

Chrysalis 231

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 231: Eye of the Beast part 2

The slowly rotating vortex of death engulfed the Gigantic Croca.

Die! Die you overgrown hand bag!

Please?

The Gravity Bomb continues to suck in air, sticks and whatever else is unable to resist its immense pull. The power of the Gravity Bomb still shocks me to my core. When mana reaches a critical density, scary things start to happen and the Gravity Bomb is a pure example of that. However, I know that this is only half the spell I'd hoped it to be. Whatever property the Massive Croc had imbued into its flame it had eaten away at the mana packed in my spell, reducing its strength dramatically.

It's too hard to get a decent visual on the enemy with the spell still in effect. My pets and I dig in our heels to resist the insidious drag of the bomb and prepare ourselves for the moment the spell drops.

The next five seconds feel like an eternity. My heart pounds in my chest as I await the results of my spell.

The spell flickers for a moment and fades. For a brief moment I see the Beast, then the world is fire.

HOT!

The clever son of a Garralosh! The damned Croc sacrificed an arm to the spell! It must have sensed the density of the mana coming towards it and reached out to trigger the bomb before it could touch its torso!

The level of strength required to resist the pull at such a close range ... is something I can't think about right now! It's too damn hot!

Flame erupts everywhere around me and I immediately fire off my three prepared gravity bolts and task my sub brains with cranking out a water construct on the double and I leg it! The three spells are reduced by the flame as they pass through but retain some of their power as they strike home against the crocs left leg.

This monster looks fairly damn strong but I'll take any advantage I can get at this point!

"Vibrant! Hit the thing but keep your distance!" I holler.

"Roger-Roger!" she cries as acid begins to fly at the Croc from behind its shoulder.

Yikes!

A torrent of flame continues to pour out of the beasts mouth. It's obviously a little annoyed but that friendly bomb I lobbed its way since the fire seems to follow me wherever I go.

Dash!

My legs blur as I activate my dash skill and begin to sprint in a zig zag moving away from the damn beast.

[Tiny! It's focused on me. Give it heaps!] I order.

"ROOOOOW!" Tiny bellows and thrusts both meaty hands forward at once.

CRACK!

Two twisting snakes of lightning blast forth from the apes hands and stab straight into the Croc's side! The electricity ripples across the beast and the smell of cooked flesh begins to fill the air.

"HURRR!" the Croc bellows and turns its blazing eyes towards this new target.

With a moment of reprieve I begin to spin together a few more gravity bolts and assess the situation. To my horror I can already see the arm that had been consumed by my pre-emptive strike is beginning to regrow. A bubbling lump of flesh had appeared where the arm connected to the shoulder, rapidly extending outwards.

I curse within my mind and launch another two Gravity Bolts at the Croc's left leg before turning more attention towards the water transformation construct. It's my only chance of being able to counteract the damn things flames!

Acid continues to fly out of the surrounding trees as Vibrant launches strikes from a distance. The Croc seems to content to simply shrug off those blows, even as the acid steams as it eats away at the scales on its back. Perhaps its confident it can regenerate the damage along with its arm? That doesn't bode well!

[What about me Master? Should I strike?] Vibrant calls desperately from her hiding place.

[Absolutely not! You hear me? Don't come out until I give the word!] I cry.

I have to hold Crinis back until the critical moment when she can get close enough to apply her damage unscathed. The trick is getting the monster to that point!

[Tiny, JUMP!] I scream.

The Croc has opened its upper set of jaws this time and a crackling blue flame has begun licking the space between the Croc's teeth when I shout my warning to Tiny.

Too late.

Caught up in his bloodlust Tiny was too focused pouring every ounce of electrical energy he could into the Croc. Controlling the lightning from that sort of range was taxing on Tiny in the first place, combined with his intense focus it isn't any surprise he wasn't able to react in time.

The Croc darts its head forward and a focused torrent of blue flame spears through the air. The heat is intense. Even though the flame isn't directed at me I can feel a rush of searing air roll over me.

Tiny is almost quick enough. He cuts off the flow of lightning and leaps high, but one foot is caught in the narrow blast of flame and burned clean off.

"ARRRRRRRR" the giant ape bellows as he lands awkwardly, falling to one side and propping himself up on his hands.

I can see an evil glint in the Croc's eyes as it looks down on the ape. It takes a lazy step forward and opens its upper jaw once more, preparing to incinerate the largest of its foes.

Wrong move!

Forceful Water Cannon!

[Meditation has reached level 5]

[At this level a skill advancement may be purchased]

[Mediation-> Deep Mediation. cost 1 sp: Allows the user to further separate their emotions from their thoughts and for a longer period of time. A slight boost to mana sensitivity will take place whilst the skill is active]

Take it!

Outside the bubble of my thoughts my emotions are a roiling mess. Seeing Tiny injured has rocked me to my core and for the first time I wonder if we've gone it too deep. Have I been too confident? Too complacent?

I refuse to let my friends die!

As soon the Croc opens its mouth it cops a Water Cannon to the face. The dense beam of water slashes into the soft tissue of the creatures palate before it snaps its jaws shut and turns to glare at me once more. That's right you overgrown gecko. Leave my ape alone and come get some!

I maintain the forceful water cannon and shunt its control off to the sub brains. The little minds are on overdrive right now as they feed they transform the mana, condense it and maintain the cannon. Only under the effect of the mediation skill are they able to find this level of efficiency but this is the limit. If I push them this hard for too long the darn things will cook themselves.

I can feel them heating up now, within my body the temperature is spiking high around the spot where three little furnaces are generated tremendous heat.

The area around us is a sea of flame now. The red flame from the lower mouth may be able to eat mana but it still seems fairly good at setting fire to regular things too! Trees and plants, only moments before saturated with the abundant water of the marsh are now extra crispy and the trees are crackling as the flames consume them.

In only a few moments the enormous Croc has transformed this watery swamp into a raging inferno.

The blue flame is even more frightening. The devastation caused by it is less, since it was fired in such a narrow beam, but wherever it touched has simply been incinerated to nothing.

Well, let's see what we can't settle this fire at the least. I'd rather not have to fight surrounded by flame if I don't have to.

I make sure to keep the forceful water cannon playing over the Croc's face as it twists its head from left to right, trying to avoid the painful beam.

The creature seems quite capable of resisting the penetrating power of the spell unfortunately, the beam that is quite capable of ripping through Shadow Flesh like a laser is not able to do the same to those bright green scales. So long as I keep the torrent of water aimed at its face, it won't be able to open its mouths to unleash those terrifying flame breaths.

What's the play now Croc?

Rage burning in its eyes, the Croc steps towards me.

Chrysalis

Chapter 232: Eye of the beast part 3

Despite being weighed down by several Gravity Bolts, the Croc is still able to step forward, though the left leg drags through the mud. I continue to blast the Croc with my water cannon, until the monster is forced to lift one hand to try and block the spray. I'm not doing any sort of serious damage to it, its thick, water-resistant scales are doing a good job minimising the damage so far. So long as I keep threatening its face however, it can't open its fat mouths and threaten us with its deadly flame.

The moment the Croc tries to break the deadlock, I dash to the side, forcing it to adjust its position to continue blocking my water cannon. I won't give it a chance to shoot! Whilst I'm doing all this, I'm also condensing mana for another spell, keeping my brains on the red line. I won't be able to keep up this level of cognition forever!

I'm also trying to keep the damn monster away from Tiny. Down one foot, the big ape is seriously mad and in the process of trying to prop himself up on one leg and balance on his knuckles. Judging by the look on his face he wants nothing more than to punch the Croc's face in, thankfully my orders are forcing him to stay back for the moment. I've managed to get into a position where he's behind me and off to one side, hopefully not enough of a target for the Croc to prioritise.

Crinis is also still in hiding, waiting for my order to strike. We just need an opportunity.

"An opening!"

What the HECK?!

Vibrant, who had been intelligently firing acid from long range, suddenly leaps out of from between two trees behind the giant Croc and charges directly at the beast!

"What the hell are you doing!" I yell.

"Biting!" she cheers.

CHOMP!

With the incredible speed of her charge she arrives right behind the slowed left leg of the Croc and brings her mandibles down sharply.

Once! Twice! Thrice! She bites and bites again! Each time her mandibles clamp shut, scales split and tear beneath her assault.

"Get out of there!" I shout.

Too late.

Vibrant had done well to avoid the tails that curled and thumped the ground behind the monster on her way in but she overstayed her welcome. As if it had eyes in the back of its head, the giant croc twists and swings its tails on different angles, cutting off any means of escape.

WHAM!

The foolhardy soldier and is sent flying, a harsh crack in her carapace.

Dammit!

"Vibrant! Heal yourself!" I shout.

It can't go on like this!

I can feel the emotion and panic battering at the walls of my meditation skill, trying to destroy the calm bubble in which I sit. I need to turn this around, the situation is only getting worse.

Decisively, I throw away the Water Cannon spell, letting it fizzle out and devote my minds to complete my next water magic as fast as possible.

[Advanced Water Magic affinity has reached level 3]

The strength of the monster is evident in how quickly I'm gaining skill levels. For some reason, it doesn't cheer me up.

Finally free of my water cannon harassing its face, the beast grins and opens wide its top jaws, preparing to blast me to ash with its blue flame breath.

Not today!

Finally complete my spell takes effect as a torrent of mana pours out from me and forms a semi-circle on the ground before my feet.

["Hold on folks! This is going to get rough!"] I shout.

Forceful Tsunami!

BOOOOM!

With a roar that would rival any explosion, water bursts out of the ground, completely destroying the earth in front of me and sweeping forward in an unstoppable wave. The marsh turns out to be the perfect place to cast this spell as the murky waters rise together with my spell, building the wave even higher and giving it irresistible momentum. The wave reaches over ten feet high and rolls over the surroundings, dousing flames effortlessly and crashing into the Croc like a sledge hammer before continuing on its path.

Hopefully this doesn't drown the entire expanse...

With one of its legs significantly damaged and weighed down by gravity the Croc is awkwardly driven off balance by the wave and knocked down. The slightest of reprieves! I hastily check my mana levels. Not much left in the tank but it might just do.

and devotes all of her limbs to binding both arms on the right side of the Crocs body before unleashing her barbs and sawing into the limbs. In a rare show of aggression she unfolds her mouth and brings her Void Maw down on the Crocs shoulder, digging deep into the flesh with her fangs.

The Croc is seriously mad now, red eyed and screaming with rage it slashes and writhes with all of its prodigious strength to throw off the combined assault of my pets.

They can't hold for long, I know that.

Within my mind a slightly new construct is taking shape, layering over the top of the water construct and adding to its complexity.

This had better work.

Chrysalis

Chapter 233: Eye of the beast part 4

When Water mana affinity levelled up to Advanced water mana affinity, I'd learned many things. I'd poured a lot of resources and evolutionary energy into beefing up my spellcasting ability to the point I was happy with it, but the spells hadn't been quite as impactful as I'd hoped. The mana affinity skills were my first window into increasing the power of my magic. The human mages I'd seen had almost all been specialised in a particular type of mana, especially the younger ones. What had been the reason for this?

Advanced water mana affinity unveiled a few clues. Along with new constructions, new spell shapes specifically for water magic, I'd also learned how to adjust the water mana transformation construct to produce a slightly different effect. A more potent one.

As Tiny and Crinis do battle with the monster, I race to complete the new construct, all of my minds dedicated to the task. I'd hoped to have more time to test this before being pushed to using it in such a desperate situation, I'd thought I'd had more time!

Just another example of me taking things too lightly. I'd assumed that I'd become so powerful, strong enough that we'd be able to blow through most resistance with ease. I constantly have to keep reminding myself that though my evolutions might have given me a massive leg up in terms of my raw stats, I started from perhaps the lowest base in the Dungeon.

I need to keep pushing myself further ahead.

With a shattering roar the Croc finally connects a solid blow into Tiny's ribs, sending the ape rolling through the dirt and into a tree where he lies clutching at his side.

Come on brains!

The final pieces of the construct snap into place as the Croc painfully struggles to its feet. All of the Gravity bolts I've piled into that one leg are adding up. Along with the beating it's taken from Tiny, the creature no longer has the strength to move freely or easily. That has to be enough.

The beast flexes its claws and prepares to slash Crinis who is still clinging with everything she has to the Croc's other arms, restraining them with all of her might.

I won't let you!

Ice Spear!

All of my minds work in concert to power one spell at a time, churning out this new form of mana, Ice!

Two feet long and needle sharp, the ice spear rockets through the air as if shot from a cannon and slams into the Croc on its chest.

CRASH!

Ice shards and scales fly as the spear shatters, but only after the tip is driven into the beast's flesh. The monster turns to me again and prepares to open its mouths to douse me in fire.

I don't have four brains for nothing, you sap!

Ice Spear!

Another projectile of concentrated ice zips through the air and smashes against the monster, just under its neck. Having avoided the thicker chest scales a bloody hole is torn in the monster as the spear penetrates deep.

The flesh immediately begins to bubble and regenerate but not quick enough.

As the monster recovers from the blow I try to give myself a little extra time by dashing to my right. It works for a moment as the Croc raises its one free hand to defend against my next spear and momentarily loses sight of me.

It only buys me a few seconds, enough for me to start compressing the ice mana until it turns from a glittering pale colour into a much deeper, richer blue.

Catching sight of me again the Croc instantly opens its upper jaws and unleashes a narrow torrent of blue flame, the air instantly heats to searing hot as the flame ignites but I was forewarned by my antennae and I'm already moving, dashing right out of there.

In fact, wasn't that dash a little quicker than usual?

"Still wide open! Hahahahaha!" Vibrant cries as she dashes wildly back into the fray.

Her carapace is still showing signs of a horrific crack that is in the process of healing, but she doesn't seem to care as she positions herself behind the Croc once more.

"Not again!" I cry, aghast.

"Ahaha! Why not?!" she laughs and charges behind the Croc once more, savaging its wounded leg.

The Croc knows what to do this time and quickly swings its tails but Vibrant has wised up and smartly dashes low, sliding underneath the strike and running clear.

She bought me just enough time.

Forceful Ice Spear!

The spear this time is four feet long and dense, the ice is a deep, sparkling blue, as if formed from the waters of the deepest depths of the ocean. As I activate the spell it crackles into existence over my head before blasting through the air towards the Croc.

The spear strikes home against the Crocs gut but instead of shattering it simply drives right in, burying half its length into the beast.

"ARRRRRRRRR!" the Croc bellows in pain and swings at the air wildly.

My brains are fried and my mana is low. I task all three sub brains with holding the ice construct in place and give my mana a chance to recharge. I've been sucking mana out of the ground all this time through my legs but my consumption has been high. I'll need to take the fight to the Croc the old fashioned way.

Exhausted, I can only open my mandibles wide and charge in.

"Yay!" Vibrant shouts and charges back in again.

The Croc is reeling from the Ice Spear buried in its gut. I bet that took a decent chunk of HP! Please be close to dead, I don't think I can fight much more!

Shattering Bite!

Pumping out as much stamina as I can I begin to mindlessly bite at the Croc, mechanically chomping as much as I can. At some point I fail to dodge a wild swipe of the claws and the Croc tears a foot long gash in my side that requires me to immediately trigger my regeneration gland.

That stings!

The Croc is staggering now but so are we. Vibrant has nothing left in the tank and Crinis is almost sagging with exhaustion. Tiny has managed to sit up but he hasn't been able to get back into the fight. Not for lack of trying, he is dragging himself through the dirt with one arm whilst the other is held against his doubtlessly shattered ribs.

The Croc becomes increasingly desperate, growling and roaring with pure rage as it struggles. Pinned to the spot, unable to move due to a leg that feels as if the weight of the world were resting on it, attacked from all sides and bleeding, the beast does the only thing it thinks will save it.

It opens its lower mouth and covers itself in fire.

[Ahhhhh!] Crinis screams and rapidly untangles her limbs, flinging herself out of the flames.

Damn that hurts!

I'm cooking right here!

The heat is intense, but the Croc is cooking itself just as surely as it's cooking us. This is the last gasp attack!

Vibrant falls back from the flames but I stay. Overhead the massive Croc looms, its double jaws gaping as it laboriously heaves air into its burning lungs.

My antennae twitch. I can sense the next moments before they happen. The Croc stretches wide its lower jaw and lunges forward, seeking to end the pest that has caused such injury to it in one bite.

In my mind it happens in slow motion, every movement following a pattern that I'd already seen. I spin around, facing away from the Croc. The jaws are almost upon me as I raise my abdomen high, presenting the justice department in all its glory.

I fill the monster's guts with acid one second before its jaws close and tear away at my flesh.

Chrysalis

Chapter 234: To consume the bees

Turns out, letting a giant Crocodile take a sizeable chunk out of your business district is exceedingly painful. Like, it hurts a frickin' lot.

FTAGN!

MY ASS!

Is this a hostile takeover of my commercial operations!? What the hell, Croc?!

In that one strike my Hp has plunged perilously low. I activate my regen gland once again to let whatever regeneration that has accumulated up to this point flow into my system and pull me back from the brink.

[Deep Meditation has reached level 2]

I bet it has.

[Cerebral Endurance has reached level 4]

If the brain is a muscle then I've pumped the heck out of mine. I'm certain it's sprained. Thank goodness for meditation keeping my mind relatively calm in this moment. It isn't stopping me from rolling around on the ground in agony as I contemplate life without a backside, but it is allowing me the freedom of thought to openly mock myself. So that's something.

The Croc isn't doing any better than me thankfully. I fired both barrels of acid straight into his open mouth. I'm assuming that both sets of jaws share one throat, so the poor sucker has little hope of getting anything out of his mouths. The sticky acid will be hardening and gumming up his pipes just as fast as it burns through that soft, soft inner flesh.

"HSSSSS! HARRAAAARRR!" the Croc gurgles and hisses as it struggles, falling to the ground as it thrashes about and throws itself off balance due to its one extra heavy leg.

CRASH.

The enormous beast falls heavily into the dirt. It raises all of its available claws to rip and tear at its own neck, ripping away scales and skin with its own hands.

Wait a sec. Is what I think it is? Is it just me or is that Croc turning a little blue?

Sure enough, the Croc is choking. The acid has solidified and blocked its throat, forbidding the passage of air. Even more than the burning effect, the lack of air is really starting to tell on the Croc.

I lie panting as my body slowly tries to regenerate itself. A huge chunk has been ripped out of my carapace and my insides have been exposed to the world. I barely want to move as I watch the Croc gradually struggle less and less, growing more feeble with the passage of time, until finally.

[You have slain level 53 Garralosh Praeceptorem]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 15]

[You have reached level 16]

[You have reached level 17]

[You have reached level 18]

[You have reached level 19]

[You have reached level 20]

[You have reached level 21]

... what?

Seven levels? Just like that? And level fifty three?! Just how evolved was this monster? If I think about it, my max level should be forty right now. So this monster is at least one evolution beyond me. There's a chance that it's more though. A strong chance.

Holy crap. We took on something like that and survived? What the hell was I thinking?! Just because we evolved once more I thought I was the bees knees, cock of the walk, the big cheese! There's still a long way to go before I'm truly strong.

Not that I think monsters this powerful are common. Not at this level. Unless I miss my guess, this big fellow must have been fairly old. Old enough to pile up a ton of levels and Biomass ...

Biomass.

Just how much Biomass will we be able to get out of this thing?

...

Gulp

[Tiny, are you able to move?]

He just grunts in reply, his eyes still on the fallen Croc.

[Get over here and eat. You need to regrow your leg]

As he starts to pull himself forward with his hands once again I look about for Crinis.

[Crisis? Are you all right? Where are you?]

[I'm here, Master] her voice echoes weakly in my mind as I see a tired tentacle wobble into the air a few metres away from me.

I drag myself over and find a withered bundle of tentacles collapsed in a heap around her spherical main body. She's badly burnt.

[Here, grab a hold of my antennae and I'll take you to the food]

[Is the enemy defeated?] she asks.

[He's done for it. Eat and heal yourself. We can talk later]

I feel slightly ashamed as her tentacles tremble as she reaches up to grasp my antennae. Her grip is feather light, nothing like the strength she should be able to exert. I carefully use my antennae to lift her off the ground and carry her towards the Croc before letting her down.

"Time to eat, senior?" Vibrant asks cheerfully.

I sigh.

"Yes Vibrant, time to eat."

Out of all of us, it's Vibrant who came out the least hurt. Mind you, she still has a long crack in the side of her carapace that is yet to heal. At least the wound is no longer deep enough that I can see the muscle attached to the inside of her exo-skeleton.

Weary to the bone, the four of us crawl to the still remains of the massive Croca. How much Biomass would a creature of this age and evolutionary level contain?

Tentatively, I reach forward to take a bite.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass, Garralosh Praeceptorem. One Biomass awarded]

[You have unlocked the basic profile of Garralosh Praeceptorem]

[Garralosh Praeceptorem, Garralosh Commander. Among the oldest of Garralosh' children, the commanders are powerful melee combatants. They feature two fire glands which are often mutated in complementary ways. Beware their powerful regenerative abilities and incredible physical strength. These creatures were personally reared by their parent to be leaders of her offspring and carry potent auras. Approach with caution]

Among the oldest of the children? So not necessarily the oldest? And what else is this? Personally reared by the big Croc itself? I guess that explains why the thing is so tough, if it had a big bad monster looking out for it from a young age.

Does that mean that Garralosh is going to come here for revenge is it? Surely not!

Please for the love of Gandalf let that not happen.

Suddenly nervous, I tuck into my food with increased gusto, chowing down vigorously in the hopes of healing my physical wounds and dispelling my nervousness. As I eat, something remarkable begins to happen.

[you have gained one Biomass]

[you have gained one Biomass]

[You have gained one Biomass]

.....

So fast!

I can feel it as well. As the food is consumed it feels heavy, dense even, inside my stomachs. Whatever magical process goes on in there, the pure essence, whatever it is that creates Biomass, is flooding into my body with every bite.

This isn't food. It's gold!

Pure gold.

Greedily now I chow down and notice the frenzy with which the others are eating has also increased tenfold. Even Crinis, a withered husk of herself only moments ago, is now tearing huge chunks of food off with every bite.

Oh no you don't!

With the mana I have in my core I activate infused mandibles to enable me to cut off larger chunks of food and increase my eating speed.

I won't be outdone! Gimme dat Biomass!

OM NOM NOM.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 235: The spoils and return to the surface

We feasted on the Croc until there was nothing left. Our stomachs were full to bursting and our wounds gradually closed. In hindsight, it probably wasn't too smart of us to eat until we were completely comatose but oddly enough it turned out fine.

With the Commander and its oppressive aura gone the creatures of the expanse began to slowly regain their former bustle. Around us I could hear their growling and clashing as the normal, frenetic pace of the Dungeon during a wave began to reassert itself. In contrast, the Croca beasts were nowhere to be found. As we ate and then lay about recovering, we didn't see hide nor scale of one.

My theory is that they must have retreated after the aura from their commander faded but some scouting will be necessary to confirm this. After I've digested of course.

Speaking of digestion. The sheer amount of Biomass gained from consuming this creature was absurd. When you consider just how many mutations it must have had, not to mention the complete lack of Biomass intake penalties due to evolutionary tier, perhaps it isn't so surprising that I was able to gain almost 310 Biomass just from my share.

310!

A staggering number. The others must have gained close to the same. I think Crinis and Vibrant will be able to max out their mutations at this point. A situation I'm extremely envious of! This trip will have gone somewhat to relieving that stress though. Combined with the food I've eaten during our assault on the expanse I've managed to pile up close to 400 Biomass!

Not to mention I'm more than half way to my next evolution. Level 40 is creeping closer into sight!

Speaking of evolution...

I roll over onto my stomach and painfully crawl my way towards the remains of the Croca commander. Not a whole lot is left to be honest, not even a complete skeleton. As I drag myself forward I eventually come within range of the gem.

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

A rare core.

Not special.

Rare.

The Gem is significantly larger than the special cores that I'd seen before. Sitting amidst the remains of the gigantic Croca, the spherical gems glitters with a red light, the energy within swirling madly.

This is some valuable stuff.

Feeling out myself internally, I feel as though the tightness and pain caused by absorbing the last Special core has almost completely faded by now. I'm not entirely sure if that means I'll be able to carry out of my plan and absorb another special core before evolving, hopefully so. I'm a bit stuck what to do with this thing though.

I'm not sure if I can use it, trying to absorb a core and popping from the inside isn't necessarily the way to go. I'll have to think on the appropriate use of this treasure.

The other aspect to consider here is that I have learned of levels of core beyond the special. This unlocks the possibility that there are even more potent cores, in fact I wouldn't doubt it! I wonder if Garralosh has a rare core or something even more potent?

What comes after rare? Legendary? Super Rare? Completely Rad core?

I have no idea!

Just something else to ponder, along with what possible evolutions would be unlocked with the absorption of a rare care might unlock.

I can dream dammit!

All in all it takes a few hours before the gang is ready to move again. We're still wounded but the worst of the injuries have been recovered. I decide that it will be best if we take our prize core and retreat back to the surface. The expanse is becoming more restless as time passes and we aren't in top shape.

We'll need to come back to do some recon to be sure the Croca beasts have actually left and then wait a bit in order to be sure that the waves of monsters will no longer be heading towards the colony.

Tired but triumphant, Tiny, Crinis, Vibrant and I limp our way back out of the Marsh Expanse towards the shortcut, avoiding combat for the most part. Due to us being careful and not wanting to attract unwanted attention, it takes us about six hours to get out of the Marsh and up the shortcut.

By the time we get there I've been able to activate my regeneration gland once again and the hole in my commercial marketplace has mostly covered up. The carapace is still somewhat thin in places but at the very least my insides are not being fully presented to the outside. All in all a great improvement.

When the anthill finally comes into sight I almost sag into the ground with relief.

I'm tired man!

So damn tired!

We all nearly died in that fight! I need stress relief. Also I need to work on my skills since my spells aren't working out the way I want them too at the moment. I wish there was someone I could talk to in order to get some advice about this stuff. I highly doubt most monsters bother with this stuff, they certainly wouldn't want to have any expertise on the matter. The one time I managed to interrogate a human, I didn't know enough to know what questions I needed to ask, so there are bound to be massive gaps in what I was able to learn.

So frustrating!

Perhaps Enid will be able to help me out.

Exhausted in body and mind, I drag myself up the anthill and down the main tunnel, Vibrant and my pets wandering along behind me.

Workers are buzzing about the place, bustling past me, busy with their own tasks. I'm stopped a few times and we exchange the ant high five enthusiastically before going our separate ways.

So nice to be back amongst by people!

I take a moment to pop into checking on the eggs and shock strikes me to my core.

The eggs! They're gone!

In their place are twenty energetic looking little grubs, dedicated workers watching over them, cleaning them and keeping them feed at all times. They hatched!

The new generation has arrived!

Eyes agog, I move into the nursery chamber to give the little grubs a quick tickle with my antennae and can't help but laugh as the little critters wiggle and roll to escape my antennae.

How exciting!

After playing with them for a time, I exit the chamber and head down to the Queen's chamber. She's still resting there, covered in workers and patiently absorbing the ambient mana here, just below the surface.

"Mother! I'm back! I've got something for you!" I call.

Gradually, the Queen's face emerges from the shifting mass of workers, her enormous antennae reaching out to contact mine.

"Welcome back child, it is good to see you. What have you brought?"

Suddenly I feel like a little kid bringing a painting they did at school home to show their parents. At least, this is how I assume that would feel, having never experienced it before.

With a thunk I drop a heavy gem onto the ground.

"I have a rare core! How close are you to evolving?"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 236: Discussion

Skills, their structure, nature and import, was one of the first things that required attention when we began to study the System in earnest. The reason why the Chrysalis felt the need to implement such measures in the way it did was irrelevant to us, understanding and disseminating this information to allow for the spread of knowledge and to allow for proper planning.

There was a great deal of knowledge to be discovered. Mapping out trees, discovering the various unlock conditions and skill fusion requirements was a daunting task only made possible by the collective efforts of many contributors.

In many ways the search to complete this knowledge goes on, as the very limits of the System are yet to be explored. Perhaps only the eldest has found the final skills in the tree, but if she has, then hasn't shared that information. Perhaps that is for the best.

Roricant the philosopher. "The Struggle to Adapt".

The Queen looked down at the core and then back up at me, curious.

"I'm not that close to evolving right now, I have tried to reduce the amount of experience I am taking from my children currently. There has been a great deal of conflict and our family has suffered. It was my intention to allow the children to have a better chance of defending themselves by allowing them to take in experience."

... Of course she did. What else would I have expected her to do?!

"Look, I understand that you are happy to sacrifice your own prospects to help the rest of us survive, but your own level and more importantly, your own evolution, will make a huge difference to the overall strength of the family!"

"I will consider your words child" the Queen assured me calmly, though I doubted she would do anything of the sort.

I may have been able to convince her to be slightly greedy with the Biomass, advancing her egg laying organs to the point she could select mutation advancements, but I think I was only successful there due to the promise of tangible benefits for her children. There is no such guarantee when it comes to evolution and mother knows it.

"Look at this core! We defeated a seriously strong monster in the marsh expanse and this core was inside it. A Rare core! Even more powerful than a special core! Who knows what kind of powerful evolution it could unlock for you!?"

As I try to advertise the merchandise I've brought back to my mother she continues to look down at me patiently. I can't help but get the feeling she is faintly amused by my attempts at persuasion.

I sigh.

"You aren't going to use this core, are you mother?"

Her antennae twitch in a laugh.

"No, child."

"Well what do you want me to do with it?" I say, frustrated.

I really didn't think she'd knock this back. If mother can evolve after absorbing the rare core, who knows how powerful she will become? What she might be capable of? At the heart of the colony lies the Queen after all, if she were to die then it'd be over for this family. I really don't think we'd be able to raise another Queen before the workers died off.

Why wouldn't she want to get stronger?

As if reading my mind, mother replies.

"What needs to be considered isn't how strong I myself can become, but how strong can the family as a whole become. I may be the most powerful individual in the colony for now, but you children are yet very young. It is you and your siblings who must grow strong for the colony to thrive, not I."

Haaaa.

"Fine. I'll take it. Maybe I can use it on Vibrant or something." I kick a few pebbles in irritation.

Thwack!

The Queen whips an antennae down on my head sharply.

"What was that for?" I protest.

"I believe that this core is precious and that you should be the one to take this opportunity" the Queen decrees.

"I might not even be able to take it, I've already absorbed a special core since evolving!"

Thwack!

Mercilessly she brings her antennae down again.

That stings!

"Find a way, child. You always have before and the family has been able to survive thanks to your efforts. I believe you can utilise this resource the best of us. Don't waste it."

....

"Yes mother" I grumble.

Satisfied with my acquiescence, the Queen gives me a quick pat on the head and turns her attention back to the workers who swarm over her.

"Oh! One more thing!" I call, "How long until the next wave of eggs will be ready to be laid?"

I want to know this so I have some idea exactly how long I'll have to get the first twenty in shape so that they can take on the job of training the second wave. I don't want to be stuck raising new generations of workers forever! I've got stuff to do dammit!

Besides that, I have a sneaking suspicion that two hundred workers wouldn't fit on my back.

"Tomorrow."

"Wassat?"

"They'll be laid tomorrow."

...

"kay then."

...

As the Queen turns back to her attendants, I scurry down into my own chamber beneath the colony and bury my rare core along with the others, mind spinning furiously. She already has enough Biomass for another two hundred!

I curse myself internally. Shouldn't have sent up all that damn food. Now I'm going to have hardly any time at all to try and get the first generation into shape! If only Tiny had eaten more...

Never thought I'd be thinking that!

Tiny and Crinis bunk themselves down in our own chamber for a well-earned rest and Vibrant has already sprinted off to help the workers out whilst I was talking to the Queen.

I feel as though she's been taking a more active interest in the activities of the workers since her last evolution, instead of tagging along with me all the time. This can only be a good thing in my mind. The workers could do with having a more powerful and intelligent soldier to protect them.

With the basics taken care of, I suppose I'd better head up to the village. Hopefully they haven't managed to stuff anything up whilst I've been gone and hopefully, I'll be able to find someone to answer a few questions I have about skills.

Chrysalis

Chapter 237: Misunderstanding

If I'm going to be honest, I don't really want to go and talk to the humans. The priest will probably be there, a crowd might form, it just feels so irritating. However, they may have information that can help me and I can't help but feel a little responsible for them.

In some ways I feel responsible for them in much the same way a human might feel responsible for their pets. They're a collective of individuals who need me to make sure they aren't killing themselves as they go about their daily business. I make sure they have the basic necessities of life, security, food and water, and then I let them go about their daily business.

Much like I cared for my pet colony when I was a human, except with the ants I cared more if they survived.

Sighing, I make my way up, out of the colony and out the top of the anthill. Diligent workers continue to patrol up and down the tunnel, a few trails leading foragers out into the surrounding wilds, groups of ants returning carrying the remains of surface monsters they'd found and dispatched.

Quite a few of the remaining workforce has evolved twice, giving them the stats they need to be able to dominate the bulk of surface monsters. Since the workers always act in teams, they've been able to mow through the surrounding lands like a scythe through wheat, in some ways reminding me of the fearsome Army Ant. That species of ant is nomadic since they basically strip the area around the colony of food pretty darn quick, forcing them to move to more fertile ground or starve.

Luckily we won't have that problem since the Dungeon will provide all of the sustenance we need, and soon the new generation of workers will be in a position to farm deep into the Dungeon, right down to the expanse, without my supervision.

Then I can investigate the aphid situation and see if I can't come up with an even better solution.

The future is bright!

Muahahahaha!

Oh right, humans. Ugh.

My musing has distracted me long enough that I've arrived at the burgeoning human village without being aware of it. I've already been noticed, several people gathering around me, maintaining a respectful distance thankfully. The number of people quickly builds and I'm fairly sure I saw someone run off to collect Enid and in all likelihood the priest as well.

As I wait, I take a little time to inspect the work that has been done. The number of crude buildings has certainly increased significantly since I was last hear, as well as the number of people. It seems as though the flow of refugees hasn't stalled at all, perhaps it's even growing.

A tingle of concern causes my antennae to twitch slightly.

If the monsters are rampaging further south then there's a chance they'll come here. I'll need to make proper preparations, perhaps get some scouting done...

Arrgh!

The list of things to do just doesn't seem to end!

Can't Pangera just buzz of somewhere else so I can help my colony grow?!

It isn't long before Enid rushes over, accompanied by the one armed priest. It seems she has several others in tow as well. I don't pay them much attention, instead I get to work forming the mind bridge, using all of my mental prowess to complete the process quickly.

[Enid] I greet her once the complex shape has been created.

[Hello] she sounds nervous, [how did things go in the Dungeon? Well I presume, since you are here safe and sound].

[It went well enough. My goals were accomplished though the fighting was more difficult than I had anticipated. My companions and I received no insignificant wounds].

Her eyes widened.

[That's terrible! I'm surprised there was a monster at that level of the Dungeon able to hurt you and your pets. What was it?]

I give an ant shrug with my antennae, which of course she can't recognise.

[More of Garralosh' offspring. I believe they have retreated from the expanse below us however, which should make us a little safer here].

Enid nodded, gratitude plain in her eyes.

[I thank you. The people here will be much relieved to hear of it. They have suffered at the hands of Garralosh and her children, hearing of your victory will give them some degree of comfort. May I?] she asks, gesturing towards the crowd.

I wave one of my antennae in agreement and the aged woman turns towards the nearby villagers, including the priest, to explain what I had said.

Behind her, the five or so martial looking refugees listen with attentive faces. Now that I give another look at them, they seem a little on edge. Their leader, a square jawed, tough looking woman, standing in front of the others, is giving me a serious dose of the stink eye.

I observe her without shifting my head or posture at all.

What is your beef, lady?

My thoughts are disturbed as a great cheer erupted from the villagers around me. It was quite a strange sight to see. People started hugging and shouting with exuberance. Smiles wreathed every face and the powerful voice of the priest rolled over the top of all, one hand raised to the sky as he eulogised his heart out.

Chill out people! One Croca commander doesn't mean the entire species has been wiped out or anything... sheesh!

Even Enid was smiling broadly as she turned back to me. I think she could sense my discomfort at the hubbub bubbling around us so she hastened to reassure me.

[I apologise for their boisterous behaviour. Good news has been hard to come by lately and even a little thing like this is enough to lift their spirits].

Her eyes narrowed a little.

[I... didn't let them know that you'd been injured. I rather felt that there might be some panic or indeed, some outrage, if they were to know that you had been harmed. I don't want anyone to start trying to sneak into the Dungeon to exact revenge].

I couldn't help a little shake of my head at that. Just how dumb are these people?! Going into the Dungeon, suicide!

Still, this is as good a time as any to bring up my needs with Enid.

[Speaking of being injured. The fight helped me come to the realisation that I may need some advice and assistance in regards to developing my skills and abilities. I tried to learn what I could from your Queen but I believe that much information may have been withheld from me. Would you be in a position to assist me?]

Enid looks slightly stunned to be hearing so many words at once from me. Once she understands my meaning she quickly frowns, her hands nervously playing the front of her skirt.

[I now a bit. My husband was a high level warrior who spent his days delving in the Dungeon and he taught me a fair bit about the combat skills. However, he was a swordsman and a human. The skills he used may not be applicable for you at all].

She hesitated a moment before rushing on.

[You might not like to hear this but our local priest, Beyn] she gestured towards the robed figure, still exhorting the crowd with all of his might, [would be an excellent person to ask. As a priest of the Path he studied the System extensively and part of his responsibilities as a priest is to advise people on builds and skills relating to their profession. He would know far more than I would].

....

Oh great.

Reluctantly I agree to Enid's suggestion.

[All right, fine. Let him know I'm going to weave a mind bridge to him so we can talk, shouldn't take a minute].

[Ah, there are some others here who want to speak to you also. Would that be possible?]

More of them?

[I'll talk to this priest first, then we'll see].

Enid nods and turns to the priest, tugging at his sleeve to get his attention before speaking to him urgently.

A few moments later he begins to weep profusely.

...

I'm already getting irritated.

Chrysalis

Chapter 238: Confrontation

Sobbing uncontrollably with joy, the priest raised his one hand towards me and fell to his knees, quite obviously performing some kind of worship. So caught up with emotion was he, that nearby refugees, temporarily taking leave of their senses, were also swept up in the moment and mimicked his action.

Surrounded by villagers giving praise on their knees, my ego begins to stir.

Down, Dark One! You shall not rise here this day! Nor any day!

I take a moment to control my thoughts. Having people worship you is a quick way to let your ego take over. I can't imagine anything good happens when someone begins to think of themselves as some sort of god when they are in fact, an ant.

I haven't shown any eternal reaction to all of this kerfuffle, keeping still except for the occasional twitch of the antennae, but there are others who have responded more strongly. The five new martial looking refugees, led by the square jawed female, do not look impressed to see a group of humans on their knees before a monster.

You know what? That reaction is probably spot on.

What sort of people in their right mind would do this sort of thing? If anything, I agree with the five newcomers. These humans are nuts. In some ways, having a human look at my villagers with such shock and dismay is almost a relief. At least there are some normal humans around here!

An angry light in her eyes, the leader pushes forward and grabs Enid by the shoulder, pointing at me and speaking in quick, harsh tones.

What's all this about then?

I'm not a big fan of her being so rough towards Enid. The old woman has been nothing but helpful to me and to the humans here. She deserves respect.

Enid listens without fear to the words being spat at her before shoving the hand from her shoulder and replying curtly to the woman. Then she turns to me, concentrating on our mental link.

[This person is named Morrelia. She and her group have been fighting surface monsters in this area for weeks. They only recently found us here and to be honest they are quite distrustful of you. They question the villagers loyalty and devotion towards you and your colony. I believe she wants to talk to you to determine if you are using some form of mind control].

...

She thinks I'm mind controlling these people? I didn't even want them here!

[She seems to be getting a little forceful here Enid. Have they caused any trouble?] I ask.

The older woman shakes her head.

[No. I simply believe they are concerned for the safety of the people here].

I grunt.

[How concerned do you think they'll be towards you if they think you're all under some sort of mind control? Will they attack me, or just kill all of you?]

Enid blinks, seemingly not having thought of the possibility.

[I'll talk to her. But tell her if she gets too handsy with you I'll be taking that hand with me].

Turning quickly to the martial looking woman beside her Enid quickly relays my words.

Nodding with satisfaction, the fighter steps back from Enid and turns to face me with a sharp glint in her eyes. And a hand resting on her sword hilt.

Yeesh.

Grumbling internally about humans being far more trouble than they are worth, I ignore the shock and disappointment in the priests' face as Enid tells him what is happening so I can finish off constructing the bridge, which I extend towards my unwelcome guest.

[What?] I huff, irritated.

Morrelias' eyes widen slightly at my abrupt rudeness, but she shows no other reaction.

[Are you able to hear me?] the response comes.

[Yes I can hear you. It's a frickin' mind bridge. I didn't bust my thorax trying to learn this spell so that I couldn't talk to people].

Oooo that's a bit snippy Anthony. I must be grumpier than I thought. Need to rain it in a little.

I have none of these problems when talking with ants, just sayin'.

My words provoke a response this time. Indignant rage seeped through the cracks on that stone face but she held her neutral expression well. The eyes told a different story however, they were alight with anger.

[Listen to me, creature, my family has slaughtered monsters for generations. If you don't show the proper respect I'll add your head to my wall].

Her grip on the pommel of her sword is getting pretty darn tight by the looks of it. This lady has some serious angst.

Mind you, I'm not planning to back down any just for that.

[Unless you're a higher level human than I've seen around here, taking my head might be more than you can handle].

Morrelia sneered.

[You overestimate yourself, monster].

What did I do to deserve this kind of attitude? This is what I get for saving humans. Somewhat irritated, I snap back.

[You're standing in a village full of people who's lives I've saved, and then protected, for absolutely no gain, and threaten me? Which one of us has issues with manners and respect? As you've been only too quick to point out, you are a human who celebrates killing monsters, yet I'm a monster who has saved humans. Is it possible that I've done more good for your kind than your family has?]

If I hit a nerve last time I spoke then this time I flat out kicked it. Muscles bulge on her arm as she struggles to restrain herself from pulling out her sword. I think she knows it would be a bad idea to fight here surrounded by villagers, but she looks so damn tempted.

[My brother gave his life fighting in the Dungeon, my father has dedicated himself to the Deep Legion for decades and he is a damn hero. The idea of a monster putting itself above them is an insult!]

... she might have a point I suppose.

[Yeah, I can see how you'd think that. I apologise].

....

[Excuse me?]

...

[I apologise?]

...

[Soooo, what is the problem here? You think I'm mind controlling these people or something?]

....

[Uh, yes?] Morrelia pulls herself together, [Yes. It seem unbelievable that a group of humans would so readily accept the help of monsters from the Dungeon, impossible, even. I want to be sure that you aren't manipulating these people with your mind magic].

I sigh and give my antennae a quick clean as I think about the situation. Bringing my front legs up and pulling my antennae through the joint drags the sensitive detectors through the cleaning hairs on the back of my knee, ensuring the antennae remain effective and also feels quite pleasant.

I don't recall ever being this clean as a human actually...

[Look, Morrelia. I didn't want these people here, they followed me after my colony fled in this direction. We ran through or near a few human settlements, none of which we harmed, and this idiot] I stab one antenna at the priest, [decided that following us and depending upon the colony for protection was a

great idea. To this point in time I've ensured that the colony won't harm the people here, tried to keep them safe from monsters and provided them with some help getting shelter. That's it. If you want to take over babysitting these people be my guest].

Morrelia's eyes narrowed.

[You could just be saying these things. Even if the villagers confirmed it, that could be because of your mind control, altering their memories].

I can't help but shrug my antennae.

[Then what are we talking for? If nothing I can say would convince you I don't mean any harm to these people, then why try and talk to me in the first place?]

If she wants to take over the protection of the village here and bar me from entry, then that could be a blessing in disguise. As long as I can get my info from the priest first, I'm happy enough to never come back!

[That is what I can't understand, monster] Morrelia bursts out, [why haven't you harmed these people?]

...

[Well they're super irritating, I agree with you there, but I don't think they deserve to be killed for it].

[Why? Any monster would be delighted to kill and eat all of these people. Experience! Food! Couldn't your colony grow in size from eating these people? What exactly is the reason why you are helping them?]

Ahhhh. Now we come down it. She's confused! Monsters from the Dungeon are supposed to be hateful things who kill and eat everything they can find, much like the Croca beasts are doing all over Liria right now. If we consider that, then finding an ant who seems quite content to live alongside people would be pretty darn weird, right?

If I were to explain that I myself was human in a previous life, that I don't particularly want to kill and eat something that I used to be, would that be convincing?

She'd probably think I was just insane. A rogue monster gone completely bananas. What to say then...

All I can think of to say is [I don't mind 'em that much, these villagers. You people are all right].

Smooth.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 239: The Pries

Morrelia blinks a few times.

[You can't seriously expect me to accept that].

This is one stubborn person.

[We've already established that you won't accept anything I say].

Her eyes narrow.

[Then would you answer a few questions?]

It's amazing how patient everyone is being watching this. I have a crowd of people standing about watching a woman stare at a monster with absolutely nothing happening on the outside. For some reason they all seem riveted, watching me, then watching Morrelia, as if an invisible game of tennis were going on and they had to imagine the movement of the ball.

[Yes I can answer some questions, but can we make it quick? I have stuff to do]

I can see her mouth tighten a little at that but I'm only telling the truth. This conversation taking place at all is a favour to her, I'm not getting anything out of it.

Maybe I'm just trying to work on my diplomacy. Nearly getting my entire commercial district bitten off was enough to remind me of the old days when I hung about on the ceiling and did my best to never be found.

The change to walking straight up into my enemies faces happened a little too quick. The caution from those early days kept me alive! Information first! Swaggering up to giant monsters and attacking them head on is not supposed to be my style!

Stay low! Information is king!

This lack of care and attention, this was the work of Dark Anthony. Damn ego beast! Be gone from my sight!

Remember humility! Remember stealth! Remember not getting half of your ass bitten off!

With renewed motivation I decide to listen to what Morrelia has to say. Not making enemies I don't have to is wise policy. Let's keep it pleasant.

[Have you ever killed any humans?]

[Yep]

DAMMIT.

Her eyes flash dangerously at my immediate reply and I hasten to explain myself.

[In defence! My colony was attacked by humans and I defended my family! I surely can't be blamed for that! I also killed a few during the rebellion in Liria but I was assisting your Queen retake her throne, you would have done the same had you been around, surely].

Morrelia listens to my defence and is forced to nod reluctantly.

[I have heard from Enid and others about what happened during the rebellion in my homeland. I had not heard of your colony being attacked].

I shrug my antennae.

[It was just bad luck really. The Queen and her guards ran straight into the anthill whilst fleeing the city. They attacked and we killed them in retaliation. Many of my siblings died in that battle, I honestly wish it had never happened].

The humans who had killed my kind had been dealt with. Then I took appropriate measures against the Queen to protect myself against her betrayal.

[I don't exactly trust humans, there have been plenty trying to kill me above ground, and the black soldiers have done the same down below. But these villagers have done nothing wrong to me or my colony, so I tolerate them].

That should communicate my position.

Instead of being relieved, Morrelia is staring at me with even more intensity than before.

[Soldiers dressed in black? You've met the Legion?]

So those soldiers are from the Legion that she keeps going on about? I remember when they forced me out of my first nesting place, systematically killing every monster they found and burning out the tunnels. I was terrified of them at the time. To be honest, I still feel afraid of them.

[I wouldn't say I've met them. I've seen them. They moved into the Dungeon and started killing everything not long after I was born. I fled from them and wound up finding my colony in the forest expanse].

[So you've not fought them then?]

Her thoughts are vibrating with intensity as she asks that question.

[Hell no] I reply, [strictly running from them. I'm not that stupid].

Morrelia visibly relaxes.

[That is wise of you. They are strong].

Just you wait, lady. Pretty soon the most powerful and awesome ant colony in the history of any world is going to born.

[I don't trust you, monster. But I'm willing to let you live. Perhaps after a period of observation I'll be able to determine your true colours. I will stay here with my allies and assist the refugees for now. They are what is left of my homeland after all].

She can't but sound depressed as she utters that final sentence. It's true, her home is gone, destroyed by monsters from the Dungeon such as myself. I can't help but feel a slight twinge of guilt. I didn't have to dig quite so many tunnels underneath the castle. I can't help but feel I played a small part in the destruction of the city and the loss of so many lives.

The innocent lives anyway. The human Queen got what she deserved.

[Stick around, feel free. As long as you don't kill any of my siblings or mess with the colony, I have no beef with you].

Morrelia nods and breaks off the mind bridge, turning to her companions as they lean forward to hear the results of the conversation.

FINALLY.

No longer forced to be diplomatic I can now turn to the task at hand. Extracting information from this priest.

I turn towards him, only to find he is still on his knees, giving praise and extolling whatever virtues have taken him at this moment in a sonorous voice.

This guy...

Reluctantly, I get to work forming the mind bridge and before long I reach out and complete the connection.

[Hello priest].

....

[OH GREAT ONE IT IS BEYOND JOY TO FINALLY RECEIVE YOUR HALLOWED WORDS. LET ME SAY THAT ..]

[Loud! Too damn loud!]

The priests' face, which had been rapturous as the link was established, is instantly chastened. He tries again.

[It is a blessing to finally be able to bask in your wisdom. I am honored ...]

[Too soft! Just speak normally man!]

Now the priest is looking properly distressed. Being told off twice by his religious idol has demoralized him so visibly that the people around him reach out with their hands and place them on his person to give comfort to the poor guy.

I try to settle him down.

[Just relax. I have a few questions that you can help me with. Please don't shout at me, it hurts my head].

The priest takes a few deep breaths. With his one shaking hand he reaches up to touch the hands placed upon him, as if to draw strength from them.

Then he faces me calmly.

[I am ready].

Okay then.

[Right, so I had a few questions about the system, I hear you're pretty knowledgeable about that?]

....

[THANK YOU FOR YOUR PRAISE, GREAT ONE! I AM HUMBLED ...]

[Shaddup!]

It takes a while for me to get him settled but eventually we reach a point where he is able to converse somewhat normally. By the time we get there I'm mentally exhausted.

[So you want to learn about skills? Particularly magic skills?]

[That's right. I need some advice about how to proceed getting stronger].

[Very well, o Great One. I would be delighted to help you to the extent of my knowledge].

[First off, talk to me about magic affinities. How important are they? How do they progress?]

A frown creases the priest's youthful brow as he ponders.

[Let me assume that your skills have progressed to the point where you are able to manipulate and shape internal mana in order to cast spells. When learning the basic skills of Mana Manipulation and Mana Shaping, you'll gain knowledge of the basic spell forms, such as barrier magic, simple bolt spells and so on. You've learned these?]

[Yes. So you're suggesting that there are other spells to work with?]

[Correct, Great One, how infinite your wisdom. Once you have reached the level of Mana Transformation you will learn how to transform mana into various attributes. Once you have succeeded at transforming your mana into any other kind you will unlock the rudimentary affinities. These are the elements, Earth, Fire, Water, Wind].

[Yes, I've gotten that far].

[Then you have taken the first steps on your path to being a mage! Possibly the first monster of your strata in history to have ever done so!]

[Settle down buddy] I warn him as the look in his eye becomes increasingly wild.

He bows to me slightly.

[I am in control of myself, Great One].

[Good. So I've learned Water Mana Affinity and levelled it to Advanced Water Mana affinity, which gave access to ice magic. What's next to make myself stronger? My magic doesn't feel powerful enough for me. Should I focus on boosting my stats? Do I need to level my skills?]

[Ah yes. The first teaching of the Path is on this matter. It is known as 'the first question', the very first thing that the civilised races of the surface sought to answer after the System revealed itself to us].

....

[So what's the answer?]

[As the saying goes, knowledge is power and Skills are knowledge. Having great physical strength, or mental prowess, is next to worthless if you can't apply it appropriately].

I was worried about that.

Sigh.

[So what do I need to learn?]

Chrysalis

Chapter 240: Learnings and worship

We stand now on the brink of the final ascension. There is tremendous fear amongst the people now, but also great anticipation. Such a momentous moment in history, the ambition of it still takes my breath away.

Who else but we would ever dream of something like this? None of the other peoples would have the mettle, the commitment, to see such a project through to the end. In my eyes, it is yet another example of our superiority. The others don't see it as I do, they are filled with remorse. I care nothing of the fates of those beneath us, or for myself. Only the completion of our work can move me.

She is sleeping now. Deep, restful slumber, I hope. It is my fervent wish that she does not wake until we are done. To see the look in her eyes would break me. It would break us all.

But we wouldn't stop.

Excerpt from a private journal, page 344, Author unknown.

[So the way the System works for humans and monsters has quite significant differences, huh?]

[From what you've told me and the limited information that the Church of the Path has collected over the centuries, there are similarities but also differences, most of them due to unlock requirements].

[I still can't believe that there are no prompts for unlocking skills].

Beyn chuckles ruefully.

[I've read copies of the journals the early researches of the church have kept. The frustration that they experienced trying to track down the exact requirements to unlock advancements nearly drove them mad. Some of them are quite exacting, I assure you].

[Give me an example]

[Very well Great One, may your carapace be ever shiny. As we discussed, the surface races do not 'evolve' and gain strength but instead have 'classes'. Gaining levels in a class provides stat growth and every class give different stats at different rates].

[That still seems unfair to me. Why do most classes have such low growth?]

Beyn raised a finger of his one remaining hand.

[It's true, most classes have appalling stat growth. Take this village for example. Most of the people here have the 'farmer' or 'grower' classes. The stat growth on these jobs is poor, 0.2 Toughness a level and 0.1 for the other stats. Without transitioning to a more advanced class they'll be stuck with mediocre stats their whole lives].

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I frown.

[So why don't they change classes?]

Beyn shook his head.

[The requirements for advancing classes can be quite strict and although a farmer can gain experience through growing and selling produce, the xp gain is pitiful compared to fighting monsters].

[How are they supposed to fight monsters without decent stats?!] I protest.

Beyn nods.

[Exactly. The system rewards battle above all else. In order to advance in class any other way is hard. It can take decades for a moderately successful trader to advance to a merchant].

I think about it. Why would the System be built in such a way to punish non-combat oriented classes? IT doesn't really seem fair.

[There must be shortcuts.]

[There are, but they are only available to those with resources. For example, a wealthy merchant can take their child with the trader class into the Dungeon and pay for mercenaries to feed them the xp from kills in order to advance their level rapidly. Such practices are common in the upper echelons of society and...] he sighed heavily, [the Church of the Path is also a major player in such trade. Knowledge of powerful, advanced classes, escorts to take people on 'pilgrimages' into the Dungeon, all of it is for sale.]

[Seems a bit grubby] I point out.

He nods.

[I am questioning much that I blindly accepted since meeting you, O Great One. The light of your truth has ...]

I tune him out for a few minutes. Every now and again he launches into a sermon and rather than keep yelling at him I've just been letting him go until he runs out of steam or catches himself going on too long.

I've been chatting with Beyn, the village priest, for some time now and the crowd around us doesn't show any signs of dispersing. How they are so entertained by this game of invisible tennis, I've no idea.

Other than a few kids trying to sneak up and poke my carapace I haven't had any issues with the crowd so far. The kids have all been intercepted by wary parents and had their hands slapped down anyway.

Beyn has had a lot to say. All sorts of new ideas have been imparted to me, skill fusion, spell tier progression and the mana type matrix. It's going to take a long time for me to digest these ideas, but for now I can say this much, I have to improve my skills!

The priest hasn't been able to give me exact instructions on how to progress my more monstrous skills, since his Church hasn't been able to study the sorts of skills that monsters have access to in any depth, but he's been able to give me a few ideas. Enough to go on for now, anyway.

[So], I break into Beyn's rambling, [you're able to give people advice and such on how to progress here in the village right? I assume you aren't charging them for it?]

He shakes his head vigorously.

[Absolutely not! However this is little time or energy for the people here to try and advance their classes and gain levels. We are barely surviving, after all.]

[Right. Tell Enid to get together a list of things that I can do to get the village up and running and let the people know that they need to be trying to advance their classes. I don't want to have to protect this village forever and the sooner you can do it yourselves, the better. Eventually I'll be prepared to escort small groups into the Dungeon to 'feed' experience to them. That should speed the process along.]

Beyn's face goes slack with astonishment.

[You would be willing to do this for us Great One?] he asks.

I shrug.

[Sure. The faster you can look after yourselves, the better it is for me right? It won't be hard.]

He immediately turns to the villagers and begins shouting, his face filled with joy. Very quickly the expression is spread around until all of the adults are staring at me with wonder filled eyes. Some of them are even crying!

Thump

Oh boy. Here comes the kneeling again.

Almost as one, the people fall to their knees and clasp their hands, or hand in Beyn's case, in prayer. Shouting out their praise and thanks at me.

I, uh, didn't think it was that big a deal...

Not far away, Morrelia and her group are watching this display with narrowed eyes, clearly angered by such words being professed towards a monster of the Dungeon.

I didn't ask for this, okay?!

The noise is so great that I almost didn't notice the slight vibration running through the ground beneath my feet. Once I detect it my antennae start twitching this way and that through the air, trying to find the source of the sudden, uneasy air that's come over me.

[Tiny, Crinis, come up here] I say, breaking off my link with the priest.

Gradually the vibrations grow stronger and stronger until the tread of heavy feet on the earth becomes audible.

Then the growls start.

[We're under attack!]