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Chapter 221: The wonders of nature

I realise now that my brain, or rather my fancy new antennae, were telling me that I was about to have my legs bitten off in a savage and painful manner by a large creature emerging from the murky waters to my left.

Unfortunately I was simply unable to process the information quickly enough. I mean, when you start receiving sensory messaging from the future, it kind of wigs you out a bit. Up until this point my new antennae had only been providing me with a mild buzzing sensation. When it lit up so suddenly I was momentarily overwhelmed. So much so that even though I knew I was about to leg my legs chomped off, it still happened!

Ouch!

The offender is a rather large hippo looking creature with rough leathery skin and a moss covered shell that had been visible above the water line, looking for all the world like a hump of dirt, much like any of the others.

Now the damn fatty looks decidedly smug as I fall to one side, cursing internally and triggering my healing gland. The cold fluid floods my system, rushing to the site of my lost limbs which begin to regrow at an almost visible pace and I scramble with my four remaining legs to get myself clear of the monster.

[MASTER?!] Crinis shrieks, [What happened?!]

["Ambush! Fat Hippo thing on the left! I've lost a couple of legs, cover for me!"] I shout.

[AHHHH!!!!]

My mind is overwhelmed by Crinis hysterical screaming as the little tennis ball on my back EXPLODES with tentacles that start seeking towards the left side, latching onto and tearing at the Hippo-Turtles face at breakneck speeds.

Irritated at the sudden retaliation, the hippo rises out of the water and charges towards us at surprising speeds. Fast! Huge! FAT!

The monster is much larger than I'd first thought and certainly more bizarre! Small piggy eyes and those adorable little flappy ears sit above a typical broken toothed, oversized hippo mouth. The head extends out from under a thick, dome shaped shell on the end of a long turtle neck. The entire thing rests upon four squat hippo legs that pump at a rapid pace as the huge monster dashes out of the water, grunting angrily as Crinis continues to shriek at it and tear at its face.

As the beast runs towards me the ground is rumbling under my feet! I push with all of my might but I can't activate dash without all of my legs! Great time to learn that! Thanks skill! Come on legs, regenerate quick or I'm going to be building a more intimate relationship with this dirt that I was quite prepared for. Just before I get stomped into ant pate and served on crackers, Tiny dashes in from the side and meets the charging hippo with one shoulder.

BOOM!

The impact is colossal and the ground shudders under the impact of these two titans. As more of the creature emerges from the water I get a clearer picture of its size. Hippos are quite large creatures back on Earth, everyone knows that. Fast, big mouth, plump grey skinned killing machines that like a swim. This guy is a touch larger. I'd say he's about the size of a minivan.

You hear what I'm saying?

A MINIVAN!

[Crisis! You need to try and get at his legs! Buy me a little time!]

My smaller pet, she of the ink chainsaw, is still screeching at the monster. Her earlier wordless hollering has given way to a deafening tirade that promises endless violence in the most graphic terms I can imagine. So caught up in her blood red diatribe is she, that I'm not even sure he heard what I said.

In any event, as the Hippo Turtle rights itself and recovers its balance after being knocked aside by Tiny, Crisis gradually begins to transfer her tentacles away from the monster's face where, despite her most violent effort, minimal damage has been done.

Not only is the shell tough as nails, it seems the skin ain't no slouch either.

[Go hard Tiny! This guy look tough!]

"ROOOOO!" Tiny bellows, the fire blazing bright in his eyes.

He's ready to go!

Fists sparking, the ape launches himself into the air and brings both fists down in his patented ape smash, directly onto the hippo turtle's shell. The flabby beast grunts as all of the air is forced out of its body in a whoosh and it slams belly first into the ground.

Electricity flows out of Tiny and into the beast, stunning it momentarily as lightning crackles over its shell and leathery skin. Snarling, the beast forces its feet back under it and turns to engage the offending ape, snapping at him with those huge jaws.

Why does everything around here have to have such large mouths?

Whilst my pets engage the monster in brutal battle I bravely continue to crawl through the dirt as my missing limbs slowly regenerate. It's been ages since I lost a leg dammit! This hippo is going to pay!

As Tiny continues to trade blows with the beast, his fists snapping that head left and right and sending shockwaves through its long neck, Crisis busies herself with ripping into the legs, trying to saw her way through the thick skin is taking a long time though.

"Vibrant! Give it some acid, aim for the neck!"

"Roger!"

The ant soldier had been waiting for the opportune moment to engage in the fight, not willing to obstruct Tiny in his battle. With my instructions given she proudly presents an ant's best feature and begins to blast the enemy with her potent acid!

Four shots in total land on that long neck and begin to sizzle away pleasantly. The big monster groans in pain but cannot now turn away from the ape in front of it as he grows more and more aggressive, his fist swinging faster with every moment.

Gravity Bolt!

I hastily whip up the spell and blast it out, hoping to assist my pets in their work. Unerringly, thanks to my skills, the bolt strikes home on the creature, directly behind its head. I've seen this before. When the bolt hits a creature of sufficient size it doesn't just increase the gravity of the whole monster but rather drags down the body part that is hit.

In this instance, the fatty is instantly effected by a strong dragging force that wants to pull its head down into the dirt. Tiny takes advantage of the hippo's distraction to step in and smash a few punches directly into his opponents face.

Gravity Bolt!

Gravity Bolt!

I pile more spells onto the now struggling monsters neck, removing its ability to attack quite so swiftly with its jaws. Unwilling to suffer from the torture of the apes fists any longer, the hippo turtle begins to withdraw its head back into shell.

You can also do that?!

I hate this monster... so much.

[Get that leg Crinis!]

[Fall you filthy beast! Become food for the Master!]

With a horrible ripping sound, those countless tentacles twist and writhe before eventually completing their task and crippling the hippos front left leg.

Hah! How do you like it?!

As the beast falls to one side, this time for good, the assault is renewed. Crinis moves to another leg as Tiny begins to lay into the shell like it's a punching bag, eventually cracking the hard outer layer with every punch.

Vibrant judges that the time is right and leaps forward to engage with her mandibles, chipping away at the beast.

By the time my legs are sufficiently healed that I can walk on them the creature has been brought down.

Finally!

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Chapter 222: Further Marsh exploration

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass, *Sus Aquarum armatae*, you have been awarded one Biomass]

[Basic profile of Sus Aquarum Armatae has been unlocked]

[Sus Aquarum Armatae, Armoured Water Pig. This giant monster possesses robust defence, boasting a tough skin and extremely durable shell. Offensively, the Water Pig can deploy its vicious bite and has been known to utilise water magic to attack its foes]

Water magic huh? This one didn't use it, but it may not have had the chance.

After the fight, I had Tiny tip the beast onto its back, a difficult feat, even for him, and then we commenced feasting on the creatures flabby Biomass.

Somewhat vindictively, I started on the legs.

How do you like it?! Damn pig!

My legs have regenerated at this point. The new limbs are still somewhat stiff and a little tender, nothing a day or two won't fix. Having my legs get eaten is still irritating.

["We need to make sure that we don't get ambushed by these damn water pigs again guys"]

[Tasty] Tiny disagrees.

"Yeah! Tasty!" Vibrant registers her opinion cheerfully.

[I will be three times as vigilant! No such filth shall approach you again] Crinis is wiggling her tentacles in the air furiously to emphasise her words.

.....

The unity of this group is severely lacking.

More to the point, listen to me dammit!

Other than Crinis, the other two are only interested in eating!

She might get a little over-enthused sometimes, but at least she listens and pays attention.

[Thanks Crinis, I appreciate your efforts] I give her a quick tap on the top of her tennis ball form with an antenna.

[HAGA!]

Eh?

Standing next to me, elevating her main body on a few slender limbs, Crinis freezes and ever so slowly, begins to topple over until she's lying flat on the ground.

"What happened to Crinny!?" Vibrant dashes over to the small mass tentacles lying unnaturally still on the ground, poking her friend with a foreleg.

.....

All of them are useless. Hopefully, the next generation of ants will prove to be more helpful than this lot.

Did I just jinx myself? No flags! Shut up Anthony!

After finishing off the damn pig and letting Crinis recover until she's able to take her place on my back once again, I pause to consider the next move. The lush growth of the marsh expanse surrounds us, pools of murky water everywhere and the extensive mangrove-like trees with their vast, overly fleshy leaves.

Those small shadows are still up there also. I can see them now, little shapes that change their position every now and again, shuttling about in their own airy domain. I think I'll get myself up there, I've had enough grubbing about down here.

More than anything, I'm curious as to what these creatures are. What exactly are they doing up there?

Informing the others of my plan, I head straight towards the nearest of the trees and place one claw against the wood of its trunk. There is something odd about this bark. I can't quite put my finger on it. Not that I have fingers. Leaning back, I reach forward with my front four legs and try to pull myself up.

Slippery!

Sticky!

What is up with this tree?! I can't quite get my claws to dig into it? Not only do they slide off, refusing to grip properly into the soft looking bark, they also feel gummed up, as if coated in some invisible substance.

Damn tree! How dare you resist my claws! As an ant, I will not be denied my natural born right to walk vertically on anything I damn well, please! There are species of ants that can hang upside down on glass back on earth. For a tree to try and stop me climbing has lit a fire in my ant heart.

I shall climb!

Determined and alight with the pride of all ant kind I kick sharply off the ground and latch onto the tree with all of my claws, gripping for all I'm worth. Come on advanced grip! Do me proud!

The tree isn't having it. I can feel my claws sliding and locking up but I refuse to give in. Grip, Grip Grip!

Like a barehanded climber with six legs I reach and grasp, forcing my claws to bite deep into the tree and grasp hold before hauling the rest of my body up. Good thing I'm not that heavy for a monster relative to my Might stat. Even so it takes all my strength to pull my body up and by the time I reach the top I'm a heaving, gasping mess.

[Are you alright Master?] Crinis asks from my back.

.....

Ah. This deceptively heavy ball of unending hunger was riding on my back. I forgot.

Still! That tree is resistant to climbing to a ridiculous degree. That was insane. I can walk upside down on wet rocks, no problem, but climbing this damn thing was nearly impossible.

Shaking myself, I push my legs back under me and look about. I've reached the lowest of the branches that reach out across the marsh. In front of me, I can see the thick leaves, each one larger than I am, and small shapes creeping over them.

Alright then. What are these things?

Bracing myself, I move out along the branch, gripping tightly and moving slowly, begin to creep out along the length of the branch towards its end. As I draw closer to the over-sized leaves, the creatures creeping about on them become more clear.

Small, soft looking green shells, round chubby looking body and thin, stick-like legs.

Something deep within my ant brain sparks as if struck by lightning.

Are those... APHIDS?

Excitement begins to build in my belly.

Many people on Earth don't realise it, but some species of ants are farmers, and used farming to produce their food for hundreds of thousands of years. Leafcutter ants harvest leaves, not because they eat the leaves but because they use the leaves to grow a species of mould, deep within their nests, that they eat. Herder ants, among other kinds, perform a different type of farming. They keep aphids. The aphids feast on the leaves of trees and plants, and when approached by the ant, they will offer up a sugary liquid produced in their business district, which the ants eat. In return, the ants protect the aphids and shelter them from harm, even picking them up and moving them to the best positions on the plant.

Looking at these little monstrous aphids, each one the size of a school bag, creeping about on the leaves, I begin to wonder about the possibilities that might present themselves. Ants and aphids have a long history of cooperative coexistence.

In the deep recesses of my brain, a farming scheme is taking shape.

Eagerly, I advance down the branch and step out onto the broad leaf on which one of the little green fuzzy little insects is feeding. The leaf manages to take my weight, and I gradually approach the little bug. As I draw close it the creature freezes and huddles flat on the surface of the leaf.

As I stand over it, waiting the creatures shivering gradually slows as I don't attack it. Gradually, slowly, the little aphid excretes a thick, gel-like fluid from its back.

My antennae twitch at the scent.

Biomass!

My eyes gleam with avarice.

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Chapter 223: New growth

Beyn was a Priest and he was proud of that class. He had worked hard in the seminary, his faith blazing with an admirable glow, such that he had earned promotion and placement into a small village at a young age.

He still thought back on his time at the college, within the Path Sanctuary in Luxon. A mighty citadel filled with learning, preaching and the contemplation of the Path. He'd been happy there, tearing

through scripts and sitting at the knee of his teachers, absorbing their wisdom and delighting in his deepening knowledge of the System and the way in which it improved the lives of all peoples.

Respect was due to the System, reverence also! It was omniscient, it was omnipresent and it had saved all of the civilised peoples of the world from certain destruction. It had shown them the Path to salvation!

That is what Beyn had firmly believed his entire life.

Looking around the dusty people surrounding him now, it was hard to comprehend just how he had come to be here.

Such wondrous happenings, such revelatory events, they defied understanding, let alone explanation. If he were to take his lessons, relate his experiences to his old teachers he didn't doubt that he would turned over the Seekers for questioning. Perhaps he would even be purged. Yet he could not deny the evidence of his eyes, nor the wellspring of hope that had erupted in his heart.

He had paid for his newfound belief with an arm, but it had been so worth it.

The evidence was all around him. The System had chosen to present its aid, its benevolence, through an entirely unexpected medium. Monsters! Ants from the Dungeon! It seemed preposterous, yet wasn't it said, "The ways of the System are unknowable by mortal mind"?

Truly none would have expected this turn of events!

"Priest Beyn" he was greeted by a passer by.

"Good Morning. May the Path be clear before you and our saviours clack their mandibles with blessing upon you."

The person smiled and nodded, their eyes flicking towards the direction of the colonies great mound, barely visible now from this place, before moving on. Indeed, the ants had done so much for these people and Beyn intended to be sure that they were properly grateful. The monsters infesting the nearby woods had been nearly eradicated by the tireless workers, wood had been provided that was now being made into houses, fencing and other such structures. Crude farms were being erected in order to secure a food supply for the near future and as more people came south, fleeing the violence that continued to ravage the surface, so too did the needs of the community grow.

He moved amongst the burgeoning village now, smiling, giving blessings to those who approached him. An encouraging word here, a smile or a nod there, a hug and compassionate prayer for those in distress. Beyn moved amongst his people and did his utmost to buoy their spirits so that they might take advantage of this wondrous blessing that had befallen them.

A sanctuary in such troubled times, protection, given by the System itself in the form of their ant guardians.

Suddenly inspired, Beyn stopped in place and raised his one hand to the sky and began to speak, his [Expert Preaching level 9] causing his voice to soar over the din of the village.

"Let us give thanks, O travellers! O weary folk of a fallen kingdom!" he cried.

The refugees were accustomed to his frequent outbursts of preaching, they were not surprised to hear his sudden oration. Compelled by his powerful voice, they turned to listen as they had many times before.

"We have suffered much. The pain of loss, the heartache of our destroyed homes. Monsters have risen to the surface in a way that hasn't been seen for thousands of years!"

A ripple passed through the people at his words and the crowd slowly began to coalesce around the crippled priest. Monster pouring out of the Dungeon was the stuff of nightmares, a forgotten legend, that they had witnessed with their own eyes.

"And yet, the Path is never straight, the path is never clear before our feet. It is not for us to decide the way, but for the System! We have been delivered from Monsters, by Monsters! Our insect saviours, led by the Great One, have defended us, provided for us and granted us sanctuary in these times of fear and death."

Beyn could see the faces of his audience. As an expert level Preacher, he was able to read the mood of the crowd, sense the ebb and flow of emotion as his words were absorbed by the crowd. These people were grateful. These people were awed. More importantly, these people believed.

There was a veneration in their eyes as he spoke of the Great One. They'd seen it for themselves. The creature had come right to the village, standing so unnaturally still, and communed with one of them.

Beyn wondered if the Great One had any idea how strange such an action was to the people here. To see a feared Dungeon Monster in the flesh, so close. For it not to harm them, but to SPEAK to them? Provide them with food? With wood?

Unheard of.

It was unprecedented, it was unnatural. To Beyn, it was a sign of the Divine.

"A MIRACLE has occurred here!" he roared, "the Great One is a MIRACLE. Sent to grant us succour in our time of most dire need! The monsters rise, friends! They rise but they shall be defeated! Our guardians shall overcome them. They shall roll back the tides of darkness that sweep over the lands and we shall be saved!"

People cheered at his words now, raising their hands towards the ant hill and bowing as Beyn built towards a thunderous crescendo.

"Be glad, friends! Make a nest of gratitude in your heart and let the workers of your soul build a tunnel to praise! The Great One has shown care for you. Do not allow despair to overwhelm you! Ensure that the directions of our saviour are met! Be vigilant and educate any newcomers as to the ways of the colony! We must seek to emulate our saviours in our unity of purpose! Only then will we be worthy of the blessings rained upon us. That is our Path!"

The people cheered, clasped their hands and bowed towards Beyn and towards the ant hill. Some were overcome with emotion, unsurprising considering what they had been through, and fell to their knees.

Beyn ceased his preaching and began to move amongst the people again as they turned and resumed their tasks.

"Do you really need to preach so often Beyn?" a weary voice asks from behind him, Enid.

The priest turned to face the de facto leader of this community. The elder of the village was looking careworn, her expression tired. However, in her eyes a small light burned dimly.

She worked tirelessly for these people, caring for them, struggling to meet the material needs of the people even as Beyn worked to provide nourishment to their souls.

"I only seek to instil a spirit of gratitude and cooperation in the people Enid, you know that."

She sighed. "Yes I know that. I just wish you didn't block the traffic when you did it."

Enid eyed him a little warily. "We've had some new arrivals today Beyn. I was hoping you could talk to them about the rules here. Make sure they don't cross any boundaries. This group seems a little ... different."

Beyn's face lit up with enthusiasm. "I'd love to!" he smiled.

"Don't preach at them Beyn. Just talk to them."

"Aww."

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Chapter 224: The rebel child

Beyn found the new arrivals huddled under a tree towards the edge of the village. Refugees, fleeing the continuing destruction of the kingdom to the north arrived nearly every day. Sometimes in small groups of three or four, other times a collection of families, farmers usually, fleeing their holdings. Twice they had received a more significant number, over fifty in each, people feeling their town, moving together for safety.

There were almost two thousand people here now, and more trickling in over time. Enid was run off her feet trying to keep everyone housed, clothed and fed but she did good work. Her high level in the merchant class made it so organising provisions and acquiring goods happened as she breathed.

Beyn smiled to think of it. It felt as if everyone was falling into place as they were needed, at just the time their absence was most felt. Builders and carpenters had arrived two days ago, just in time to employ their skills and levels in the construction of more permanent housing. When they ran out of materials, the very next day blacksmith arrived, his equipment stacked on a cart pulled by an exhausted nag and watched by his young apprentice.

The priest had gathered the people and given praise for an hour, shouting and raising such a racket that the blacksmith might have turned his cart around and taken off if Enid hadn't appeared and clapped a hand over Beyn's mouth.

He shook his head at the memory as he approached the dusty group of travellers. He got carried away sometimes, he knew it. The passion, the faith that blazed inside of him felt so powerful that he struggled to contain it. The Great One, a divine miracle, had appeared to lead the people in their time of trial.

How was he supposed to NOT talk about it?!

Even now, the blacksmith was running out materials he could melt down and turn into nails. Many a wagon axle had been sacrificed to erect housing. No sooner did the need arrive than members of the community stepped forward and began prospecting in the nearby woods. Beyn had every faith they would find ore nearby. He felt it in his bones. Provision would come.

"Welcome travellers to our humble sanctuary" he greeted them warmly, "please be at ease, you are safe here and among friends."

Before him sat five travel worn individuals. Enid has told him there was something odd about this group and on first inspection, Beyn had to agree.

It wasn't the way they half sat, half squatted in the shade of the tree, resting yet alert. It also wasn't that they wore leather armour and had blades on their hips. It was their eyes, hard, cold, and perhaps a little angry. They were mad about something, Beyn had no idea what.

He wasn't phased though. It would take a lot more than a hard stare to wipe the calm smile of his face.

After a moment four of the strangers turned to eye one of their number. The thickset woman nodded shortly and stood. Beyn turned his peaceful expression towards this person, apparently the leader of this group and took in her features.

She looked strong. Not only that, powerful. Her shoulders were broad, her arms thick and her jaw looked like you could cut bread with it. A strong, calloused hand rose and rested on the hilt of her blade as she extended the other towards the priest in greeting.

"I am Morrelia. My group have been fighting monsters in this area for several months. We saw smoke from a few kilometres west of here and came to investigate", she gestures towards the bustling people in the village with one hand, "I didn't expect to see This? What has happened to the north?"

The smile finally slips a little on Beyn's face. They haven't heard of the trouble, of the kingdom in ashes, trampled into the dirt under the feet of Dungeon monsters.

Taking a deep breath, he tells them. Their faces go pale and their eyes wide with shock as he describes to them the horror that has occurred.

"... we are all refugees here Ms Morrelia. I led the people of my village here and in the weeks that have followed more have arrived with the same tale. It is a difficult time."

Morrelia scrubs one hand across her forehead, still struggling to process what she has heard.

"Monsters on the surface? Are they attacking out of the Dungeon? It makes no sense! My Father... what of the Legion? They surely wouldn't allow such a thing to take place! What has happened to them?"

Beyn can only shake his head. "I have no idea Ms Morrelia. I am only a humble preacher who has followed in the steps of our saviours, led by the Great One. Here we have found a place of security, for the time being."

Confused, the young lady and Beyn has realised that she is quite young, turns back to her people for a moment and they shrug.

"Saviour? Great One? Is there some leader here? A Lord or Lady with a strong class?: she asks, turning back to the priest.

His smile returns at full beam, blasting these guest directly in their eye holes. There is nothing he would like to talk about more!

"Yes! The Great One and our saviours! From the Dungeon itself, they rose amongst us and did not do us harm! Instead, they had protected us, saved the city of Liria before its subsequent fall and then led us here to safety. We would be dead without them, and so we give thanks!" he shouts fervently.

"Give thanks!" nearby villagers echo his shout and raise their hands towards the ant hill in the distance.

Wide-eyed, Morrelia looks from the suddenly, extremely animated priest towards the villagers and back.

What the heck is happening here? She wonders.

"Just who is the great one? And your saviours? Some delving team?"

"No!" Beyn yells, full of the wonder of this miracle. He leans close towards his audience, his face only inches away from hers, his eyes afire with faith.

"They are monsters!"

A leather gloved fist crunches his nose before he says another word.

The following melee was short and thankfully deathless. When the people saw their beloved priest go down bleeding the refugees were incensed. Full of wrath they descended upon the five strangers, punching and kicking in a frenzy. The new arrivals were no slouches, their skills put on full display as they fended off the angry mob with fists and movement skills until Enid had arrived on the scene and shouted everyone down.

"How can you be sure you are safe from them?" Morrelia demanded, not for the first time.

Enid sighed once again. These people were exhausting, and she had a list of jobs as long as her arm that needed to get done. Instead, she was here trying to talk to one of the most stubborn people she had ever met.

She raised her hands from the crude wooden table in front of her to rub her temples and try to soothe her building headache. They were seated inside one of the few completed buildings, used by Enid and her helpers to try and

"We are safe here. The ants have protected us numerous times. I'm surprised you didn't run into them if you were out there", Enid gestured in the general direction of the woods, "they've been in and out of there killing the surface monsters for weeks."

The young woman before her shifted uncomfortably.

"We had noticed that the pressure from the surface monsters had decreased lately. We thought we might have finally been having an impact on their numbers."

"You've been trying to reduce the monster population here? Just the five of you?" Enid asked incredulously.

Morrelia turned her head to one side. "Fighting monsters is kind of my family business, and I'm damned good at it", she brought her forceful stare back towards Enid, "and I don't trust them. Dungeon monsters are killers, always have been. You want me to believe a colony of monstrous ants is peaceful? It's insane!"

Enid readily nodded. "Yet it's true. Their nest is right over there. You can see it from the edge of the village boundary. We are unharmed. Not only that, the monsters have provided wood and materials to the village to help us establish housing. I witnessed one of the ants fight to repel invaders from Liria. I have SPOKEN with their leader, using mind magic. They mean us no harm."

If Morrelia was shocked before, she was gobsmacked now.

"You've spoken... With a MONSTER?! You could have been bewitched! If it can use mind magic it could have twisted your thoughts!" she exclaimed.

"I am extremely confident that is not the case" Enid denied firmly.

The younger woman stared, unable to believe what she was hearing.

"They're monsters," she said, "they kill people. They always kill people. How can you trust them?"

Enid could only shake her head. "They have proven to be trustworthy, so we trust them," she said definitively, " while you are here, you must respect the rules. If you cross the boundary and are attacked by the ants, you will defend yourselves, and the villagers will not take kindly to any casualties amongst their protectors. If you cannot accept this, then I suggest you leave."

"What about this leader ant? Can I speak to it?" Morrelia asked suddenly.

"It's gone into the Dungeon for a while" Enid replied warily, "I'm not exactly sure when it will be back. It isn't particularly talkative, but you could try for an audience."

The warrior rested one hand on the pommel of her sword.

"I think I shall."

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Chapter 225: The push

After the discovery of the wondrous Dungeon aphids we spent two more days pushing into the Expanse. Monsters became more and more common the deeper we went. Hippo-Turtles, Double Crocs, bewitching flowers, a tree that tried to eat Tiny and got punched to pieces, all sorts of stuff.

I didn't care about any of it.

APHIDS.

They represent something incredible to me in this world of Dungeons and monsters. A way to get Biomass, WITHOUT fighting. The possibilities boggle my mind. You could have newborn ants fed from the aphids until they have achieved a decent level of strength, they'd be under no risk whatsoever as they collected food, from trees and leaves of all places!

I'm hungry for the details. To what level can these creatures be pushed? Can the stuff they excrete be improved in some way? Is it an organ that they have? Can they mutate it? Can we breed them? They're almost like fuzzy little dogs, would the ants be happy to care for them, defend them?

I need to know so badly! I can't however. Until the Expanse has been purged of our foes and made safe for ant kind I can't afford to be side tracked by anything!

So we keep fighting.

The constant fighting and eating has been good for my little group. Crinis in particular has continued to feast and take in more Biomass which I demand she spends during our rare breaks. As a result she's been able to gain several more mutation advancements, including her Durable Shadow flesh +5 and Disintegrating Void Maw. The first upgrade has made her rubbery shadow flesh tougher and harder to damage. The second has caused her mouth to achieve a disintegration property. From what I understand, anything she can get her impressive maw around will slowly start to disintegrate, crumbling out of existence.

She was apparently frustrated that her tentacles weren't up to the task of tearing the Hippo down and wanted another avenue of attack against monsters with tough defence.

With that she has achieved +5 in all the body parts she is currently able to spend Biomass on. Having already evolved once, her limit is presently +10 so she's pushing forward with upgrading her tentacles, getting them to +9 so far.

Almost all of her skills have advanced also. The murder ball of infinite darkness is certainly starting to come into her own! At level 16 it won't be long until she's ready for her next evolution!

Tiny has continued to feast, as usual. He managed to get his Iron Bones to +10 and took the unbreakable mutation, making his reinforced skeleton even stronger. I suspect this is only so he can try and attach even more explosive muscles, making his punches stronger again.

Most of his punching skills have improved also, not enough to go up a tier but I can tell they're getting sharper just by watching.

Vibrant has also been sharply improving. Her Robust inner carapace plating has improved her defence and her +5 Enhanced speed aura gland is giving all of us a significant speed improvement. Nothing crazy but certainly enough to make a difference.

My own improvement has been more modest, by comparison. I'm still biding my time and testing out my bag of tricks. I want to have plenty in the tank by the time we get to the big bad hiding in the middle of this swamp.

For now I'm just storing up my Biomass and continuing to hone my magic attacks.

Right now we are perched up a tree. Not one of the nearly impossible to climb large ones, but rather a more regular specimen that is less resistant to climbing and not quite as hungry for giant ape flesh.

We gathered up here to rest a little after another tough fight in which a Hippo Turtle decided to run into the middle of a battle against a posse of crocs. It got messy real fast but fortunately we were able to lock down the hippo long enough to finish off the crocs before turning onto the hippo and devouring it.

A little battered and with bulging stomachs, I decided we should retreat to heal up and digest before moving on.

So here we've been for the last few hours as I've watched the comings and goings of the monsters nearby. It's curious that after we clear out the Crocs the local marsh monsters begin to come out of their shells. Their activity increases and what I would consider 'normal' monster behaviour begins to re-emerge. It only gives more weight to my theory that the expanse and indeed all local monster activity is being suppressed somehow by the crocs as part of their occupation.

If I can learn how they do it I'd be most interested in exploring the applications of such methods....

Gweheheheh.

First, there's more crocs to for eating. I mean fighting. Also eating.

If Garralosh truly wanted to conquer the upper levels of the Dungeon then they shouldn't have made their offspring so tasty! It's a flaw in design and not one I'll replicate! I've never eaten an ant but I feel fairly confident we'd taste like garbage.

Not that I think a monster would care about how I tasted considering how Biomass rich my body would be.

Gah! Stop thinking about yourself getting eaten Anthony! Positive thoughts!

Isn't it a positive thought though? I wouldn't want the monster that eats me to have a negative experience... or would I?!

Bah! I hope they choke!

["Are we all ready to go?"] I ask my gang, not willing to dwell on these pointless thoughts any longer.

[FIGHT!] Tiny growls.

"Ready-ready!" Vibrant beams.

[I am prepared for battle, Master] Crinis replies, dignified.

Alright then.

["Let's move out"]

We cautiously descend the tree and begin to make our way deeper into the expanse. Here, in the middle, we are completely surrounded by the dense vegetation. I can't even see the walls from where we are. This means that vigilance needs to high.

Tiny is under the strictest of instructions not to go running off like a moron. We can't risk it now!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 226: Woodstuffs

What the heck is this stuff?

After venturing forth again, it wasn't long, and only one fight before we came across something curious and I halted the group for a careful inspection.

We're looking at one of the mangrove style trees that emerge straight out of the muddy waters of the marsh expanse. It's tangled knot of roots sinking beneath the water line like so many straws. Supported atop this mess of roots the tree rises, twisted and tall, opening into a grand canopy. It isn't the top of the tree that has garnered our attention at this moment; it's the bottom — specifically, the roots.

They're glowing. Not all the roots, mind you, just some of them, half perhaps, but there is a glow happening. The roots in question are shimmering with a soft brown, bluey sort light, the kind of colour that soothes and mollifies the tired mind.

Curiously I venture close enough to give them a traditional investigation, which consists of thwapping the offending wood with my antennae until I get a good sniff of them. To my more ordinary senses, they seem just like glowing wood.

Flipping on my mana sense skill, I get a very different picture. When I reach out with my magically attuned mind I can detect water mana, blue and clear, infused with the wood alongside another mana type, slow-moving and earthy in a way I can only imagine is earth mana.

So this wood is infused with not one, but two types of mana? Is it due to sitting in the muddy waters of the expanse, a place that is saturated with mana at the best of times and at present completely overflowing with the stuff?

Perhaps this is an example of the kind of rare materials Enid was mentioning? I wonder if the humans can make something out of this stuff? I'll have to take a sample up with us when we return, not to mention keep an eye out for any more sources.

Before leaving I give the wood one last thwapping with my antennae, the nimble sense organs flipping about rapidly as if they had a mind of their own before I feel satisfied.

["looks like some sort of mana infused wood"] I report back to my group when I join them, a few metres away from the tree.

"Ooooooh" Vibrant coos, "sooooo, what does it do?"

"I'm completely certain" I reply firmly, "that I have no clue. We'll have to wait until we get to the surface and ask if the humans know what we can do with it."

"Aww. I was hoping we could do something cool with it."

Personally, I was hoping the same, but to preserve my dignity as the senior ant, I refuse to let my disappointment show.

"Nothing to get too fussed over Vibrant," I tell the soldier, "let's go find some monsters to crush."

"kay!" she cheers, punching the air with one foreleg.

I wait a moment as Crinis lifts herself up on a few tentacles and returns to her customary place on my back. Since she has a walking skill it wouldn't hurt to have to wander about on her own. There isn't strictly any reason why she has to be on my back. Perhaps I've gotten so used to having little creatures

riding around on me that I've grown too comfortable with it. Since she can fold up into a little ink black tennis ball, it doesn't do any harm to have her there.

[See anything Tiny?] I ask the ape as he pushes through the growth in front of me.

[Crocs. Big] he grunts, pointing.

Hmm? I skitter forward, mandibles clacking with curiosity. What did he see?

When I make my way around my sizable ape friend, I follow his arm with my eyes and takes a moment before I can spot exactly what he's pointing at, but once I do...

Holy Mackerel! BIG!

In the distance, perhaps only one hundred metres from us is a gigantic croc. I wasn't able to see it at first since it was resting in the water, most of its body submerged. When the water rippled, I was able to pinpoint the long snout resting just above the water level and then traced it back to see the tail resting on the shore FIFTEEN metres away.

I mean, really?

I can tell from here that this thing is a freakin' beast. Perhaps this is our first sighting of the legendary, so far mythical tier four offspring of Garralosh? I study the floating beast carefully. Yes, I'm confident that this is just too large to be a Double Croc. We have a new species here.

[Don't even think about it]

I hear a shuffle next to me.

[Wha?]

[Don't play dumb Tiny. You plant your big ape butt right here in the dirt until I say you can fight. Got it?]

[Grrrr]

[I'm not kidding here buddy. Sit down a chill out for a second. We don't how many crocs there are out there]

Without turning my head, I can see him shift and look directly at me as if I were crazy.

[Is that meant to be the fun part?]

He nods vigorously up and down.

.... Save me from this muscle head!

With one antenna I firmly point to the ground next to me. [SIT].

[Hmph] he sulks and sits with a THUMP.

.... And of course, the Croc in the distance twitches in response to the sound before slowly turning to face our direction.

[Dammit Tiny.... Was that on purpose?]

The massive ape looks innocently at me, and wide eyed as a newly born baby giant ape.

....

If he didn't have the Cunning of brick forged out of smaller bricks that were themselves made of the distilled energy of pure stupid, I'd believe he might be capable of such an act of duplicity. I think he just got lucky.

["Ok gang. We have attracted the attention of a large ass croc, possibly a new variety. It looks strong, and we don't know how many others are about, so be careful!"]

[Roger!] Vibrant solutes me with one antenna before scuttling a little ways off to look for a flanking opportunity.

[Master, I will defend you with my life!] Crinis vows solemnly.

[It uh, shouldn't come to that Crinis]

[Nevertheless!]

....

[Ok thanks....]

This headache is coming back...

Shaking my head to dispel my extraneous thoughts I focus on what is truly worrying me. The oppressive aura that has weighed on our minds and hearts the entire time we have been in this expanse, is it coming from this beast?

To tell the truth, I'm worried. Obviously, I'd be worried! That stupid aura is pressing down on us like a weight strapped to our backs! It isn't exactly comfortable! The vague oppressive fear that permeates the entire expanse has only grown stronger the further we have progressed.

....

No. It isn't coming from this monster. I can tell that the source is further in, the pressure is rolling in invisible waves from quite a distance yet.

So even this creature in front of us, a Croca Beast that has undergone three evolutions, is not enough to cause that terror. Just what is waiting for us deeper in the expanse?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 227: Undying

We've killed a lot of Croca-Beasts already in our expedition. I don't know exactly how many children Garralosh has but we are seriously depleting the tables at the family reunion at the rate we are going.

I've now eaten so many of the basic Croca's that we managed to unlock the intermediate profile for them. It struck me again the ridiculous number of specimens you need to consume to get even this far in terms of profiles. Just how many do you need to eat for the complete profile?! A thousand?!

What exactly does the complete profile communicate anyway? It must be something damn good to have such high requirements. Or, more likely, it doesn't and it's just the Dungeon messing with my head, as usual.

At any rate, the profile provided the following information:

Garralosh Infant :

Might: 31

Toughness: 17

Cunning: 9

Will: 6

These numbers are roughly in line with what I expected. From my experience with designing the new generation of workers, workers mk2, if you will, I know that it's so much easier to bulk up on physical stats than mental ones for a new monster. Even so, to produce monsters of this size, the cost compared to even my enhanced workers would be out of control. If I were to compare the output of the Queen to producing workers or Garralosh infants, the ants would outnumber the crocs more than five to one.

Since my work was so damned streamlined!

The more I know the more I think that Garralosh just didn't see the value in efficiency. Although, now that I think about it, these creatures were designed to be solo hunters, and they certainly manage to terrorise the upper levels just fine, being pretty much the baddest thing on the block around here. So perhaps Garralosh was correct in making sure their offspring could punch hard from the get go.

Whereas I want my fellow workers to survive through intelligence and cooperation, garralosh wanted to create solo killing machines that would battle their own way up the evolutionary ladder. Not a bad approach I suppose, simply inferior to mine.

At this moment the next rung in that Croc ladder is lazily swimming towards me, double tails trailing behind it. This thing is absolutely massive and I don't intend to stuff about in this fight.

Meditation.

For the first time in the expanse I activate my recently acquired meditation skill and its effect comes into play immediately. Like a shutter sliding down over an open window, my minds are suddenly cut off from distraction, from the outside world.

The silence is deafening. Where only a moment ago my keen senses, heat detection, near 360 degree eyesight, hearing, scent, were flooding my mind with information, where my inner mind was filling itself with plans, thoughts, worries and distractions, there is now quiet.

To be honest I hadn't expected much from this skill when I first used it. Level one skill like meditation? How effective can it be? At best I'd expected a little more clarity of thought, a little stillness.

Instead, it was like being ejected into space. My minds are sealed into a vacuum, separate from the world an unassailable as the mundane stimulus of the physical worlds drifts past like debris after a storm.

The problem I found was that I was so detached from my own body that a monster started chewing my antennae off and I was barely cognizant of it, my minds dismissing the pain to focus their energies inwards.

If Vibrant hadn't tackled the shadow beast off me I might have kept on casting spells whilst it tore my head from my body!

So I'm a little nervous as I activate the skill but as soon as I do, those concerns fall away into nothing.

I'm as placid as a lake that has no giant Crocodiles swimming in it.

Immediately my minds turn to crafting magic and it's so damn easy! With the unnatural focus and concentration that the skill brings the weft and weave of the magic is so smooth that the streams of energy seem to dance under the ebb of my thoughts.

Three streams of gravitational energy flow out under the direction of my sub brains, swirling around each other as they drawn down in concentric circles that grow tighter and tighter until a ball of condensed gravitational mana begins to form.

To this task my main mind is dedicated. The ball of extraordinary energy looms so clearly in my mind and it's so simple to reach out with my thoughts and PRESS, squeezing until the ball begins to take a different feeling.

"Vibrant, give our new friend a few blasts of acid. If he's going to take his time approaching then let's get a few shots in."

"Okay!"

The ant turns to present her commercial district to the foe and fires a few shots of acid at the approaching monster. The enormous Croca has been slowly drifting towards us, not even moving except for the languid shift of its tails as it propels itself through the water. In the stillness of my mind I can make out the beady red eyes of the monster glittering confidently as it continues its gradual approach.

As Vibrant's acid slashes through the air the beast finally reacts, opening its mouth wide and ... yawning?

The acid splashes across the water, much of it wasted on the marsh but certainly some of it contacts the monsters head. Sure enough, a slow sizzling sound arises and I can see the steam rising from bubbling flesh on the creatures snout.

Within I continue to press the mana that floods out of my gravitational mana gland into an even more dense ball. There is something off about this Croc...

It takes a moment for me to recognise it but with my thoughts so still my observation is much sharper than normal.

[Stand up Tiny. Time to fight]

Where only moments ago the acid had been chewing into the monster's face, the flesh is reknitting itself at a rapid pace. Is this Croc undying?!

Chrysalis

Chapter 228: The bigger they are

Our new foe continues to take its time approaching our position. Its skin has rapidly closed over and healed the damage that Vibrant was able to do with her enhanced acid, indicating some powerful regenerative effect. Is it tied to the skin? Surely not even a Croca Beast would be stupid enough to waste a regeneration gland on such a small injury?

For my part, I continue to use this period of excessive confidence from our foe to create my most potent weapon the gravity bomb! Within my mind the mana pulses with excessive energy as three separate streams of gravitational energy stream into a dense sphere that has begun to darken, turning from purple into black. As the transition takes place, the ball starts to shrink even further, packing the mana ever more densely as I continue to pour in more energy and compress it with the force of my will.

If this moron wants to take us lightly, I'll give it a welcome it won't forget or survive!

Crinis slowly extends her tentacles and rises from her resting place on my carapace. I understand that she wants to create room and have tentacles at the ready in case this monster decides to rush and attack at the last second.

Tiny is still sitting on his backside, staring at the approaching Croc as if it were a sparkling birthday cake with his name on it. He isn't able to stand until I rescind my earlier order, which I won't do since he would race into the water and start punching the beast the second I did. I wouldn't usually be so against the idea but since this creature is a new variety than those we come across before I want to be cautious.

Also, I plan on vaporising the Croc with a miniature black hole, and I wouldn't want my beloved pet Tiny to be caught in the spell.

"Stay on the flanks for us Vibrant, and don't get caught. If any other monsters try to interfere you have my permission to fight them."

"Really?! Yippee!" her voice rings out from my right.

Being able to converse without making a sound is such a fantastic aspect of being an ant. Pheromone language is severely underrated. I wonder if humans could have adapted to this over time, or perhaps genetically modified ourselves?

When I get right down to it, what part of an ant isn't superior to being a human? Except for the brain I suppose, which I got to keep anyway! Best of both worlds!

The Croca draws close now. Close enough that it has reached the island of dirt we are standing on and now has to crawl out of the water. Its enormous jaws seem to grin evilly as those two pairs of red eyes glitter in their sockets.

"HSSSSSSSSSS."

The creature utters a guttural hissing sound that grates on our ears. Still moving slowly, it begins to push itself off the ground with its powerful front arms, noticeably longer than those of a Double Croc. Up, up

and up it goes until it towers high, even more significant than Tiny! Its hulking body is enormous! Heavy and rippling with muscle!

Part of me is relieved to see it. To achieve that kind of size, it must have dumped almost all of its evolutionary energy into Might, and taken size over quality. Tiny has a more balanced approach; not only is he large, but his muscle density is also fairly decent, creating a lighter, faster moving yet powerful form.

I'm sure this Croc is quick, but I highly doubt it has achieved back to back maxed out special evolutions, its stats should be manageable for us.

Standing at its full height, it's an impressive sight! Sharp claws glitter and pointed white teeth gleam as the monster almost seems to invite us to admire its impressive and intimidating physique!

.... Is this the Croc version of Tiny or something? How stupid is this variant?

Tiny himself still sitting, staring at the Croc with stars in his eyes. Don't be happy, dammit! Hold on, what is that? Are you flexing!?

He is! Even while sitting, the giant ape is positioning his arms just so, and I can see that his arms and shoulders are tensed, causing his muscles to bulge beneath his fur. He is taking up the challenge of the croc! He refuses to lose in terms of might!

....

Idiots!

I critically eye the croc as I put the finishing touches on my spell. Being an unknown variant, I haven't gone light on this one, and my main mind is beginning to buckle under the strain of keeping this ferocious amount of energy contained. The spell itself pushes back against my control, at all times wanting to be released. Should I slip up, I've no doubt the spell would explode out of control, probably sucking my entire body inside it and crushing it into an acorn!

[Forceful mana has reached level 8]

That helps a little...

In terms of differences from the double croc, whom I believe this particular specimen evolved from, this version is both larger, and more defensive. The stomach is no longer coated with a lighter colour of skin but thick plated scales, almost like armour, cover the once vulnerable area. The rest of its scales are also darker and denser. Even its face appears to be more thickset and broader.

Some of this could be attributed to mutation advancements, but I don't think so. I think this beast was designed to be a brute force tank, able to take and dish out a lot of punishment as it rapidly healed itself in the fight.

Suddenly the Croc opens its mouth, and red flames begin to gutter in the back of its dark throat!

Oh no!

Gravity Bomb!

HOOOOOOOOOOOOWL.

I panic and unleash the gravity bomb the moment the croc goes on the offensive. The spell howls through the air as if tearing a wound in space itself. Not even twenty metres away the towering croc unleashes a torrent of flame into the spell, confident it can burn anything a little ant like me can produce.

Big mistake.

FWOM!

[Tiny! LEG IT!]

The moment the spell contacts its target it expands into a sphere that begins to drag and pull everything around it into itself. A shrieking, tearing void that wants to consume everything!

Also, are we ... a little too close!?

Advanced Dash!

GOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

I can feel the pull of my own spell start to take hold of me as my thin little legs move so quickly they become a blur in my eyes.

GOGOGOGOGOGOGOGO!

Air, leaves, branches and water. All sorts of stuff flies past my face as I try desperately to run away from the immense gravitational pull of my bomb.

Stupid, stupid! Why the heck would you launch that spell so close yourself?!

As I frantically scramble to avoid elaborately killing myself, I idly wonder what happened to that tough crocodile we left behind us.

[You have slain level 17 Immortalis Garallos]

[You have gained XP]

Immortal eh? It turns out not so much.

When the spell has finally run its course, and the four of us have managed to avoid dying we return to find the dense ball of compressed stuff sitting innocently in a circular depression in the ground.

The only problem with this spell is that it doesn't allow for me to enjoy the Biomass afterwards, dammit! Oh sure, I could try eating this ball. It has the Croc in it, after all. Also, a good chunk of dirt, muddy water, leaves, sticks and goodness knows what else that got pulled in there.

Even Tiny is eyeing the ball a little sceptically.

["Uh... anyone want to try eating that?"]

"Nope!"

[Bad]

[I'm afraid I must decline, master]

That's what I thought...

Chrysalis

Chapter 229: The encroaching doom

Since we unexpectedly crushed the Immortalis Garralosh (immortal Garralosh? Even I can work that one out), progress has been slow.

The density of monsters has been increasing. Not only the Croca beasts in their various forms are more common but also the local wildlife. One of those stupid Hippo Turtles managed to sneak up on us and almost took Tiny's arm off, but he managed to dodge away in time, and I tied the flabby beast down with Gravity bolts until we were able to kill it. Their strength is in their far, but also their weakness.

Hehe.

Other things have also been growing in strength, namely the oppressive aura that fills the expanse, it's so thick now it hangs over us like a fog. Even with a Will as high as mine it intrudes on my thoughts and fills me with a compulsion.

This close, I can sense more clearly what the aura is trying to convey — a combination of fear, and demand for obedience. I'm not sure if a gland creates this aura or if it's some side effect of a sufficiently powerful core, but this oppression is rolling out in waves and suffocating the will from the newborn monsters while also suppressing the instincts of the creatures within the expanse.

Just what kind of creature can cause such an effect? I'm getting a touch nervous since I think we're getting reasonably close to finding out!

["Everyone holding up ok? I know it isn't easy to operate under the effect of this pressure"]

[I am ... all right, Master. I will not fail you!]

One the one antenna, I'm touched by her loyal spirit, on the other, I'm concerned about her lack of self-preservation instinct. Crinis is loyal in an almost fanatical way that Tiny never was. I wonder why?

[I'm not worried about you failing at all Crinis, I want to make sure you're fine. If you can't fight properly, then you won't be safe, and we will need to pull back. It's crucial that you be honest here]

[I am touched by your concern Master! I believe I will be all right. If I feel that I am becoming a liability, I will tell you]

[Good girl Crinis] I pat her by bending one antenna back and tapping her on the head a few times where she is resting on my back. Like a cat, she flops down and turns from a tennis ball into a tennis blob. I need to stop indulging her.

[How about you Tiny? Feeling all right buddy?] I ask my faithful Bat-faced gorilla.

[Hmm] he rumbles.

The poor guy's face is tight with strain. His mental stats are a bit low, to say the least, the aura must be having the most potent effect on him out of all of us.

[Need fight] he says finally.

I think I get what he's trying to say. With the fear and command pressing into his mind, he wants to fight and have the adrenaline take over. Or perhaps he just feels the need to smash the face in of whatever is making him feel this way. Actually, I'll bet on the second.

"How about you Vibrant? You holding up all right?"

The soldier ant, no longer a small, cheerful hatchling, is more subdued than usual. Even her usually boundless energy and enthusiasm has been dampened by the atmosphere surrounding us.

"I'm fine" she responds, utterly devoid of her usual sparkle.

"It's going to be fine Vibrant, don't worry", I sidle up next to her and give her a friendly thwippity with my antennae, the ant high five.

"Once we find this nasty croc down here and smash him, the colony will be able to use all of the stuff down here, and we won't have to worry about those waves of monsters killing our family. Don't forget; we also get to eat him!"

"True!" Vibrant exclaims, a little energy coming back to her voice.

Encouraged, I keep going.

"Just think about it," I say intently, "how strong must this monster be to create this sort of pressure? Think of the Biomass? It must be so dense with it that every mouthful will give a point. When you take into account how large the monster is, how much Biomass do you think is contained within ... why is it raining?"

So intent was I on imagining the glorious harvest of rich Biomass and watching the light begin to shine in Vibrant's eyes, that I didn't notice Tiny walking up behind me and listen in. Before I'd even finished speaking, he was drooling a river all over my precious diamond carapace!

[Dammit, Tiny! Stop dribbling me on me! Yuck!]

[Disgusting! Clean the master immediately to make up for your lack of manners!] Crinis demands, enraged.

[Uh, I don't think that's necessary] I say quickly, but it's too late.

Looking shame-faced after being admonished by his fellow pet, Tiny moves swiftly to make amends. He reaches down with two enormous hands, grabs me around the middle, and flings me into the nearby marsh water.

SPLASH!

He put his arm into as well! I feel Crinis latch hold of me desperately as we fly through the air and then crash into the water.

Irritated, I stomp out of the water with a soggy Crinis on my back to find Tiny standing on the shore looking extremely pleased with himself and Vibrant on her back cackling with her legs wiggling in the air.

"Haaa hahahahaha!" she laughs.

[...] Tiny smiles at me proudly.

["haaaa"] I sigh.

Feeling a little mollified to see them so happy I walk onto the shore and shake myself down. Having a carapace means I don't take on water at least, but judging from the weight on my back, it isn't quite the same for shadow flesh. Luckily the water wasn't too deep; I might have drowned.

In my rear vision, I can see Crinis extend a few tentacles and wrap them around herself before squeezing, wringing herself out like a sponge. A torrent of water pours out of her and runs down my back to puddle at my feet. Nice.

[Please don't throw me into the water next time Tiny] I say.

He looks a little confused but nods readily to my request. What am I going to do with this guy? Seriously. At least this moment has lightened the mood little.

"Haaaaa hahahahaha haaaaa!"

"Stop laughing! It isn't that funny!"

"RRRRRRRRRRRR SSSSSSSSS."

A deep, guttural growl echoed around us so loud that it shook the leaves in the trees and rattled my bones. What the hell was that?!

Suddenly the pressure that had fallen to the back of mind returns will full force, nearly bowling me over. It's close!

My brains kick into overdrive, every sense coming alive. Not going to kick the bucket now. Bring it Croc!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 230: Eye of the Beas

With dirty swamp water dripping off of my carapace I felt the formless pressure build ever higher as the group frantically cast their heads about trying to identify the source. It has to be close! It could be coming towards us right now!

["Eyes open everyone! Something nasty is coming!"]

With my compound eyes, I keep watch in every direction at once, keeping my antennae twitching, trying to focus on what happening both now and a moment into the future. Without hesitation, I begin to prepare my most potent attack, the gravity bomb.

It was able to one-shot the immortal Croc hopefully it can do the same to whatever the heck this is! My sub brains begin to feed out three separate streams of gravitational mana that I seize with my thoughts and press down into a compressed ball that continues to grow and darken as more mana is added.

This is a risk, my attention is being diverted by the need to focus my main mind on the compression process, but I'm willing to take the chance. If I can blast this thing right in its face the moment I see it, then that will be the best outcome.

The marsh has become unusually still. The various creaks and growls that were always in our ears just moments ago have quieted. Then I hear it, in the distance, I can hear a pressing sound as if something were slowly squashing the damp earth of the marsh expanse down. Press, press, press. Each sound is coming slowly, but regularly.

Footsteps!

Hooooooooo boy. I'm getting nervous.

I activate my meditation skill and feel my minds sink beneath the icy waters of emotionlessness once again. My fear and anxiety falls away and no longer perturbs my thoughts, allowing my spell to continue to take shape at record speed. A handy thing too, cause I think I'm gonna need it!

The rest of the crew spreads out, doing their best to resist the mounting dread caused by the oppressive aura as the creature draws closer. Tiny has already begun sparking with electricity, his body writhing with snakelike ribbons of lightning as he snarls, revealing his fangs.

[Crisis, hop off me and look for a flank. I don't want you directly in the firing line for this one] I tell my orb like pet.

For once, she doesn't try to argue about putting myself in danger, perhaps she senses the seriousness of our predicament, and immediately extends a few tentacles to allow herself to walk a little ways off. Keeping herself low to the ground and out of sight she places herself close the water line. She'll have to rely on my directions to get into the battle but I hope she can do some damage without being injured, since it's so hard for her to get back out of the fight.

I hear another sound now to accompany those slow footsteps. The rustling of leaves and the creaking of wood as a towering figure pushes its way through. I can make out vague details through the shifting leaves. Bright green scales punctuated by flashes of red. A flash of a broad, rounded snout studded with jagged teeth. And large. Really large. Not only the height, but also in sheer bulk.

This Croc is ripped.

Unhurried, the massive Croca steps its way through the branches towards us, reaching out with thick claws to shove branches and trees out of the way as it moved. As more details of our foe come into sight, I divert part of my attention to snap on my Mana Sense.

The Croc blazes with light, it's powerful core radiating energy. This core is stronger even than the Queen's! This core is second fiddle only to Formo's worm in my experience. In my mind that confirms it. This has to be the monster responsible for the trouble in this expanse. This monster is responsible for sending out the waves of creatures and getting my siblings killed on the surface.

The Croc steps around a tree and into full view at last.

If this thing isn't responsible for the trouble, then I sure as hell don't want to meet whatever is.

It's huge.

Three tails sweep the ground behind it. Bright green scales, striped with a pattern of red markings. Two fully developed sets of arms extend from the shoulders and its head is horrific. It has two jaws, one on top of the other. What the point of that is, I don't know, but there it is. The lower jaw hangs open now, a grotesque red tongue hanging low, dripping saliva onto the ground.

Gross man! Show some class would you?

Next to me, Tiny is starting to grunt and shift his weight and the electricity on his body crackles with increasing intensity. Settled within my calm, meditating mind, I know he's psyching himself up for a charge.

Also thanks to my calm, meditating mind I believe such a course of action would be reasonably suicidal.

It isn't that the Croca is so much taller than Tiny, even though it is. It must be half again as tall as he is. It's the sheer mass of the creature. Tiny is a fully stacked deck; don't get me wrong. His enhanced musculature bulks him out to an impressive degree. This Croc is a whole different beast. It's got to be half as wide as it is tall!

Deep within my minds, even as I continue to press down to create the densest Gravity Bomb I can, I roughly calculate the monster must weigh six to seven tons. I'm looking at a Croc with slightly more mass than a full-size elephant.

HOLY MOLY THATSA BIG CROCA!

Eat Gravity, sucka!

Gravity Bomb!

Even within the depths of my mediation skill, the sheer size of the monster has panicked me. Apparently I need more levels in the skill to truly tamp down my emotions. Once the beast reveals itself, I unleash the shackles on the miniature black hole contained within and open my mouth wide to unleash destruction on the world!

HOOOOOOOOOOWL.

The dense rotating ball of pure, concentrated Gravitational energy flies at the gigantic Croca, the wind howling as it is sucked into the spell creating a piercing shriek!

The Croca's eyes flash! Flame bursts from its lower mouth in an instant, engulfing my spell!

So fast!

The reaction speed on this Croc is no joke! Part of me is looking down on the Croca beast, however. Just what does it think its flames are going to do to my Gravity Bomb? Get compressed, fool!

As my spell races towards the beast, it tracks it with its flame, after another second I notice it. If I weren't activating my meditation skill, I wouldn't have had the presence of mind to detect it. The fire is eating away at my spell! It has anti-magic flames!

Not good!

In an instant, my sub brains kick into gear, and each starts constructing gravity bolts. The Gravity Bomb will still probably detonate, but I can't be confident it'll have the strength to kill the beast.

We need to prepare for a drawn-out fight.

[Tiny! Charge up your lightning and blast it from range! I want it to get both barrels but don't shoot through the fire!]

Tiny has been busy working himself into a rage, but he isn't so far gone that he doesn't hear my orders. So long as he understands them, he has to obey them. Eyes blazing with fighting spirit, the ape crouches low before thrusting all his strength down through his legs.

POW!

His leap skill and mutated legs give him one hell of a leap. The ground THUDS under the impact and Tiny flies into the air, his entire body writhing with electricity. When he lands twenty feet away, the electricity is already snaking down his arms and pooling in his hands.

FWOM!

Much diminished, the Gravity Bomb finally reaches its target and detonates, instantly inflating to the dark sphere that attempts to devour all.

Please kill it!