

## Chrysalis 291

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#### Chapter 291: The surface is just so draining

Damn ... I need some mana.

After running around the surface, we've managed to find a whole heap of nothin'. Ruined buildings, burned out farms and abandoned homes. All the while my core is leaking mana into the air. Checking my MP told me that I still had around half of my full tank, but I'm a little nervous about that. If we keep pushing forward then I'm going to reach the point that I'll need to find some Dungeon access in order to recharge my batteries since I won't be able to make it back to the nest before I run dry.

He's being stoic about it, but I can see the drain has taken a toll on my big ape associate as well. At the same stage of evolution as me, but with a smaller core, Tiny is nonetheless experiencing a bit of drain. He hasn't told me as such, but the expression on his face, tense but puzzled, as if pooping out an orifice that he didn't know existed and couldn't quite find, has given the game away.

No Tiny, that isn't a waste product, that is your literal life energy being sucked out of your core!

Gah! This whole thing has given me a headache. It wasn't long ago that I was a lifeform that didn't require a mana infused gem within their body in order to sustain themselves. Heck, when I was born onto Pangera, I didn't have a core at all! Now look at me, filled to the brim with mana and dependent on it like some sort of junky.

With great power comes great ... addiction? I didn't think it would ever come to this, back when I was fresh and new to the Dungeon, staring at glowing blue veins on the wall and wondering what it was all about, but now I want my fix!

Gimme' dat mana!

Even my legs are providing precious little relief here on the surface. No matter how much I try to soak mana through my legs I'm getting vapour at best.

I sighed. All I can do is press forward, particularly now. A few hours ago we picked up the trail of a pack of monsters and since then Morrelia has been following them like a demon possessed crazy person. Her hands are tight around the hilts of her swords, only to let go when she realised what she'd done. A little later her hands were back on those swords, knuckles white.

That is one angry berserker.

I have a suspicion that things are going to get nasty soon. For the last hour we've been on the road, in a literal sense. After first coming across the tracks amongst the trees and farmland, we followed them, well, Morrelia followed them, the monsters in the group can't track for nards, until we hit a flat dirt road and have been following it since. The road had the appearance of being well maintained, so I expect that somewhere at the end of this is going to be a sizeable community, a town or small city, and considering a somewhat large force of monsters is heading that way (judging by the tracks), I feel something is about to go down.

It's going down for real!

[You sensing anything up ahead, Crinis?]

[I don't, Master. My ability to sense mana is far more limited in range than your eyesight. I think I will be much more useful in the confines of the Dungeon] she responded, somewhat despondent.

[Out here in the open you might struggle, but inside a city you'd be much better off] I comforted her, [each of us had our strengths, not to worry.]

She didn't respond but I sensed a more cheerful mentality radiating from the softball on my back. Such a well-meaning horrific dealer of death.

[I think there might be a fight ahead, Tiny. Stay alert.]

The ape looked more cheerful in an instant. Damnable ape! I wanted you to be wary, and on your toes! Not happy and ready to run to your stupid death!

Argh.

Not helping it, I've known what Tiny is like for a long time now, he's not happy unless embroiled in a brutal fight to the death, the more risk to himself the happier he gets. Only a miracle has kept him alive this long. I need to find a healer to join in my retinue of pets, otherwise I doubt he'll continue to survive. He doesn't have any built-in healing and his toughness isn't as high as I'd like. He's a glass cannon is what he is, all brawn, no brain and not enough HP.

You're a worry Tiny, no doubt about it.

The object of my frustration continues to bounce on his heels as we walk, throwing compact punches at the air, a wide grin stretched from bat ear to bat ear. Hopeless.

Oh? What is that I see?

In the distance I noticed a grey smudge on the horizon and as we travelled it grew into a city wall when we were close enough for my ant eyes to make out the details. With haste I threw together a mind bridge to chat with Morrelia. She would be sure to know something about this place.

[Hey] a classic lead in.

[...]

[Hey!] second times the charm.

[...]

[Heeeeeeeey!] this time, for sure.

[Would you shut up!? I'm trying to focus!]

Holy moly! Seems like I poked a bear... I should take the hint and leave her alone.

[s-sorry. Just wanted to ask a question.]

[...]

[Do you know anything about the town up ahead?]

[...]

[It'd be great if we had a little more information is all...]

[GAH! Stupid ant! What do you want?!]

Along with her ferocious mental sending, Morrelia rounded on me, the barely controlled rage in her eyes seared me with intense heat.

[Hey there, just, like, chill for a second. All friends here, right?] I shrank back from her glare as I spoke and Crinis, sensing my distress, began to extend a few warning tentacles toward the enraged mercenary.

With a visible effort, Morrelia choked down her anger and when she spoke her mental voice sounded tight with the strain. For a berserk to keep her emotions in check must be quite the taxing exercise.

[Is your class actually Berserker? Because that would awesome] I blurted out.

A thick vein began to throb on her temple and I hurried to move on.

[Ah, ok. Just wanted some information about what I suspect is a town up ahead. We've tracked some monsters here, I can see what looks like a town wall, it only follows that we can expect some monsters fighting up ahead, possibly against some survivors, I was hoping to learn what you planned to do?]

I spoke quickly to try and squeeze out my query before this enraged lady drew her weapons and cut me down where I stand. For her part, Morrelia blinked as my torrent of words smashed into her head. When I finished she managed to keep a grip on her temper long enough to sate my curiosity.

[What you've said is correct. The town ahead is called Midum. It's a fair size trading hub with a garrison and city wall. Since the monsters we've been tracking are headed this way I believe the city may still stand or is currently under attack. I've been trying to maintain the correct emotional state to enter into my Berserk Rage, a feature of my Berserk Tempest class, at the first sighting of the enemy. Anything else?] she answered my questions in clipped tones, making it clear her emotions were still at a steady boil under the surface.

[All good. Just, ah, don't try and kill us when you go all angry.]

A tight smile is all I get in response as she goes back to 'maintaining the correct mental state'. I don't begrudge her testy attitude at all, since the closer we came to the city, the more clear it became that it was at least partially on fire.

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### **Chapter 292: City under attack**

The city of Midum was burning at an impressive rate as we approached. As we drew closer the sound of combat began to ring in the distance, roaring monsters, shouting people and the clash of steel on claw. In a lucky break, the gates of the city were already demolished, overwhelmed by whatever creatures had arrived before us. The wooden gates made a sorry sight as we rushed through them, smashed timbers hanging on hinges pinned into the stone walls.

The walls were much less impressive close up, nothing at all like those of Liria. A mere four metres tall and two metres thick, they were hardly the kind of fortification that would keep out a monster horde,

but then again, they weren't intended to be. The only things they'd expected to have to deal with in this part of Liria was low level surface monsters and bandits, at the very worst an attack from a neighbouring country. Something like a Dungeon monster invasion was never on the cards for these people, right up until happened.

We surged into the city, the rubble of buildings strewn about our feet. The signs of battle were everywhere, smashed buildings, doors ripped off their hinges, burned out roofs. The only thing missing was the remains of the combatants who had fallen. Because there wouldn't be any, naturally. Human or monster, the fallen are Biomass, ripe for the taking.

It makes for an eerie scene. Just like what I'd witnessed at the farm house except magnified in scale a thousand times. It's almost like running through an old ruin rather than a place with humans still fighting in it, there is just no sign of anything organic. What were once inns, filled with people, laughter and merriment are now shattered, their signs ripped down, walls knocked in and furniture destroyed. As we race passed one I can see the tables upturned, chairs scattered around the room and even the bar itself carved right down the middle, yet not a single sign of any living thing inside.

I get the feeling that whatever has happened here, didn't happen quickly. There are signs of barricades on the streets, of houses torn down to create makeshift walls and open up space for archers. Spent arrows abound in the areas we pass through, scattered across stone or lodged into wood. It seems that once the walls were lost the people here engaged in a brutal fight, street by street, in order to try and survive.

I skittered over rocks and debris as the once cobbled roads of Midum were now cracked and strewn with the remains of the homes of its citizens. The deeper into the city we get, the louder the sounds of combat become. I looked at Morrelia as we dashed with all our might and the signs of her emotional state were clear to see if I was careful. Clenched teeth, fierce glare, muscles knotting, all signs of her barely repressed rage. If I was to hazard a guess I would say she was balancing herself on the very edge of her class feature activating, aiming to berserk the second she caught sight of the foe.

It didn't take much longer to find them. Rounding a corner we find ourselves approaching the waterline, the wide spread of the... lake? Ocean? Laid out before me. Here too is the source of the fire. Large warehouses are burning, sending soot and smoke billowing into the sky. It seems the people here are making one last stand. Several warehouses, those made of the most stone, have been boarded and walled in with whatever the people had to hand. Archers dot the roofs, firing into the hungry mass of creatures below. Men and women with spears defend the edges of the building, stabbing and pushing with desperate fervour to prevent the monsters from finding purchase on the roof. Centipedes, spiders and others climb straight up the walls, jaws clattering as they strive to sate their hunger.

Around the base of the buildings the doors are barred but more powerful beasts, like Crocas, hounds and bears are attempting to batter them whilst fending off constant thrusts from spear wielders inside the building. It can't last. The sheer mass of the monsters pressed forward, unable to be denied access to the building itself which they tear into with fang and claw. The stone scrapes and shatters beneath the blows and the tough wood of the warehouse door is already splintering.

The Croca beasts, stupid fire breathers that they are, bellowed jets of flame as they sought to ignite anything they could. Smoke could be seen rising already, something, somewhere inside had already caught alight.

The moment the creatures came into sight Morrelia was off. Bellowing like a raging hell beast she dashed with all her might, her entire body seemed to flicker out of existence before she appeared halfway to the enemy with both her swords drawn.

[Better get in there Tiny, or there won't be anything left for you by the looks of things!] I shouted at the big ape.

The words had barely reached his half eaten peanut sized mind before he rumbled forward, knuckles pounding into the road so hard he shattered the stones as he hurled himself forward, lightening crackling around his upper body.

[There's a lot of monsters here Crinis, going to have to put you to work I'm afraid] I informed my sightless companion as I strove to keep pace with Tiny.

[Not to worry Master], she assured me, [for having placed themselves in your way I will allow these filth to taste true despair!]

I'll bet she will.

Although I don't spy anything too powerful in the mix, there are still a heap of monsters here. Easily over a thousand. I'll need to deploy Crinis' tentacles of mass dismemberment in order to chew through these kinds of numbers, although I do have a few spells that should prove handy.

As we close in the backs of the unsuspecting monsters, Morrelia is already there. Her face frozen in a rictus grin of pure hate, her blades flash faster than the eye can see, sending waves of pure swordlight into the pressed ranks of the enemy.

Even in her berserk state, she isn't so foolish as to dive directly into the middle of the horde, instead she dances around the edge and her twin weapons never cease their brutal motion. As the monsters begin to fall dead and dying by the dozen, they turned and tackle this new threat, claws grasping for a chance to rend flesh.

Then Tiny arrived.

BOOM!

With an impact like thunder, Tiny descended on the monsters like a collapsing mountain. He leaped high into the air, gathered all of his strength before he delivered a titanic blow to an evolved dragon wolf hound. The beast was smashed directly in half by the twin fists of Tiny, who didn't pause to admire his handiwork but instead lashed out with his meaty hands, pulped enemies left behind every time he struck.

[Let's do it Crinis! Try not to kill any humans!]

Crinis didn't respond with words but actions instead. She reached out with two tentacles to grasp my antennae before pulling them back towards herself. Crinis slingshot has been loaded!

Fire!

It's shameful to say but I can't throw her that far with my antennae alone, they aren't built for that kind of lifting, but I manage to launch her far enough she landed within range of the nearest monsters. No sooner does she touch the ground than tentacles explode out from her body to wrap around the unsuspecting creatures nearby.

Poor things, I almost pity them.

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#### **Chapter 293: Bird is the word**

It's a factor of the Dungeon that I find has been curiously understudied, the fact that the denizens of that place, the monsters in all their various forms, change over time. One hundred years ago the tower lead a detailed study into the menace of the Scorpionem genus that had been terrorising the Dungeon under Enlightened Alliance lands. And now? That particular variety of monster is gone, almost never seen.

The question that needs answering is why? Environmental pressures do not account for such a rapid extinction of a species from the Dungeon on their own. Monster populations are incredibly adaptable, even the less intelligent species are known to adjust behaviours and select different mutations in order to adapt to the ever changing conditions around them at lightning quick speeds.

So why the dearth of Scorpionem monsters? Some of my peers have suggested that they were hunted to extinction, a prospect I find laughable. These creatures were featured in a study detailing their detrimental takeover of a large swathe of Dungeon territory, and we are to believe that they were exterminated by the surface races? Not a single documented case of a Dungeon species, let alone genus, being driven extinct by surface intervention exists.

And why? Because we cannot prevent or control Dungeon spawns. When a large population of one monster gathers together, it is known to cause a spawn point to form, but it isn't required. Destroying all of one species at a point does not prevent them from being spawned elsewhere. It's almost as if the Dungeon decided that it didn't need or want to spawn Scorpionem monsters anymore, so it stopped. Had they fulfilled their purpose? Were they deemed to be unsuccessful? We are on the edge of a very important question, one that touches on the very nature and purpose of the Dungeon.

Does the Dungeon choose which monsters are spawned and where? If so, the implications are terrifying.

Excerpt from 'Biodiversity in the Dungeon, a dissertation on its breadth and purpose' by Xinci

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Isaac Bird had seen some plops in his day. When his father had walked out his mother, little Isaac little more than a wee toddler himself, that'd been some ripe, fresh bull plops right there. His poor ma had worked herself to the bone, scrubbing pots and serving tables at the Skeeve Rat, a complete dive on the water front.

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When Isaac got old enough he'd managed to 'prentice himself out to a local guard company, finally able to bring home a bit 'o coin to support his ma, only to have her take sick and pass away three months later.

That was plops with some serious heft. Real weight to 'em. Some men could be crushed under that kind of weight, but not Isaac Bird, no sir. He'd picked himself up and carried on. After three years of getting his head kicked in, training, levelling and carrying the plops for jeering superiors, he'd become a full guardsman.

That'd been two years ago and since then, Isaac had been knee deep in it and no mistake. Guards on the take? Plops. Merchants stepping on the citizens, above the law due to their wealth? Big bag 'o plops right there. Poor people strugglin, starvin', dyin' with nobody to look after 'em, thrown on the garbage heap to rot with the off fish? That be a steaming mountain of brown right there.

But this latest one had to take the cake. Watching the merchants and nobles sailing out onto the sweet blue waters of Barka Lake, burning the fishing fleet behind them as savage Dungeon monsters swarmed over the walls, that'd been the largest, most potent serving of plops that Isaac had ever clapped eyes on. Sacrificing the people of Midum so they'd have more time to escape, those worthless sacks of trash had ground the poor under their heel all their lives and now they sought to prevent their death the same way they lived: at the detriment of a whole heap of others.

Isaac shouldn't have felt surprised, but the callousness of it had rattled him.

"Anna! Find out what the hell is burnin' would ya!" he hollered to his second in command as he struggled to clear the sting out of his eyes. The damned smoke was everywhere. Even as he coughed Isaac found an opening through a crack in the door and thrust his spear through with all his strength.

[Expert Spear Mastery has reached level 31]

Well 'aint that somethin'. If he survived he might be able to reach Spear Supremacy before he turned thirty, quite the honour for a town guard.

The fighting was thick and fierce now, had been for the whole damned week. The walls were lost so quickly, the attack coming out of nowhere. Mainly because City Lord Cranten pulled all the scouts in and chucked them inside the wall when he found out what had happened in Liria. Terrified of Monsters erupting out of the ground he'd let them walk right up the walls during the night. Flamin' moron.

"Come on you yellow dogs!" Isaac bellowed, "what are you watin' for? Breathable air?! Get your ass on the door!"

Beleaguered and suffering, the last able bodied survivors of Midum heeded his call and stumbled back into position, braced against the splintered doors that were the last defence against the swarming beasts outside.

Isaac tightened his grip on number five, his spear, before he stabbed once more through the crack in the door on instinct. His intuition was rewarded with a pained growl and a squelching impact as the spear tip struck home.

BOOM!

"What in the blinkin' blazes was that?!" Isaac hollered as the stones beneath his feet rattled from a colossal impact.

Thinking the monsters outside the door must have staggered from that impact, Isaac leapt forward to press his face to the crack and his eyes widened at what he saw.

A sea of monsters heaved across the docks outside the warehouse, but beyond them something he couldn't explain was taking place. A giant gorilla monster was smashing smaller monsters into pieces, smashing them like twigs.

Even as he watched a, writhing mass of tentacles erupted and a hideous beast of horrifying darkness began snatching creatures up and stuffing them into its fanged maw.

"What in the name of bleedin' bloody blood" Isaac muttered, scarcely believing what he was seeing. Why would monsters turn on each other now? It didn't make sense! And where the heck did this lot come from?!

A flash of light caught his eye and he pulled back from the door just in time as a piercing ray of light pierced through the hulking monsters around the door, scything them down like wheat. Only when the spray blasted through the crack and into his face did Isaac realise it had been water.

What on Pangera?!

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#### **Chapter 294: Salvation?**

"This is a right ploppin', that's for sure" Isaac Bird growled as he fell back from the cracks in the door.

The water he'd seen had sliced through monsters as if they weren't even there, not to mention the other monsters he'd seen as they battered against the horde assembled outside the warehouse.

How could he explain it? Had some master mage and tamer heard of their plight whilst travelling past? Such a thing would be a darned miracle. Not only because a mage with the strength and means to raise two powerful pets would be a rare as hens teeth in this part of the world, but such a person would almost assuredly be part of the upper crust and unlikely to lower themselves to assisting some townsfolk and guards stuffed in a warehouse.

Isaac scrambled back onto his feet and tightened his grip around his spear once more. Whatever the reason, it wouldn't matter a bit if his people died before the monsters were killed.

"Step back from the door you bleedin' piles of flamin' trash!" he bellowed over the roar of the fight, "if that water comes through you're gonna end up in pieces and I aint' got any glue!"

The men and women who'd braced the danger to brace the warehouse door stepped back in confusion. The spray of water blasted through the cracks and soaked them but they hadn't seen the water jet itself and didn't appreciate how deadly it was.

They moved too slow for Isaac and leapt forward to pull them back. Many of them flinched as if they expected the door to be forced in the second they were no longer holding it shut but no such thing occurred.



"You and you" Isaac pointed at two of the bedraggled survivors, "get out the back and get on bucket duty, make sure there's nothing burning in here."

The two, a man and a woman who looked barely old enough for marriage but had fought their way through hell in the last week, nodded and rushed to hit the buckets. The others gathered near the wide doors of the warehouse looked to Isaac for guidance.

"Looks like help has arrived people" he told them and watched the hope blossom in their expressions.

Judging from the horrific din from outside the warehouse, the battle was still raging out there. The bellowing of monsters, the crash and thud of heavy blows and impacts rang in their ears without pause.

What they do? Just wait it out? Hope that whoever had come to their rescue was victorious?

"I'll be damned if I hide like a rat in a bleedin' hole!" Isaac bellowed.

"Form the line you idiots! You think you're rescued already? Thousands of monsters out there need killin'! You wanna live then get your arse up and in line! Spears front and at the ready!"

Isaac stormed through the ranks of his 'guards', most them fishermen and shopkeepers, as he shouted, pushed and harassed his people until he had a rag tag group of twenty formed up behind the door in the most pathetic excuse for a box formation he'd ever seen. He was damned proud of it.

Most of these people hadn't seen a monster and never held a weapon in their life. Here they were one week later with steady hands and steel in their eyes.

"If we're gonna survive then we need to get out there and help. With all the monsters distracted by the assault from behind we'll have a good chance to stick a few before they even realise we're there. Get in position now you sack of pig sick! Do I need to open the doors me bloody self?"

After another minute of furious cursing they were ready. He'd sent a runner to the roof so the archers knew they were coming out and to give them cover and he had two young boys on the door, ready to yank them open and allow the spear wielding formation to charge through.

Isaac checked his grip on the spear one more time. He'd already busted four spears in the last week, he was hoping this would be the last one he needed.

"Alright then. Stab 'em right in the face! Charge!" he screamed.

The doors to the warehouse flew open and they charged out, momentarily blinded by the sudden change in light. It didn't slow them at all as they hurtled forward, the lot of them screaming like demons of the Dungeon.

When his vision cleared he was faced with a horrifying bear monster, its fur covered body rippling with muscle. Isaac thanked any gods who might be listening as well the path just to cover his bases, since the creature was faced away from him.

"Haaaaaaa!" he roared his challenge and stabbed forward with all his might.

"Raaaaaaa!" the townsfolk who followed him echoed his ferocity, each of them stabbed out in rough unison, taking advantage of the monsters distraction.

The twang of bowstrings rang out and Isaac was relieved to see arrows sprout on the backs and shoulders of the monsters in front. Seems like the archers received his message. Fingers crossed this'll be enough.

Isaac didn't know who had come to help them, but he hoped that with them all fighting it would be enough.

Not willing to dwell on negative thoughts, he pushed them out of his mind and focused on the only thing that mattered. Stabbing. Your shoulders don't ache, your legs aren't burning and your lungs aren't burning from smoke, he told himself, rest when you're dead!

As his mind crystalized around that one thought he brought his spear back and lunged forward again, following the instincts embedded in him by the System and honed over countless hours of practice. His waist rotated in synch with his step, transferring his mass through his feet, to his hips, to his shoulders and then to his arms and through them, his spear. At the critical moment he executed a dash, just a tiny one, a 'micro-dash' as bastard trainer Willom had described it. Put it all together and a simple thrust with a spear became something altogether more deadly.

Like a bullet, Isaac's thrust rocketed forward and pierced deep into the hide of the beast, tore through muscle and slipped past bone. With a long groan the bear slumped down, its monstrous form drained of vitality and Isaac turned to find new prey.

Except there wasn't any.

In front of him stood an amazon of a women in leather armour, covered in gore and heaving for breath.

There were several possible things happening here, but any way it went, Isaac felt like his dreams had come true.

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### **Chapter 295: Flexing profile**

I've started to come around to the general idea that I'm stupid. I mean, I'd considered that perhaps I was a little impulsive, Gandalf knows my decision making 'process' could, when written down, fit on the back of stamp with enough room left over for a drawing of Tiny poking himself in the eyes.

But I'd never considered myself to be a complete moron. I mean, there was that time I waltzed up to some human guards to say hello whilst I inhabited the body of a monstrous ant, but I still feel I can chalk that one up to stress and shock.

This time, I don't believe that I have the capacity to draw on excuses such as those. This goes beyond the impulsive, beyond a habitual lack of foresight or pattern of lackadaisical thinking.

This was just downright stupid.

As mana leaked out of my core, drained away into the air around me, how did I attack the monster horde in front of me? When my blood was up and the excitement of the fight was upon me, without thinking I decided that the best way to clear the chaff around the warehouse was using the empowered water cannon, pouring out my mana with unrestrained zeal to cut the monsters apart.

My mana.

I need that stuff! It is the lifeblood of my monstrous body and I literally need it to live! I was just under half empty when we made it to Midum, half of my life energy gone into the air, and what do I do? I take what is left of the mana in my core, pulled it out in huge amounts, made a water mana transformation construct, then created compressed water mana in order to hose down the enemy with wild abandon.

...

YOU IDIOT, ANTHONY!

My core gasped for breath as the final ten percent of mana in my core, the last wisp of energy I had left, stirred and sputtered about. I've probably got until the end of the day until my core has run out of gas, then the pain will come on fast. This is not good.

As keen as I am to run for the nearest Dungeon entrance as fast as possible, I want to make sure things are under control here. Not to mention I need to talk to Morrelia to find out the location of a close Dungeon entrance anyway.

Which means I need to use my mana to craft a mind bridge. Ugh. Using my mana as sparingly as possible, I weave together the mind bridge. I committed all of my will and energy to ensure that not a single iota of MP was lost without cause. It's amazing what a little scarcity can do for your outlook.

[Don't have long Morrelia, running out of mana. Everything good? You done going berserk?]

The tough as nails mercenary is stood close to the warehouse, conversing with a grizzled looking fellow in his twenties, a spear held lightly in one hand. As she heard my message Morrelia turned toward me and nodded.

[Hold on] she sent, [I'm talking to the leader of these survivors. It seems the people in the warehouse are the last ones left from Midum. He says the aristocracy fled on ships into the bay at the first sign of trouble.]

[Classy stuff.]

[Hold on a second.]

She spoke to the fellow for a few moments longer and I could've sworn he was leaning in a little closer than one would expect. Wait, now he's put his spear across his shoulders in just such a way that his biceps are featured prominently.

Is this guy putting the moves on Morrelia?! That is a brave man right there. Even as they speak she is covered head to toe in monster blood. Her berserker style doesn't exactly lead to much subtlety when it comes to fighting up close and personal.

[Is this guy cracking onto you Morrelia?] I chortled.

I could see her shoulders slump from where I stood a dozen metres behind her.

[I think so] she grumbled, [he seems pretty impressed with my efforts here.]

[Well you did fight hard. He doesn't have any credit for us monsters here?]

[Well] her voice turned sly at this point, [he thinks that I'm some rich wandering expert and you three are my pets.]

I'm not sure how I feel about that.

[You know what, that's probably better for him to believe than the truth. Tell him to get his people together and send them to the village, just make sure to warn them not to fight any ants that they find.]

She turned and nodded to me before she faced her would be suitor once again. If anything he'd managed to puff himself up even further. He looked so ridiculous that it's taken all of my attention. I feel like I've forgotten something...

Oh right! I'm dying.

[Any chance you could tell me where the nearest Dungeon entrance is? I'm almost out of mana and I'm gonna die soon.]

[WHAT?!]

[I did say so already]

[You didn't say you were dying!]

[Well... I'll be dying soon.]

[That's the same thing?!]

She gave us directions to the closest entrance, a small one in the wilderness halfway to the next closest town. As soon as she was done talking I told her I'd wait there for her at the entrance and my pets and I started to stuff our faces quickly with as much Biomass as we can fit in as short a time as possible.

It can't have been nice to watch since the flexing guard took one look, blanched and then ran inside the warehouse as if he were about to hurl. It was probably Crinis eating that did it, I eat in quite a dignified manner, tearing with my mandibles and then shoving my face into the food so I can reach it with my mouth which is positioned on the underside of my head, below the jaws.

So much freakin' centipede. I swear I've eaten a thousand of the horrible crawly scum. They taste awful, tear away with their horrible claws and look disgusting to boot. Ever since I was born on this world I've had an instinctive hatred of these damn things. I don't feel any real need to explain it, I just hate 'em. Am I an insect racist? Maybe. Centipedes are gross, on this I will not be persuaded.

[One Biomass gained]

[Master profile of the Claw Centipede unlocked]

By the rigid white staff of Gandalf! I was starting to think the full profile didn't exist! A thing of myth, of legend, hidden behind deep mists and beyond impenetrable mountains! I wonder what the heck it says?

Master Profile:

[Unguibus Scolopendra : Claw centipede, has strong claws and a venomous spike in its tail.

Might:12

Toughness: 15

Cunning: 8

Will: 12

Current Evaluation:

The Unguibus variety of the Centipede Genus has thus far proven to be an adequate survivor at the highest levels of the Dungeon, about to compete for food and territory against most of the solitary threats there. It has been determined that this species is worth further investigation and is currently among the more favoured varieties of the Insecta class. Further spawnings, evolution options and pathways have been developed. The species will next be assessed in two years.]

Uhh. Wut? The system, that is to say, Gandalf, is assessing the monsters in some fashion? He likes the centipedes?

He has dropped at least four pegs in my estimations. Now, let's go get to this Dungeon before I drop dead.

[Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 296: Just barely**

Holy mother of all that is good and gracious in this world, puh-lease let me make it alive! I'm burning up! The light is fading! My soul is running before the light! Is that you mum? What is that you say? You wish I'd never been born? Get the hell out of my death vision, human mum! Bring out my real mother, the Queen!

Gawd, I'm delirious. Which is interesting since I've actually not quite run out of mana in my core yet. I'm down to vapour, make no mistake, but not quite out of gas just yet.

No, wait. Check that, just ran out.

Oh my word, it hurts! I feel like my soul is suffocating!

[How much further Crinis?!]

[I don't know master, I can't see!]

DAMMIT.

[Tiny! Do you know how much further we need to go?!]

[Hurts]

[I KNOW that! More than anything in this world I know it! Do you have any idea how much further we have to run?!]

[... No]

I swear by all that is sacred and loved in this world Tiny, if I survive this, I'm going to shrink your muscles until your arms are limp noodles and you have the brain power of two young Einstein's. You won't be

able to fight and will have to sit around sipping tea, discussing the latest in particle physics. Only then will my wrath be sated!

It can't be that far away. I feel as if we've been running for ten hours but that can be attributed to my panic and anxiety. If I were to try and guess now it would have to have been closer to two hours.

Argh! Holy smokes! That tickled me right in the pain zone. How do describe the pain of having an empty core? It's as if my magic lungs are empty and I'm in a vacuum. No matter how hard my core tries to pull mana in it just isn't getting anything like enough from the air above ground. My monster body consumes far more mana to operate than can be replaced outside of the Dungeon.

I need to get down below, fast!

I shoved the pain into the back of my awareness and focused on pushing my little legs until they were on the edge of snapping. I don't care if they break, as long as I get below ground and away from this agony!

As he so elegantly communicated, Tiny is suffering also. Crinis isn't quite at the point where this is going to be an issue for her but soon enough it will be. Wait, is that sign pillar Morrelia told us about?!

I ran closer for a look. Ten feet tall, the stone column stood to one side of the cobbled road, words and arrows carved onto its surface. Fantastic! We're close! I circled around the edifice and found an arrow that pointed away from the road, into the surrounding woods. That'd better be it. If I could read the native language it would help.

[Quick, Tiny! This way!] I hollered at him before I sprinted away. Trees and branches flew past my face as I motored with all of my might. I'm not willing to dash in case the drain on my core is increased but I'm sure as heck going to run as fast as possible!

How's my HP looking? GAH! Already down 10%?! This is ridiculous!

GOGOGOGOGOGO.

Is that it?! Up ahead a stone structure rose before us. A small fort in the middle of a forest. A ludicrous thing in normal times, but now, a lifesaving fortress of blessed mana.

I ran straight at the fort and then straight up the wall. Once I crested the moss covered stone I beheld the most glorious sight of my life. Inside the walls, cut straight through the earth is a wonderful crack, dim blue light leaking out of it. Precious mana! Without a shred of hesitation I leapt from the wall and scrambled toward the crack, Tiny not far behind.

Too much to describe this place as a 'fort', more of a guard post, maintained to keep an eye on this particular crack in the ground. Not wide enough to be considered a 'Dungeon Entrance' and not worth the cost of excavation the Kingdom must have decided to leave well enough alone and not worry about it.

But I will!

The pain is excruciating but I grit my mandibles and bear it. It's time to dig!

The entrance to do the Dungeon here is only a foot wide, not enough for me to slither into and certainly not enough for Tiny to back his commercial barge into. There is only one choice!

DIG!

Embrace the zen of ant living and dig you mana-less insect!

My face hands pummelled the soil at a relentless pace, dirt and stone was flung into the sky as I whipped my body back and forth, a rhythm of soil extraction achieved in a blink of an eye.

And with each blessed mandible load of dirt, the sweet, sweet touch of mana flowed more smoothly out of the Dungeon and into my parched core. It still wasn't enough, each second that passed a new kind of torture as I almost got enough of what I needed but it wasn't sufficient to quench my thirst.

Dig! Dig! DIG!

Tiny was there too, his massive hands scooped out enormous amounts of earth before he threw it over his shoulder. In a short amount of time we had managed to dig out a bowl shaped basin deep enough that both Tiny and I had our heads below ground level but it still wasn't enough, so we concentrated on digging a narrow tunnel straight down, following the crack into the Dungeon with the idea of widening it out into a chamber once we were deep enough.

The deeper we went the more mana seeped into our cores until finally sweet relief was at hand.

At that point we collapsed in a heap.

It was a few hours before Morrelia found us. I awoke to the sight of her head poked down the impromptu tunnel we'd dug.

Ugh.

This is what I imagine a hangover feels like. I feel gritty and sore across my entire body. After a few hours of torpor at the very least I'd managed to recharge my core back up to capacity, my feet helping to recharge the batteries once I'd managed to jam them into the crack.

All six of my legs twitched as I stretched them until the joints cracked. There is still some residual pain in my body from the damage I sustained when my core was empty. I wonder what exactly causes that damage? Does my body fall apart at the cellular level without mana to sustain me? Does the core draw on the energy contained within my cells to prevent itself from damage when there isn't enough mana for it?

Interesting questions.

[Tiny, how are you doing bud?]

The big ape grunted at me and raised one massive hand to slap over his head.

[Better]

[Fair enough]

Above me Morrelia has been pointing to her temple and gracing me with her traditional scowl as I've taken my time to stretch.

Hey, I nearly died, I deserve a little rest after that sort of existential crises. Did I bring the problem down on myself? Yes. Yes I did. I've resolved to try and address my shortcomings, namely my stupendous idiocy, in future to the extent of my ability. I wonder if there is an evolutionary option that would add common sense to my list of abilities?

I could really use that.

I sighed wearily and crafted the necessary mana to form the mind bridge with Morrelia.

[Hello Morrelia, what is it?]

She snorted from her position hanging upside down in a tunnel.

[Slept enough down there, Anthony? Any chance you want to get of your lazy backside and do some work?]

[Hey! I'll have you know my business district is diligent and flourishing! We're very excited to be announcing the delivery of new products that will cause our target demographic to positively melt!]

Bemused, Morrelia shook her head.

[As usual I have no idea what you are talking about. We have serious business to deal with. I've found the tracks of another group of monsters heading north. By the looks of things there is a massive Garralosh type monster with them. If we hurry we might catch up to them before they make it Liria.]

Well now. That does sound interesting. Another one of the big momma crocs eldest children caught gadding about on the surface?

How delicious.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 297: The children of the bees**

Tiny, Crinis and I hauled ourselves out of our temporary respite home to join Morrelia on the surface.

[What happened to the survivors of Midum?] I queried.

[They're getting their stuff together and heading south as quick as their legs will carry them. It might take them awhile to get on the road though, they have almost the entire city to loot after all] Morrelia smirked.

[How much of that stuff is going to be useful? If they turn up with a mountain of vases and precious jewels they are going to be pretty damn useless when they get to the village. I don't think they even have currency there yet.]

[Oh I've no doubt there will be some idiots who prioritise valuables, but I think that most of them will be more sensible and bring things that will be actually useful. I'm expecting quite the interesting haul.]

Judging by the dangerous glint in Morrelia's eyes there is assuredly something she knows that I don't. As long as it doesn't affect the colony in any way, then I don't really care what they get up to.

[So ] I prompted her, [what about this trail you found?]



[Oh, right. When I following you to this location I happened to notice that something had carved a path through the forest before doubling back and heading toward Liria. Judging by the tracks there is absolutely a big beastie in the mix.]

[Interesting] I mused out loud, [perhaps their core ran out of mana, forcing them to turn back to the city in order to recharge? It isn't as if they have a local guide to point them toward every little crack in the ground after all.]

Morrelia leaned toward me, interest pain on her face.

[So the mana on the surface is too thin for you? Is your core really that developed?]

My antennae waved self-consciously.

[What? Are you core shaming me? Yes, the mana on the surface is too thin for me and Tiny both. Is that so weird?]

She shrugged.

[You just don't seem to be large enough or evolved enough to have such a strong core. Most creatures from the first strata are able to run around on the surface if they break out of the Dungeon. There are powerful exceptions of course, I doubt Garralosh could last up here more than ten minutes.]

[Is she really just a first strata monster? Seems to me that the mother of those beasts would be too much of a big shot for the top layer of the Dungeon, surely?]

Morrelia paused for a moment before she looked at me oddly.

[You aren't wrong] she said finally, [she is way too strong to be as close to the surface as she has been. Mostly because she's been prevented from getting any lower.]

Something about her tone tells me that she won't be much more forthcoming on that topic, so I let the conversation lapse as we find the trail and start a high speed chase.

Thank goodness I managed to get a food a quick nap. Core aside, I needed the rest. There has been way too much running about up here! It shames my ant self to say it, but this is just too much damn work!

Morrelia is keeping a few things from me, specifically about the Dungeon and Garralosh, but I don't mind that too much. If someone spent their entire life fighting against monsters, it would be a little tough to turn around and trust one with all of your most precious secrets. Especially those pertaining to security.

How exactly would you prevent a powerful monster from moving around in the Dungeon? Sounds like some sort of nightmare. Couldn't they just dig? Thinking about the pathetic hands on the crocs, I don't they would be very effecting at digging actually. Sad for them, forever denied the true light of zen.

Once we are on the trail Morrelia transforms from a taciturn warrior to a wolf on the hunt. Her body language changes completely. Gone is the relaxed but wary stance, the watchful eyes flicking amongst the shadows, ever watchful for the slightest hint of a threat. Now her every muscle radiates focus and intent. Leaned forward as she runs, her eyes are alight with a hunger that wasn't there before, her lips peeled back to reveal too many teeth her entire expression has transformed to that of a beast. Her head

jerks back and forth and she follows the tracks, seeking any sign of monsters having snuck off or others joining. So intense is her focus I think she could tell me exactly what monsters make up this group we're following.

If this is another one of Garralosh's big kids, then managing to fight one whilst they are potentially drained of mana and suffering on the surface is a perfect opportunity. We managed to beat one last time when they were on a full tank and we've powered up somewhat since then, not to mention we didn't have a murderous berserker with us at that time.

Run, run, run. I feel like I've well and truly covered my step count for the day but it doesn't end. Through the woods and then out into open farmland the chase continued. I'm interested to see that a significant number of farm animals remain on the surface, wandering here and there as they grazed on the grass. Most of the fences have been knocked down or have large holes in them where monsters have passed through, so the cattle and sheep are free to explore the world at large.

I suppose they mustn't give Biomass when consumed, otherwise the Monsters would have chowed down on these guys for sure. I wonder why they don't? Is Biomass an intrinsic property of a monster body?

Interesting to think about... someone smarter than me will have to work it out.

Our pace is fast and relentless. After four hours of solid running, by which time Tiny is seriously flagging, we start to catch glimpses of our quarry. A small pack of beasts, mostly offspring of Garralosh, with a few other types thrown into the mix for giggles. Sure enough, in the centre of the group, looming over the other monsters and emitting a suffocating pressure is a massive Croc, clearly the same size as the Garralosh Commander we fought in the Marsh Expanse.

As we draw closer to the enemy Morrelia gripped her weapons tightly and I swear that as we ran she began to growl under her breath. She appears to hate these more evolved Croca Beasts even more than she hates normal monsters. Which is a heck of a lot of hate.

[Looks like it might be a Garralosh Commander] I tell her, [Ever fought one of those before?]

She replied only with a shake of her head, her focus still laser-like on our quarry.

[Watch out for the two mouths, the flame attack from each is pretty deadly but the last one we killed had this wicked blue flame, crazy dangerous.]

The news that I'd fought one before seemed to shock Morrelia enough that she actually spoke back.

[You've fought one of those before?] she asked doubtfully.

[What? Why do you constantly underestimate my incredible power?! Not only did we fight one, we killed it and feasted on its sweet Biomass! Impressed?]

She shook her head, not to deny my achievement but more in puzzlement.

[They don't come up this close to the surface, ever. For one of them to be on the surface is beyond strange. Normally they stay close to their parent, reluctant to leave her side. If they are up here, does that mean that ...]

[Big momma croc is up here as well?] I finished her thought.

A moment of silence falls over us as we contemplate what that could mean.

[If you see a mega crocodile .... Run] I advised.

I certainly would!

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 298: Bring down the commander**

We gained on our quarry with every passing second but they weren't aware of us in the slightest. I could see them clearly now, twenty to thirty Croca-Beasts at various stages of evolution surrounded by a similar number of other, first strata Dungeon monsters. In the centre of the pack, a large hulking form ran surrounded by their more diminutive cousins.

From one hundred metre away, I could it was another Garralosh Commander. One of momma Garralosh eldest children. That loathsome over and under jaw, those massive, bulked shoulders and the writhing triple tails. Seeing one of them again brings back nightmares. Tiny, Crinis and I all suffered at the hands of the first one of these we brought down, I'd rather not get my back zone chomped off this time if I can help it.

[Let me lead off] I tell Morrelia, [I can clear off a lot of the chaff with one surprise attack.]

Focused on the enemy ahead, she only glanced at me once, raising a single eyebrow to express her doubt before nodding.

What a ridiculous lack of faith! She won't question me again after she behold the sheer destructive potential of gravity! It's time to unleash the bomb!

I take a moment to congratulate myself for not drawing on the raw mana of my core, but instead remembering to utilise the gravitational mana within my Gravity Mana gland. The gland will increase the drain on my core as it seeks to replenish the mana it's lost, sure, but it's still a lot more manageable than pulling mana straight out of my core and blasting it everywhere.

I made sure I preserved some attention to ensure I don't run into a fence before I tasked my sub-brains with drawing out the mana, whilst I devoted my main mind to compressing it down. Working in tandem, the two sub-brains took hold of the deep well of gravitational mana within me and poured I it out for my main mind to grasp and compress.

Then compress it again. Then compress is some more.

Although my stats haven't changed since my last evolution, my ability to work with and to handle mana certainly has. My ability to compress mana has improved due to levelling the Forceful mana skill to level 9, my ability to focus has and endure mental strain has increased thanks to the oh so handy cerebral endurance skill line and my control has jumped by leaps and bounds due to my earnest levelling of the meditation skill.

Compared to when I first started, grasping and moulding my mana are tasks I can complete with relative ease! I mean, it's still hard as hell. Once compressed the mana roils and fights against my control as

much as if ever has. My will is wielded like an iron vice, the mana is pressed and held, unable to escape and with no choice but to submit to me.

At least, sort of.

The more dense the mana becomes, the more unruly, as if repelled by an unseen force it struggled to be released from my grasp. Compressed, squashed and compacted, the mana changed, became deeper, darker and more potent. If I slipped at this stage then the results would be catastrophic as the mana expanded rapidly in a similar fashion to, you know, an explosion.

There is high reward for this type of spell, but there is also high risk.

As I wrestled internally with my spell, we continued to pursue our enemies, running behind them at break neck speed. Advanced Stamina has levelled twice since we left the nest. When I considered all the freaking running I've done, that doesn't seem like enough!

The Croca Beasts don't seem to be built for extended runs, their bodies are a bit larger than their limbs seem to fit and their impressive bulk must make it tough to run this far. The same goes for Tiny and he's approaching the end of his rope, so they must be also. These big monsters are built for power in bursts.

Thankfully it means that we've caught up to them.

Fifty metre behind them now and they still haven't noticed our approach, so intent are they on running towards the capital. At least, Morrelia assured me they are headed to the capital. Or at least, what's left of it.

[How much longer?] Morrelia demanded tersely.

[Oi! I'm manipulating the controlling forces of the universe over here. If I slip in my control then we'll all die a horrible death!]

[Then why are you talking?]

Argh!

Embrace the meditation, emotions are a distraction I can ill afford.

Calm. Calm.

Not so calm.

Within me the energy of my spell underwent a transformation and turned into the now familiar, near black gravitation energy of the Gravity Bomb. In my mind the spell appeared as a rotating sphere, it's edge smooth as if cut by a laser and a terrifying pull emanated from within.

Happy to oblige, I fed more and more mana into the spell, allowed it to drag and yank at my gravitational mana as all of my minds struggled to direct and contain it. Without the razor sharp clarity afforded by my meditation skill I wouldn't dare to push this far, in all previous attempts at casting this spell I would have released it at this point, or just held onto it until I was ready to release. But this time I felt I could go further.

More mana. Still, more.

Onward and downward it spiralled into the core of the spell which only grew more dense and heavy as time passed.

I hadn't had much opportunity to test the limits of gravity mana gland since I'd last upgraded it to +15, consolidating my capacity upgrades to grant yet more capacity. I've pulled a torrent of mana out of the gland at this point but I can feel there is a ton more to give.

In the back of my mind I shivered thinking about what kind of devastation a Gravity Bomb would cause were I to dump all of my mana into a single one. I doubted I'd even be able to control it.

[Forceful Mana has reached level 10, upgrade available]

[Forceful Mana -> Condensed mana. This skill further schools the user the ways of mana compression, instructing in the more elegant method of mana condensing]

Not a great time but sure! Go for it!

The more mana I poured into the bomb, the darker it became and the faster it rotated. I felt the spell scream out for release as I continued to force and force more energy into it. And it changed, growing heavier within me. The sheer density of the mana exuded a menacing pull that I began to feel within my very carapace.

It was at that precise moment that the Garralosh Commander froze in place before it whipped it's hideous double jawed head around and looked directly at us.

Oh nads!

Fire!

HOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOWL!

As if all the screaming banshees of hell had been unleashed on the world in an instant, by spell tore into existence before me and howled towards my foes.

[Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 299: The stuff of nightmares**

What exactly has my mana become? What is it that I have unleashed?! The Gravity Bomb that I unleashed is smaller than my previous efforts but is far more menacing. Reality itself seemed to groan under the weight of this, thing that I had made, this small rotating orb that drained the light from its surrounds as it moved through the air.

Even the monsters who were the unfortunate targets of my orb of death seemed to sense something wrong was headed their way. Fear, terror, even, overwhelmed the poor beasts. As my spell descended, a dark avatar of air rending death, they scrambled to escape its path, climbed over each other, clawed and tore at those who got in their way.

And all the while the dreadful shriek emanated from the Gravity Bomb as it pulled the atmosphere, as if a whole had been punctured in the sky and the world rushed to fill it.

What the heck is going to happen when it hits?

Come to think of it...

[Tiny, Crinis, brace for impact! And maybe back up a bit.]

I heeded my own advice and scrambled back a few steps before the spell finally impacted. The monster who was my primary target, looming large over its smaller followers, thought fast, snatching up a smaller Garralosh Infant in two of its four claws and in a horrific feat of strength hurled it through the air to take the brunt of the spell.

I didn't hear if the Croca beast made a noise before it was consumed, so deafening was the wind that whipped around us, stirred the grass and sent the trees to creaking. The moment the spell impacted against the unlucky croc, it expanded, swallowing it whole. In a flash the Gravity Bomb had manifested its full glory, a near black, revolving sphere that dragged its victims within to crush them into a particularly spicy meat ball.

There were a few changes this time. Deep in the meditation skill I observed the destruction impassively. The energy of the Gravity Bomb was greater than any I had cast before. Flickers of black lightning emanated from it, almost invisible as they appeared and vanished so quickly it was hard to say if they had existed at all.

What I can see, can feel, is the horrific pull of the spell as it attempts to consume all within its reach. The grass swayed towards the sphere as the wind rushed to fill it. I resisted its force, hunkered low and digging my claws into the dirt with all of my strength.

Belatedly, I reach out to Morrelia. [Hold on! You don't want to fall into that!]

[You think?!] she roared back, looking rattled.

[Yes! Yes I - oh you were being sarcastic.]

The monsters haven't fared well. The spell was set off before it landed in their midst but it was close enough that most cannot resist its dreadful pull. They struggled with all of their might but to no effect, one by one they were dragged into air and fell into the Gravity Bomb.

They made not a sound once they were caught in the spell's grasp. If they did, it was snatched out of their jaws by the howling wind. Once within the sphere itself, they vanished, not to be seen again.

Well, not looking quite the same, at any rate.

Though it felt much longer, the revolving sphere lasted only a minute before it flickered out of existence, leaving a core of crushed material suspended in the air that promptly fell to the ground.

Due to its quick thinking and powerful physique, the Commander-Croca is still standing, but its detachment of followers has been reduced to a few Titan-Crocs and a mature Dragon-Wolf hound.

These Gravity Bombs are becoming serious business.

It seems I'm getting closer to getting myself consumed by the spell each time I cast it.

[Can you hit it with another one of those?] Morrelia queried as she readied her blades.

[Nope. Takes a bit of time to charge it up and friendly fire is a real issue. Once we start fighting it'll be impossible to cast it safely.]

[Well then] her eyes narrowed as a fierce expression seized her face, [time to take the fight to this child of the beast.]

That's another thing I liked about Morrelia, she seemed to hate the Croca-Beasts just as much as I do.

[Tiny, Crinis. You guys remember how it went down last time we took on one of these things. It wasn't great. We all nearly died and my backside was reduced to clear. Let's be a little more careful this time. Tiny, I want you to hit and run, you gotta stick and move. You stay too close to him you're going to get torn up. Crinis, stay sneaky, wait for your moment, then hit the arms like you did last time. We've trained for this people. Be careful!]

[Yes Master! I won't fail you!] Crinis declared passionately.

[Hrn!] Tiny grunted, his eyes alight at the oncoming challenge.

He's not listening is he...

Sigh.

[I'll stay back to start with and join the fray later. Try not to die] I tell Morrelia, but she isn't listening either. I can see from her expression that she has begun to work herself into the rage she needs to unleash the benefits of her class. Possessed by her anger and bloodlust she walked towards the towering Croc-commander, blades gripped in her hands.

Here we go...

The Croc and the last of its retinue have begun to make moves. Having sensed the oncoming conflict they have spread themselves and begun to approach us. The Croc-Commander's steps thundered in our ears and caused the ground to tremble with each tread of its feet.

Before it can get too close I prepared to unleash my ranged barrage. My sub-brains whirl into high gear and begin to draw out gravitational mana independently as they each weaved a gravity bolt. Sunk deep into my meditation they constructed the spells at a rapid pace as I lowered my body, arched my abdomen high to present my famed commercial district.

Have a taste of what your sibling couldn't stomach!

POW!

A jet of acid streaked through air to splash against the Croca-Commander's scaled hide. The monster didn't bother to deflect or avoid my strike, not threatened by it in the least. Doesn't mean I'll stop!

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

Along with this salvo of acid, the first two gravity bolts streaked forth, another two entered production the moment they were released. Again, whether through confidence, arrogance or stubbornness the Commander refused to dodge, its body splashed with acid that hardened even as it burned.

Likewise my two bolts stuck home on the beasts left leg, the force of gravity would be increased on that one side, perhaps enough to slow the beast. If it wasn't enough, no matter. If two bolts aren't sufficient then I will shoot two hundred!

[Enhanced Precise Shooting (II) has reached level 2]

Nice! I like this skill since it's applied to both my spells and my acid. Double value!

I slowed the pace of my acid barrage and allowed my main mind to form gravity bolts also. I'm unwilling to invest my attention to create condensed bolts, since I need my wits about me for the fight. Just like the last time, quantity will need to win over quality in this contest.

As I peppered the commander with magic and acid, Morrelia had circled to the right as she sought to cut off the remainder of the goon squad whilst Tiny circled to the left, for once not listening to instincts and closing in at the first opportunity.

No, wait a second. There he goes.

Dammit, Tiny!

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 300: Leap of faith**

I had to give it to Tiny, he'd tried. He'd given it a red hot go. His untameable hunger for battle is well known. I can still remember him as a not yet full sized ape when he threw himself onto a giant rabbit that reeked of the putrid scent of un-death. Even then, his face had been alight with the joy of battle.

I just wish that he'd be better at choosing his battles.

Tiny bellowed his rage at the giant Croca-Commander and smashed his fists into the earth and struck himself on the chest in a fearsome display of physical power. There is no doubt that he has some serious pecs on him. The musculature on this gorilla has always been potent, there has never been any question of that. If only his mental attributes were given a small slice of that pie, I wouldn't have to worry so much.

Confronted by this obvious challenge the Croca-Commander turned its hideous double mouths toward my dim-witted ape pet as it's triple tails writhed through the air behind it. The Croc was a fearsome sight, it's scales glittered in the surface sunlight like hardened gems. Beneath that hard defensive exterior it bristled with physical might, massive shoulders and chest muscles that provided power to the four arms, each of them powerful in their own right and tipped with those razor sharp claws than glinted as they reflected the light.

Atop all of that rested the sickening double mouthed head. One set of jaws rested atop another, each one studded with razor sharp teeth that poked out here and there. A phenomenon that caused the Croca-Commander to appear as if it had two sinister grins at the same time. Smug, in a word.

I hurled my just completed gravity bolts at the commander and turned all of my minds toward assembling a mind mana transformation construct as with all the haste I can muster. If Tiny is going to go in and duke it out with this damned monster then he's going to need all of the help he can get, otherwise I expect roasted gorilla will be on the menu for these remnants.



Mind magic in combat has been something I've been forced to experiment with since I wasn't able to select Gravity Magic affinity after reaching a sufficient level in water magic. In order to make full use of the skill I decided to focus on using it to distract and trick my opponents in battle.

The basic concept is quite simple: use the attributed mana to construct a bridge between your own mind and that of your enemy, then you can craft little 'packages' of sensation or understanding and blast you opponent with them, distracting them, cause them to feel pain that isn't there, hear sounds that aren't real.

Lightning began to crackle around Tiny as he started his charge, electricity writhed over his body in thick ropes and flickered and shifted constantly. The Croca-Commander watched his approach, a contemptuous gleam in its eye. Unhurried, it opened its lower jaws at a relaxed pace, allowing the black flames to leak and play across its teeth.

Dammit, dammit, dammit! My emotions roiled in the back of my mind but deep within I continued to be locked in the calm of the mediation skill. My three minds operated in harmony as they weaved and folded the construct into place. Not a beat once missed once it was finished, the very second the final thread of mana was in place, mana was drawn out of my core and fed to the construct, the raw mana emerged out the other end as glimmering mind mana.

Now make a dang bridge! My panic and desperation slid along the outside of my awareness as Tiny continued to charge directly towards his own imminent, crispy doom. It's happening too fast. I don't think I'll be able to make it!

The neck of the Croca-Commander bulged as it lunged forward and unleashed a torrent of black flame toward the charging Tiny. The heat seared the moisture off my eyeballs from fifty metres away, so intense were those flames. When my vision cleared, Tiny was nowhere to be seen. In desperation I tuned every sense to its utmost limits and tried to seek him out. In no direction could I see him, my heat detection was completely frizzled due to the residual energy from that flame blast.

I refuse to accept that he is barbequed!

Even the satisfied look in the Croca-Commander's eyes mocked me. The giant beast turned toward me next, ready to deal out more flammable death.

Then my antennae reported something strange. Their ability to glimpse into the future was giving me a tickling insight of a future event. An impact of tremendous proportions.

I looked up.

And Tiny crashed down.

Holy moly! I knew he had some serious spring in his legs but I had no idea he could get that high! When the flame had been belched out in his direction he must have leaped straight over it, achieved the kind of air time that Jordan could only dream about, before he collapsed down on the Croc like a falling mountain.

BOOOOM!

The ground quaked as Tiny struck home with an overhead smash. Taken by surprise the Croc could only weather the blow as best as it could, upper body hunched over as its legs buckled, struggling to absorb the impact.

Unwilling to let go of the momentum, Tiny unleashed his fists and lightning in their full glory, his body rotated like a pro to transfer his weight into every strike. Each time his fist contacted Croc scales, electricity danced along his arms and discharged into the beast, scorching it.

Nice! Time for the bridge!

With a deft final few weaves the bridge slammed into place and my mind was connected to that of the foe. One mind immediately dedicated itself to holding the bridge and transformation construct in place whilst the other weaved together our first mental assault against the Croc.

[Get in there Crinis! Whilst Tiny has him distracted!]

[Right, Master!]

Out of the long grass an explosion of tentacles occurred not twenty metres away from the Commander. Crinis had done well to sneak as close as possible, keeping a low profile in order to take advantage of this moment.

Weighed down by my gravitational magic and distracted by Tiny's relentless assault, the Croc wasn't able to react in time to escape the grasping limbs of Crinis and she locked onto the enemy in seconds. Her tentacles latched onto one arm like an iron clamp and that was all it took, in moments more limbs had lashed out and used their leverage to pull her main body toward her victim, where she would begin her dark work.

Then I felt something roll down the Mind Bridge and slam into my awareness like a truck.