs who need dealing with.

Come to me, you leathery chumps! I'm not holding back this time!

I vengefully command my sub brain to pass more gravitational mana to me and begin swiftly weaving together ordinary gravity bolts. With the relative ease of construction the spell leaves me enough awareness to turn and present my back zone towards my foes.

Have a taste of this, you darn crocs!

POW! POW! POW!

Quick as a flash I fire off three blasts of my own special brand of acid before turning around again and unleashing my spell.

The acid arcs through the air towards the crocs. They are on alert this time and two of the shots miss but the spell slams home into one of the Titan Crocs who immediately feels the weight of the world fall on its shoulders, slowing its movement to a crawl.

Plenty more where that came from!

[Crisis, get into a defensive position in front of me. I'll throw spell until they reach us]

[Understood, master]

No nonsense in the heat of battle, my faithful pet glides gracefully in front of me and rapidly deploys her web of tentacles. The monsters will have to get past her if they want to reach me and I don't think she'll allow that...

Gravity Bolt!

With my current mind I can whip one of these out in just seconds, the second is already prepared and on its way!

This time I target one of the Double Crocs. I want to see what these beefier monsters are made of. As they draw closer the spells become more difficult to dodge and this one strikes home easily. The target looks angry to have been struck with my spell and when the gravity descends it unleashes a roar of frustration, the anger rumbling out from deep in its chest. But it keeps coming. Slower than before, thankfully but still coming. It appears these monsters have enough Might to overcome the normal gravity bolt and not suffer too much. I won't bother spending more of that on them then.

Weighing them down and restricting their mobility is nice but I can do a hell of a lot better with my time and every second counts.

I've been weaving another gravity bolt even as I watched the effect of the last one and it is quickly ready.

Fire!

Another Titan Croc feels the pressure fall onto it, pulling its feet down to the ground and it struggles to overcome the weight.

The Crocs are moving at full speed now, the ground shuddering under the impact of their massive feet. Overhead the trees shake and shiver. The monsters moving through the water shift into high gear, spraying water as they pass, their jaws opening wide to reveal their surprisingly pink tongues nestled between rows of razor sharp teeth.

I've got time for maybe two more spells before they hit us.

Maybe I can buy us some more time though...

Gravity mana begin to pour out of my gland at the behest of my sub brain and I bring forth the full power of my prodigious mind to compress it down and weave it into the shape of another new spell. I have to focus hard on this one as I haven't had enough practice with it to be able to shape it easily.

I can almost feel steam pour out of my ears as my mind starts to overheat. Within my mind I compress mana and build up the structure of my spell at dizzying speeds, loops and whorls, spheres and lines, layer on layer taking shape as the seconds tick by. The crocs thunder towards us, emerging from the water just a few metres away and charging forward.

Aaaaaand Done!

Gravity Bola!

[Forceful Mana has reached level 7]

[Precise shooting has reached level 3]

Haa! It's nice to fight some tier three monsters for a change! The difference in Xp is really showing. I can't wait to eat.....

The Gravity Bola materialises before me and flings forward in the shape of a wide line. By angling it just so I manage to clip the Crocs emerging from the water as well as those running overland. Only one Titan Croc is able to avoid being hit by the spell as it faces forward, shrinking in width as it passes.

The Crocs who are hit seem almost confused as they notice no effect from the spell but unbeknownst to them there is a sliver of energy that ties to them to the bola as it travels. The further the spell goes the smaller it becomes until it has shrunk to a single point and becomes still.

At this point the spell takes effect. With a tremendous pulse of gravitational energy, the crocs feel themselves being pulled backwards towards the spell. They jerk as the pulse yanks them backwards a few steps. The massive beasts freeze for a moment then being to walk forward, only to be yanked back by another pulse of energy.

The gravity bola!

The normal version isn't much but the forceful version comes out wider and the pull is much, much stronger.

Phew! That took a lot out of me. Thankfully by Gravitational gland is so deep, I still have plenty in the tank.

Angry and frustrated the Double Crocs push forward until their muscles creak and pop, the hulking monsters straining against the spell. The closest one opens wide and flames flicker within its mouth.

Yikes! I hastily begin spinning up a spell.

The Croc leans forward and unleashes a huge ball of fire that races towards us, the fire bursting out of its mouth with a tremendous roar!

[Master?] Crinis questions.

She can probably feel the heat. The temperature is certainly rising fast.

[I'm on it!] I grate out as my brains work together at light speed to put together my spell.

Done!

Water Bolt!

The dense ball of water flies forward and impacts against the fire just before it strikes us.

PSSSHHHHH.

With an audible THUMP the spells collide and an explosion of steam bursts out, the two substances consuming each other in an instant.

Dammit! I can't see a thing!

I hastily whip up another water bolt and hold it as I peer through the steam. My antennae start going crazy as my heat detection lights up like a firework. Yes! I get it! There is heat everywhere!

[What have you got Crinis?]

[They're coming!] she cries.

The steam has no effect on her vision... since she doesn't have any...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 217: Feast of Croc

What is experience? Where does it come from? Where does it go? Ever since the System descended on our world, scholars priests and wise ones all over the world have sought to understand it. Class progressions have been mapped out, skill trees have been researched and codified endlessly. Many aspects of the system are thoroughly understood and form the curriculum of schools all around the world.

The fundamental underpinning aspects of the System, however, remain elusive and resistant to study. There are many theories on the topic of experience that range from reasonable to absurd but the topic is one that resists study as it is so intangible. The system at no point quantifies experience in a number, making it impossible to ascertain just how much is gained from any one activity. Estimates can and have been made, by having two subjects of the same level attempt to reach the next by different means, one through study and one through combat, for example, and educated guesses can be achieved through such means, but just what experience is, remains as distant a piece of understanding as ever.

There are those who believe, somewhat mystically, that experience taken from a living thing, a monster, is the purest form, the true intention of the System and any other source is secondary to this. The church of the Path has long extolled the view that nothing truly dies so long as it's experience is absorbed by another living creature, that the 'essence' is preserved and made part of a stronger whole. This seems harmless enough when applied to monsters, but should one extend that dangerous logic to the killing of other people, an activity that also awards XP, some of the dark rumours that swirl around that faith, particularly in its early years, begin to gain credence.

"Experience of the System, origins Myths and Legends, by Jivani the faithless" from the secret Library of the Path.

Behind me I can see that the fight is raging between Tiny. Vibrant and a host of Crocs. Without my magnificent magic to deter the beasts, they have been able to swarm forwards and engage Tiny in a vicious melee. Unfortunately for the Crocs, right next to the ape isn't exactly the safest place one could hope to be. Lightning crackles along Tiny's torso, zapping nearby foes and discharging through his hands with every punch. With each swing of his arms a Croc is sent reeling, even the Double Crocs, large as they are, cannot withstand the strength of those fists.

Like me, Tiny is a tier four monster, not to mention the beneficiary of multiple special evolutions. His strength is absurdly high and thanks to having actually spent some Biomass and skill points, his combat effectiveness is only climbing. The Double Crocs are tier three monsters, and there is little chance they have received the level of evolution, or had access to the wealth of Biomass, that Tiny has been able to enjoy.

I spoil my pets! What can I say?

At any rate, despite being heavily outnumbered, the big lug is managing to hold his own, smashing away Crocs with wild swings whenever they surround him. He's taking some damage though, his defence not up to the task of fending off those jaws and claws.

Vibrant is sticking to instructions and after bombarding the foe with acid from range she has stuck to a hit and run tactics. Whenever a Croc runs directly at her she turns and races to the other side of Tiny, putting the melee between herself and her would be opponent. She really is fast! She would leave me in the dust, even when dashing. Once out of sight and out of mind she charges forward and viciously deploys her various biting skills, chomping away at legs or arms, occasionally the odd torso.

Whenever they get sick of her nibbling, the monsters turn and swipe at her, their claws raking along her carapace, occasionally penetrating far enough to draw blood. True to directions, she immediately backs off, healing up and waiting for another opportunity to strike.

I wonder just how often she can use that healing gland...

On my side, Crinis and I are stilling contending with the odd fireball as our opponents struggle to overcome my forceful gravity bola.

Nifty spell this one. Even monsters as large and physically powerful as the Croca's aren't able to advance once I've tagged them with this beauty. One Titan Croc managed to evade the spell but he has unfortunately fallen into the clutches of Crinis' tentacles.

[You dare to approach my Master, vile beast!?!]

She seems mad.

The fate of the Croc is.... Not good. To say the least.

[Don't eat them all Crinis, we need to save some food for everyone, especially the Double Croca]

[Understood, Master]

Beyond the immediate surrounding the environment is still shrouded with steam. I can't quite see the Crocs, their hulking bodies reduced to mere shadows with the obstruction, but similarly, they can't see us.

Doesn't stop them from hurling fire at us though.

[Crisis, fire coming!]

Dammit! Blindly throwing fire in our direction is still dangerous enough. The flames the double Crocs contain within is more potent than that inside their smaller cousins. This is going to get rough.

Around me the fireballs explode as I turn my mind inwards, racing to complete another spell. The air begins to roast us immediately, Crisis suffering more than I do.

Grrrr. I should have seen this coming! Hurry up Anthony, get this spell done!

Within my mind the water mana dances and glides as all of my minds are purposed to directing the mana into a familiar shape.

FWOOSH!

More fireballs ignite through the steam. These Crocs have a decent tank of fire. Luckily my spell is ready!

Water Domain!

Expanding outwards with me in the centre, a spherical wall of water pushes the flames away. With yet more explosions of the steam the incoming fireballs smash into my expanding barrier, super heating the liquid and pushing through but only with a shadow of their previous strength.

Nice! I can handle this!

Yet more steam billows out and further obstructs our vision.

Dammit, I can't see a thing!

[We can't hang back anymore Crisis! Time to push forward and mess them up!]

A very damp tentacle death sphere acknowledges my words with her actions and picks her body up and begins to advance, extending a web of tentacles before herself as she advances, completely unaffected by the steam.

I pass the maintenance of my water domain, a swirling mass of water than swishes and froths constantly in a five metre diameter around me.

Cautiously we advance, my sub minds taking over the maintenance of the water domain and supplying it with a steady stream of water mana. Gradually a shadow looms larger in front of us, a Double Croc thrashing against the restraint of the gravity bola. The Croc is large, far larger than myself, but it certainly doesn't expect us.

Crisis' seeking limbs creep forward before finally contacting the monster before us. Instantly a number of tentacles snap forward and latch onto the Croc who growls deep in its throat and begins slashing with its claws at the shadow flesh that has attached to it.

Oh no you don't you damned Croc!

Dashing forward the beast is buffeted by the surging waters of my water domain, knocked off balance and thoroughly saturated. Summoning the energy from within I open my mandibles wide as they begin to glow.

Shattering Bite!

Crunch!

"GARRRR!"

The Double Croc reels back in pain.

Suffer from my bite Croc! The first of many!

Chrysalis

Chapter 218: Skirmish Conclulsion

More fireballs fly out of the distance and impact against my water domain, sending massive gouts of steam hissing into the air and further reducing visibility. In front of me, buffeted and soaked by the frothing mass of water that makes up my water domain, the double croc lunges forward with its massive jaws.

SNAP!

Yikes!

Leaping to the left I manage to avoid the snapping jaws at the last second. With the foe off balance, I dash forward to bite once more.

CRUNCH!

[Shattering Bite has reached level 8]

Muahahaha!

The Croc growls furiously, a rumble that comes from deep within its chest and shakes the air with its intensity. The double crocs are almost the same size as Tiny when standing on their hind legs, close to ten feet.

Being a little over a metre tall at this point, the damn thing towers over me. My eyes are about level with its knees! Thankfully my shattering bite manifests more than metre away from actual mandibles, increasing the range of my bite attacks considerably.

Enough to take a decent chunk out of the monsters side at any rate.

WHAM!

Ouch!

A little cocky after my successful bite and I don't even notice the twin tails sweeping towards me until they smash into my side with tremendous force, sending me flying several metres away.

[Master! Are you all right!?] Crinis cries shrilly.

[I'm fine! Focus on the fight!]

[Damn beast! I WILL REND YOU!!!]

I've lost a bit of HP from that strike, the kinetic force of the impact was enough to crack my carapace in several places but the enhanced diamond is perfect for resisting this sort of damage. Not to mention, a new feeling arises in the damaged sections that brings a smile to my heart. The inner bone plating, a supportive structure that webs the inside of my exoskeleton, begins to excrete a gel like substance at the site of the damaged portions. Immediately I can feel the tingling feeling of regeneration begin to intensify as the cracks start to knit together.

Oh how I love it when a plan comes together!

How's that you stupid Croc?! A few minutes and I'll be back to full HP again! The magical tank that is Anthony the ant shall never be stopped!

Being able to repair the damage to my main defence, the carapace, without having to expend my healing gland, is so tasty!

Whilst I'm admiring my own incredible wisdom, Crinis has gone berserk. She has begun threshing her limbs around one of the Crocs' legs, the beast being too large for her to effectively wrap the entire thing at once, she has chosen to concentrate her fire on one particular limb.

Ahhh! So THIS is why she took dismember!

....

Yuck....

The beast fall to one side and I can see other shadows growing closer now, their flickering shadows growing nearer through the steam. My water domain continues to swirl around me and I position myself so that the frothing liquid slashes and slams into the Crocs face as Crinis flicks her limbs to the beasts torso.

It seem like the crocs, as expected, are quite resistant to water spells. Their scaly hides are perfect for sliding through water and provide a decent measure of protection against the kinetic impact of my water spells.

Perhaps Garralosh wasn't completely stupid when they designed their children with fire mana glands after all. At least my water magic is working to counter their stupid fireballs, even if the field has been covered in a blanket of steam.

I rush forward and begin to chomp away at the hapless double croc. With Crinis working her dark magic on its limbs and my own mandibles crunching at it, even a tier three croc monster cannot resist for long.

[You have defeated Level 12 Garralosh Bellator]

[You have gained XP]

Before Gandalf has even finished his words I leap forward and take a bite from the fallen enemy.

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

[Basic profile of the Garralosh Bellator unlocked]

[Garralosh Bellator: Garralosh Soldier, Following in the evolutionary footsteps of their progenitor, the Garralosh Soldier is equipped with a more powerful muscular system, increased stamina, intensified flame and double tails.]

Huh. So apparently these Garralosh offspring are basically evolving the same way the original Croc monster did? Following in their mother's footsteps?

That's interesting, it gives some insight into what Garralosh itself might look like.

But I don't have time to worry about that now, we have more offspring to kill! I have to move quickly before my gravity spell wears off completely!

I nudge Crinis mentally and we dash in the direction I recall seeing the other Double Croc. Thankfully my memory doesn't fail me and we manage to approach the creature who, despite being buffeted by my water domain, manages to accurately swipe at me with one claw.

SCREETCH!

The solid bone claw scraped along my pristine Diamond carapace and sparks fly but the claw fails to penetrate through to my soft, fleshy insides. The carapace is triumphant!

[DEATH!] Crinis screams, and a boiling mass of tentacles lash forward and wrap both legs of the double croc.

[Nice, Crinis!] I shout and move to follow up on her attack.

POW!

Right from the famed shopping plaza a blast of acid smacks into the beast's upper chest, immediately sizzling and burning away the scales that cover the croc's torso. Flames begin to flicker around the mouth of the creature but thanks to my improved rear vision I'm way ahead of it and position myself so that my water domain starts slamming into the croc's face.

Haha! You want flame thrower me now?

HSSSSSSSSSSSS!

Apparently yes!

Unwilling to hold back the flame, the monster opens wide blasts the spherical wall of water before it and even though some of the fire does indeed penetrate my defence, the majority is swallowed by the water and a huge gout of steam blasts the Croc right in the face!

Yeouch.

I wonder who has the higher Cunning, Tiny or the Double Croc?

I shake my head, I should think so poorly of my own pet.

Scalded by this unexpected event, the Croc rears back in pain and anger.

[Get him Crinis! Finish it!]

[Understood!]

As the uncomfortable sounds of ripping and tearing begin to fill the air I lunge forward to apply mandibles, pumping some raw mana into them to activate their infused property and greatly increase their cutting power.

CHOMP! CHOMP!

No matter how the monster tries to fight back its useless. Within Crinis typing up and savaging its legs and me tearing into it, the superficial slashes and bites it manages to land on us are not able to inflict serious damage.

[You have slain level 6 Garralosh Soldier]

[You have gained experience]

I feel the forceful gravity bola dissipate, releasing the rest of the crocs to continue their advance, but it's too late, the spell has done its work admirably. Without being able to group together the larger double crocs have been defeated.

In fact, I can also sense that by forceful gravity sphere has dispelled and

[You have slain level 7 Garralosh Soldier]

[You have gained experience]

[You achieved Level 14, One skill point awarded]

There you go.

Not sure I want to go inspect those remains though...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 219: Expeditious retrea

With the heavy hitter taken out of the equation there isn't much left to the fight. Crinis and I quickly destroy the Titan Crocs and rush back to help support Tiny and Vibrant.

The giant ape and ant soldier are beaten and bruised but victorious as they lord over their fallen enemies. Tiny is beating his chest and roaring his challenge out to the world whilst Vibrant does a manic, high speed dance around his ankles.

[RAAAAARR] Tiny bellows.

"RAA HAHHAHAHA!" Vibrant cackles.

.....

I was right to team these two up. They fit together like peas in a pod. The only problem is, who is the brains of the operation?

In the distance there are yet more crocs, huddling together in small posse's like leathery hoodlums. For the time being they aren't responding to our provocation but I'd rather not put their tolerance to the test.

For now there aren't any groups within two hundred metres, which is roughly how far we've advanced into the expanse.

["OK, hold off on the celebration already you two"] I snap, ["We've won the first skirmish but there are more to be had. Let's eat quickly and prepare our next move."]

I don't need to tell them twice. The gang quickly breaks up and we start stuffing our faces full whilst keeping a watchful eye on the surrounding monsters. I myself head directly for the Double Crocs. It's been some time since I've been able to eat a tier three monster of this size and I don't intend to let the opportunity go to waste!

OM NOM NOM.

There really is a distinct flavour to croc. I think it's growing on me, to be honest. Particularly the tails. Now that I think of it, the double croc evolutionary choices are really making sense to me. Double the tail to eat? Nice!

I manage to reap a nice harvest of Biomass from the first croc but as I'm moving towards the second, Crinis cries out mentally.

[Master! I can feel vibrations coming this way, lots of them! I think it's a wave!]

Oh snap!

["Everyone back to the tunnels! Go Go Go!"]

Tiny seems reluctant to move, still shoving huge fistfuls of food into his mouth until his cheeks are puffed out to a ludicrous degree.

[Tiny! Move your big butt back to the tunnels! Right now!] I yell at him even as I activate my dash skills to rush at Crinis and throw her onto my back.

HEAVY!

With that maw of hers she can eat ten times faster than the rest of us, she's so damned heavy already she must have eaten two or three crocs at least!

Tiny cannot refuse my direct command. Unwilling to part with his meal he grabs the body of the double croc he was eating and throws it over his shoulder before dashing and leaping his way back to the tunnel.

How greedy! Wish I'd thought of that.... At the very least I might have been able to grab a tail...

With all possible speed we rush back to the tunnel entrance we used to reach this point and position ourselves defensively. I'd figured that we would encounter a wave or two during our attack on the expanse and in my mind the worst case scenario would be if we were caught out in the open. The monsters in a wave are low level, without many mutations and generally tier one with a few having

evolved, generally not much of a threat. But if they were to surround us in the middle of the marsh, where mobility is difficult and there are native monsters who could interfere and get in the way...

It could get nasty.

Safely retreating to the tunnel that leads up to the colony and effectively blocking it, preventing any monsters from reaching my family and then continuing the assault is by far the best choice.

[Tiny in front, Crinis right behind to support, make sure he doesn't get surrounded. Vibrant, stay behind Crinis and move up to support when you can, don't let yourself get caught. I'll stick to the roof]

We quickly take our positions and it isn't long until I can see the wave of monsters approaching through the tunnel entrance. They roll through the marsh as a dark mass of shadow beasts, the occasional normal, animalistic monster mixed in.

Curiously, they don't seem too interested in feasting on the native monsters in the expanse as they pass, leaving them undisturbed for the most part. I think I see the odd flower monster getting trampled but nothing seems to go out of its way to kill or eat.

This behaviour is just so un-monster like that it's baffling to me. What hold does the creature controlling this expanse have on these monsters? Is it a skill? A mutation? Or something to do with their core? I just don't have the knowledge to explain it.

Hopefully soon, I will.

It doesn't take long for the monsters to reach us. Tiny finally stops snaking on his croc and flings the remaining food behind us, saving it for later, before flexing his fingers as lightning begins to crackle around his body.

I myself head towards the ceiling and grip it tightly, drawing on my water transformation construct to stockpile some condensed water mana in preparation for a forceful water cannon. That spell has proven to be the most effective so far at cutting through the shadow beasts' strange flesh quickly.

[Advanced Grip has reached level 4]

....

Nice! Grip hasn't levelled in ages! Why now?

I guess I haven't been doing a whole of gripping. Where once I almost exclusively travelled on ceilings I'm more a floor walker now. Somehow that feels a little disappointing to me, as if something of my ant nature is lacking. I guess I walk up and down the colony walls but that probably does less for xp wise than hanging off a ceiling during a fight.

Internally I resolve to hang upside down a bit more as I brace for the incoming wave.

The monsters grow larger in our eyes until they crash into us with tremendous momentum. Tiny meets the challenge willingly, his massive fists smashing the first monsters into past the moment they rush into range.

Forceful Water Cannon!

The tunnel is immediately filled with sound of desperate combat as the monsters throw themselves at us like berserkers, mindlessly advancing into our attacks and getting cut down just as quickly.

My spell zigs and zags through their ranks, slicing through them without mercy. The spray of water saturates the tunnel and the incoming monsters who quickly fall prey to Tiny's lightning and fists.

Any that reach his sides are snatched up in Crinis tentacles and torn to pieces or flung back towards Vibrant who falls upon them with savage flee, her mandibles swiftly ending the threat.

We battle in this way for a full fifteen minutes before the wave has expended itself. The tunnel is packed full of Biomass, to a ridiculous degree and we are tired and battered. Tiny in particular has suffered the brunt of the fighting so far, cuts and bruises dot his body as the massive ape catches his breath.

Since we are close to the shortcut anyway, I decide that we should stuff our faces, heal up, and deliver the rest of this food to the surface for the colony to pick up before we continue our assault.

Chrysalis

Chapter 220: Once more into the expanse

After we've made a quick delivery to the surface and we take a little time to rest to aid the digestion. Fighting on a full stomach isn't the best feeling in the world, especially when I've already taken in a special core.

The tight, painful feeling has faded in the background by now. I'm sure if that is because my body has successfully accommodated to containing this slightly oversized core or if I've just gotten used to the pain. I'm still determined to try and take in another before my next evolution. I'm not willing to stay behind on the power curve. To protect my family, I'll take the risk to get every edge I possibly can.

To turn a humble worker ant into a monstrous powerhouse I can't go by the standard road. Maxing out my core and selecting the special evolutions isn't enough for me anymore. If I'm going to run into this Garralosh monster, I feel like I'm going to need every edge I can get my claws on.

Just thinking about what that Croc could look like makes me nervous enough to clean my antennae before I can settle down.

How many evolutions? Tier five? Six? Seven?!

Mutations would be at what level? Tier six would be +30!

I hope my pets and I are strong enough to handle it if that damn beast ever decides to come at the colony.

For that reason, we need to take every opportunity to make ourselves stronger. When the new generation is up and running, I'll be a lot more confident in our future. To that end, we have to secure our position as quickly as we can. I've got a week until they hatch, by that time the expanse needs to be tamed and the threat to the colony ended.

I reaped 21 Biomass from the fighting so far, enough to buy a little something.

I instruct everyone to spend up and then settle in to glance through my menu.

Thank goodness! With this last feed, I've amassed just enough to take my antennae to +10!

[Would you like to upgrade antennae to +10? At this level you may select a mutation advancement from the menu]

Awesome!

My infrared senses have served me well since purchasing that upgrade. Having more information and more ways to sense enemies has made me feel much more secure in my travels through the Dungeon. My earlier sensory weakness has been well and truly overcome by now.

Flicking through the menu, I can see that there are some upgrades to the infrared advancement that make it more sensitive or effective at a greater range but I'm not particularly interested in that. Some of the other options are far more delicious, and I want to come back to some of those this time.

Precognitive Antennae, being able to sense a moment into the future. That is just a straight up hack. With multiple upgrades, I might be able to push the time I can detect into the future further and further.

Now that ability to sense opponents is so high, and it's time to continue to build on my ability to defeat them!

[Do you wish to purchase this upgrade? It will cost 27 Biomass]

YAS!

....

Oh right.

SNAZIFAZZLE!!!!

WHY DAMMIT?!

Five minutes of agonised flailing later we are ready to roll. The others have made their purchases, and the decided lack of reaction to the irritating side effect of having your body rearrange itself at the cellular level is starting to get me irritated.

Not much I can do about it.

Before we leave, I gather the crew for a brief war conference.

["All right everyone, how do we feel about our attack on the crocs so far?"]

[These beasts lack the proper respect for you Master!] Crinis pouts.

[Tasty] Tiny grunts.

"Those tails are delicious!" Vibrant cheers.

....

["Thanks everyone that's super useful. Let's go"]

In short order, I get everyone lined up and ready to advance. Once more we step out of the narrow, glowing tunnels and into the comparatively broad skies of the expanse — this time I make sure to instruct Tiny not to charge forward recklessly and wait for my order.

He wasn't happy, but he's just gonna have to build a bridge and get over it.

Immediately I can see that there are fewer crocs on this side of the expanse than before. Where before they were clustered quite thickly around this entrance, there isn't any sign of them now. It almost feels as if they've withdrawn to prevent further losses. Maybe we'll find them deeper into the marsh. Content not to have to worry about the stupid lizards, for the time being, I get the gang moving, and we step forward.

In this way, we progress a little further into the marsh. The vegetation and flora are a little more active this time. Perhaps the thinner numbers of crocs have encouraged them to come out of their shells a little. The ever-present aura of intimidation still hangs thickly in the air, but the marsh is starting to show a few small signs of life.

Tiny, for one, gets instantly spellbound by the mind-bending flowers and I have to try and hold him back while Vibrant rushes forward to mow the offending plant.

Having warned Tiny away from the pretty flowers, we continue to creep gradually in until we make it to roughly the four hundred metre mark. The vegetation is so damned thick, trees, hanging vines, flowers the size of cars and rolling humps of mossy earth rising high, that visibility is incredibly weak. It's hard to know if we are coming or going sometimes.

As the soft sounds of the marsh ring through the air around us, I try to watch in all directions at once, wary for any traps or ambushes that may come our way.

As I creep along behind Tiny, Crinis riding on my back, I suddenly feel a strange sensation tickling down my antennae. It feels so weird I freeze in place momentarily, entirely unable to process what my brain is telling me.

CHOMP!

Which is precisely when I lose two legs to a massive Hippo Turtle.