

## CHRYSALIS

### Chapter 3 Monstrous associates



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Growls, hisses and the click-clack of claws echo off the walls in the cavern. Waves of vibrations batter my antennae, dizzying me. This cavern swarms with beasts, fighting and moving through what appeared to be a thoroughfare in the part of the cave network.

Quickly as I can, I dart into the cavern, moving towards the dark shelter of a stalactite, hanging like a spear tip from the roof. Flattening myself against the rock I remain still, and cast my eyes around.

The strange blue lines I'd seen pulsing in the walls are here as well, twisting and branching throughout every surface, even winding around the pillars of pointed rock that burst from the ceiling and floor, illuminating the entire space with the same soft blue light.

Nearby, in the center of a clearing, a basin of water, perhaps twenty meters across had formed in the floor of the cavern. Peering closely, I see it's fed by a steady drip of water from cracks in the ceiling, possibly from a river or aquifer above. The water seems suffused with the blue glow, illuminated from beneath by veins of light in the basin floor.

The thing that makes my poor ant heart leap to my mandibles however, is the menagerie of monsters I see congregating around the pool. What sort of nightmare parade is this Gandalf?! The details are hard to make out thanks to my still crappy vision but thanks to the creatures being so stylishly lit from below as they drink I can see enough.

First let's address two closest to me, they appear to be a kind of dog, or wolf, each with a reptilian tale extending behind them. Their head features an elongated snout filled with what I imagine to be razor sharp teeth. The two creatures take turns drinking, watching over each other and rumbling warning growls at anything nearby, tails swishing over the cavern floor.

Next to them I can make out another Croca-beast, leaning forward, placing its weight on its front legs, scooping water with its elongated jaws. The other monsters seem to give the beast a bit of clear space, I would too! It seems the creatures here understand to let sleeping dragons lie well enough.

Now that I notice it, it seems there is no conflict around the water pool at all. Perhaps the denizens of this place have established an unspoken truce here at their water source? I'm surprised. I wouldn't have expected these terrifying creatures to be willing to share space, especially if they can grow stronger by eating Biomass as I can.

Since this is the case I'll skitter a little closer and try and see better!

Very slowly I approach the pool, one leg moving at a time, keeping my body as flat to the roof as possible. Progress is so slow! If I could sweat then water would be running off me so fast there would be a second drinking pool in this cavern! I test every foothold and sweep my antennae oh so slowly through the air.

[Stealth has reached level 2]

Oh yisssss!

Skill level up! So juicy!

This confirms my suspicion that my skills can be trained by use, in this case my stealth skill has been raised by moving without being noticed by the monsters below me. This gives me a huge opportunity! I can hide here and continuously observe these monsters, moving very slightly the whole time, which will allow me to gain information whilst training my stealth.

Okay, settle down. The worst thing I can do is lose my cool.

I take a few slow deep breaths to calm myself before I continue my approach. One mistake will mean death in this place, I must be cautious three times in everything I do. Combat means instant destruction for me, I can never forget, even for a moment, that being found means being killed.

Steady the ship Anthony!

Eventually I make my way closer to the pool, letting me see the creatures on the other side a little more clearly. What looked like a shifting mound of a creature is now revealed to be a mass of centipede like creatures, twisting and falling over each other as they drink and rear up their bodies to hiss and clack their pointed mandibles.

I can barely make it out, but each centipede seems to have two small arms with pincers, like a crab or scorpion and their long bodies, covered in legs, end in a sharp point.

Disgusting!

These things are massively disgusting Gandalf! There must be ten of them piled on top of each other over there! The way they writhe and twist makes me slightly nauseous. I'll look away.

The last beast I can see is a small, squat creature with four legs, like a lizard, but with long, stone like spikes rising from its back. Of all the creatures here it looks like the least threatening but since the other creatures are giving it a wide space there must be something about those spikes that make them avoid it.

Even though I'm hiding here, there is one thought that excites me greatly, each of these terrible creatures is a possible harvest of Biomass, the red envelope of XP, waiting for me to reap!

First I have to make preparations. The next few hours pass slowly as I diligently stay over the pool, shifting my position gradually so as to stay hidden, observing the way the creatures move, especially taking care to see where the creatures go after they leave the pool.

The centipedes slither away to the opposite end of the cavern and curiously the Croca-beast does as well. The dogs move into a small tunnel opening in the south end, close the tunnel I emerged from. The spiky lizard wanders off towards a wall and starts to climb up before I lose sight of it in the shadows.

Another wall dweller eh? I'd call you brother if I didn't have to eat you!  
Heheheh.

As the creatures leave they are replaced by more slinking out of the shadows and from behind rocks.

After two hours I am finally rewarded.

[Stealth has reached Level 3]

At last! My poor ant claws need a break!

It might seem effortless to hang upside down here but I'm expending energy and not eating anything. I'm tired and hungry. Food will have to wait for now though. It's still too soon.

I creep back to my tunnel and make my way back into my hidey-hole. Phew! Only when I'm enclosed in this space do I feel safe. Maybe that is the ant coming out in me?

Never mind that! Time to work some more!

I begin to widen the space and I use the excavated dirt to start blocking the tunnel off on the side leading away from the cavern. Using my mandibles to shift the dirt and pressing it down with my body to compact it. It's strangely soothing, this.

Usually, when a colony is excavating a nest they would pile loose soil around the top to create a mound in order to help keep water out of the nest. I don't want this for a few reasons, I'm not worried about rain down here and secondly, I don't want anyone to know there is an ant in here.

So my plan is to try and restrict the tunnel on both sides, leaving only a small gap for me to pass through on the roof. This way the larger creatures will be dissuaded from chasing me here to my hiding place. They could get through if they really wanted to of course, it's only dirt after all, but I'm hoping they wouldn't be bothered and find another way to travel.

After some time:

[Digging has reached Level 2].

Ha! Now I can dig faster!

After a few hours of shifting dirt I was able to completely block off one side of the tunnel, leaving only a small gap at the roof. Also, my digging had reached level three.

I'm exhausted, time for a nap!



Covering up the entrance to my now much more spacious hiding hole, I loosen my six legs and place my body down on the soft earth.

I'm so hungry!

My stomach is twisting and cramping. I know this feeling from when my family didn't send expenses money or neglected to put food in the fridge. I'm no stranger to going hungry.

I just have to wait. When I wake up I'll go to hunt my first prey.

I already have a target!