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Chapter 301: Mind War

Dazed, my minds went blank for a terrifying moment before clarity returned to me and I focused my awareness on the mind bridge that connected the Commander to me. What the hell had just happened?!

Somehow, in the midst of all that it was enduring in this moment, the damned Croc had possessed the presence of mind to detect the mental connection that I had created between us and use it to strike at me directly.

Really, you stupid Croc!? With a giant bat faced gorilla punching your lights out and a writhing mass of tentacle death descending upon you, the little ant who'd created a mind bridge threatened you the most?! I think you have messed up your priorities!

Another pulse of mana flooded down the bridge, but this time I was prepared and focused my will to resist the impact. I felt as if I'd braced myself to be hit wrecking ball. The mental strike smashed into my awareness and rattled it like a tin can. I grit my mandibles and brought all of my Will to bare in order to prevent myself from blacking out and dropping the bridge.

If the stupid Croc is so threatened by the mind bridge then I'm sure as hell going to maintain it. Even if it's going to burn through mana faster than I wanted to, especially after coming so close to having exterminated myself through this exact problem.

I didn't want to have spend my mana quite so profligately as this but these big monsters aren't the kind that we can take on without going all out. I just hope that I don't end up in empty core territory again, that sensation was... uncomfortable, to put it mildly.

But how can I utilise this bridge to attack the Croc? Come to think of it, how on earth is this Croc using the Bridge to attack me!? I doubt very much that it's capable of constructing a mana transformation construct, does it have a mind magic gland? Why the heck would an evil two mouthed Croc have a need for a mind magic gland?! This horrific looking monstrosity hasn't communicated with another organism except through the medium of fire in its entire life!

The beast appeared to judge that I'd been incapacitated by its mental strikes and turned its attention to fending off the relentless assault from Tiny. Repeatedly rocked by the apes tremendous fists the Croca-Commander has taken some damage, blood dripped from a number of open wounds where Tiny had managed to crack its scales.

Now the Croc had enough room to swing with both arms on its right side, the wide swipe forced Tiny to retreat backwards and the Croc made use of the space to open its top jaws as it unleashed a gout of fire towards my ape pet.

What I saw then I shall never forget.

Tiny had been falling backwards, off balance after the savage swing from the Croc, the follow up fireball should have turned him into a roasted side of ape, but instead, a miracle occurred. One moment, Tiny was flat footed as he stumbled backward, the next moment he'd risen onto the balls of his feet, his

tense expression faded to be replaced by one extreme calm,. Then he floated to one side, executed a graceful pirouette and avoided the flame breath of the Titan Croc with ease.

What the hell was that?! When did you learn how to move with such, such grace and precision? His feet flickered so quick was his movement.

Wait a sec.

Is that fancy feet?! That suspicious dance related skill? When the heck have you been practicing that you brute?! Have you been dancing when I can't see you, you cursed ape?! If you had a skill that was so useful why the heck didn't you let me know about it? I'll ignore the fact that I could have checked the details by examining his core but I'll put that to one side. I never bothered because the name of the skill seemed to be so frivolous that I didn't think it mattered. Even now, as I pictured myself dancing and floating around enemy strikes, my six legs flailing in the air, I just don't feel like the skill would be for me.

It's sure to hit flame strike missed, the Croca-Commander was slow to react to this light footed ape and Tiny slid to the creatures side, raised his fists and continued to deliver justice. By now Crinis had managed to bind two of the creatures arms together and begun her gruesome work, the teeth that lined her tentacles ground and sliced away at the Croc who appeared to be less than enjoying the experience.

This damn Croc. It's so damn tough it'll take some time for Crinis to get through, and though Tiny is doing good work, the damage hasn't piled up as quickly as I'd like. The thing that we need to keep aware of is the mana attrition we are experiencing. I've burned through a chunk of my reserves already by creating this mind bridge, and the trickly of mana from my core into the Gravitational Mana gland is a constant worry.

Similarly, Tiny has expended lightning with every strike, and his core needs to replenish two mana glands, which will increase his expenditure. The Croc must be suffering in a similar way. As a matter of fact, it should be worse. They're a long way from the nearest Dungeon entrance and according to Morrelia have been marching straight back toward the capital, no doubt to enter the Dungeon there and bathe in the sweet, sweet mana there.

Considering that the Croca-Commander is two or more evolutions ahead of me, the drain on its core must be significantly higher. The Croc seems to have been willing to unleash its flames quite freely so far, I wonder how much further it can afford to do so.

Morrelia has swept into the battle by this stage, cutting through the chaff like a double bladed demon. Deep in her Berserker rage she roared and screamed at her foes as she lacerated them with her twin swords, causing her to be covered in gore.

Nasty.

At least she's kept the small fry off our backs.

Time to deal with this Croc. Distracted my Tiny and Crinis I reach deep into myself with all of my minds working together in concert, exerting the full force of my intellect upon my mana. Inside me the mind mana transformation construct glows like an ethereal arch and I bring my will to bare, producing mind attribute mana and condensing it swiftly.

With my improved skill and the concentrated effort of all of my brains I weave together a sending for the Croca that is based off an experience that I shall not soon forget: the searing, agonizing pain of an empty core. Deftly I weave in the pain, the fear, the desperation and uncertainty into a tight little ball that I fire across the mind bridge and straight into the Croca-Commander's brain.

Enjoy that sucka!

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Chapter 302: The Fall

When my dish of curated agony arrived at its destination the Croc responded much as I would have expected, with unabridged terror and anguish. The sheer terror and pain of ones' core being drained is unique experience and I'm glad I had the chance to share it with this particular Croca-Commander. I feel gratified that I suffered for a noble cause.

Stunned by the sudden arrival of such a dense and rich package of sensation through the mind bridge that connected us, the Croca appeared to be unable to resist its effects and succumbed for a moment to the illusion that the sensations it felt were real and not, in fact, crafted by a nefarious ant.

In my experience utilising mental warfare, I've found that it's generally the case that a monster has a chance to 'resist' your sending through sheer force of mind. I have suspected that this resistance is based upon the Will stat in some way, which is why I had been worried the Croca may be somewhat impervious to my mental strikes. Not so. It seemed that the impressive physique of the Croca-Commander hadn't come without a cost.

Tiny, we have found your spiritual brothers here in the Croca-Beasts! Tough as nails and just as intelligent!

The monstrous crocodile reeled in horror at the pain it felt emanate from within, arms flailed and the creature attempted to fling Tiny and Crinis away but the two pets were persistent, not willing to allow the beast to escape.

Chance!

I flexed my legs and dashed toward the Croca at full speed. I closed the distance in a few seconds, my mandibles opened wide and ready to deliver their own particular brand of law and order.

CHOMP!

I poured my strength into the muscle that lined my head and bit down with every ounce strength in my body. One bite is never enough! No ant was ever intended to win through an alpha strike! Bite, Bite and Bite some more!

I wasn't willing to continue to empty my mana from my core, so I refrained from infusing my mandibles with mana and relied on their base destructive power. I'm the first to admit that my destructive power is somewhat lacking, that's nothing new, but with my skills and high level of mutation I can at least contribute something on the ground level.

I'm not willing to keep flinging spells, that's for sure! After so recently going through the experience myself, I was in no rush to taste those sweet delights again.

Forced to use Splintering Chomp due to the solid defences of the Croca, I work as mechanically as possible, bite, open, bite, open, as I tried to pierce through the hard scales of the monsters' leg and puncture the sweet, succulent muscle tissue beneath.

Tiny continued to unleash his barrage of punches even as his feet flickered above the ground as he shifted his weight to suite his punches. Electricity sparked and danced every time he struck home and the damage was piling up.

For her part, Crinis focused on keeping the two arms she had control of bound and contained as her saw teeth went to work. In order to escalate her damage she switched gears slightly and shifted her head so that she had access to chomp down with her terror inducing teeth on the Crocs shoulder.

Which may have been a mistake since the pain of having those fangs sink deep into its shoulder seemed to be enough to shock the Croca-Commander out of the delusion that I had supplied it. Its eyes flashed red as it bellowed with frustration and rage. Still light on his feet, Tiny managed to slip out of range as the Croc flailed at him with its two free arms, its claws raked through the air leaving a shining trail of light as it executed a skill.

Holy mackerel! That looked sharp!

Quick as beat the Crocodile switched its play and turned to snap at Crinis with its vicious upper jaws.

[Crisis watch -] I called but not quickly enough.

Thankfully it didn't matter as Crinis artfully dodged, her entire body morphed out of the way, her shadow displayed its flexibility, and incredible ability to compress itself, her body chose to be where the jaws were not.

[Nice, Crisis! Be careful up there!] I cheered.

I wonder if that's a skill that she picked up? That level of movement, the speed she was able to do it, I haven't seen her do anything like that before. Her body has always been somewhat, amorphous, able to be compressed from her full, inflated ball of death down to a mere softball of implied illness.

This is a different type of shift, as the Crocs jaws closed in she retracted the part of her body that would have been bitten, whilst leaving the rest of it alone. For a moment it even looked as if the Croca had bitten a chunk out of her since there was nothing but air remaining when it withdrew its teeth.

I refuse to sit by and let the pets do all of the work!

HAH!

Digging deep it reared back and crunched down with a Splintering Chomp. A resplendent crunching sound rang out as my mandibles pierced through the crocs scales and bit deep into the leg beneath. With a loud groan the commander staggered to one side and I seized the opportunity to pull it off balance and threw my weight to one side, gripping the earth with my claws and hauling on the Croca-Commander with my jaws still lodged in its leg.

Timber!

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Slowly at first, then with increasing speed, the Garralosh Commander tilted to one side before it came crashing down to the dirt.

BOOM!

The ground vibrated under the weight of its frame as it slammed down, rattling my legs and sending me scrambling to ensure I wasn't crushed as it came down. Ha, ha! That's how it's done! I hope Tiny saw that, he'll be irritated to no end that I managed to bring it the ground before he did. Gweheheheh!

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!" someone screamed.

Ah?! Morrelia?!

She's finished off the chaff already?! Focusing my near 360 degree vision I can see that its true, the broken and sliced remains of her foes litter the ground behind her as she charges toward us, her eyes burning with rage and her face twisted in a vicious snarl. Her two blades are held low and pointing directly at the Croca Commander as she charges, her dash skill allowing her to move with unnatural speed.

You want to make your glorious entrance now?! When the work is almost done!? Well, I guess it doesn't matter that much, help is certainly welcome when challenging a monster as powerful as this, even wounded as it is.

And we have wounded it. Crinis has been biting and sawing away at two of the monsters' arms and shoulder for a while now and her work has been rewarded. The scales have been penetrated and ichor is dripping down from between her tentacles. It won't be much longer and the Croc is going to be down to half arms. Even if she doesn't get that far, those two arms don't look as though they'll be much use in the near future, not without some serious healing.

Tiny has done more work, certainly more than I expected him to be able to do. His punches have impressive destructive potential on their own, powered by his massive physique, but with him discharging bolts of electricity into the Croc with each blow he's been savaging the inside of the monster just as badly as he has the outside. Of the three of us, the most raw HP damage has been dealt by the ape, for sure.

My own contributions have been a bit more on the utility side, slowing the monster, gumming it up with acid, weakening its defences and attacking it mentally in order to provide openings for my two pets to take advantage of. I don't mind playing the support role for now but I have to say I don't feel it suits my temperament, I want to be right in the thick of things, slapping down the enemies of justice with my face hands. Hopefully after my next evolution I can address my current physical weakness.

All in good time. I still need to try and finish absorbing the rare core before I can even think of evolution.

Arriving as a storm of metal, Morrelia begins stabbing with incredible ferocity before the Commander can even right itself after falling to the ground. Her two blades don't bite too deep with each strike, but sheer weight of attacks is going to add up quick at the pace she's going. At this speed she might even be the one to score the last hit.

....

w-, wait a sec!

THAT EXPERIENCE IS MIIIIIIINE!

[Tiny! Hold down the handbags arms on your side. Jump on them if you have to! Crinis! Wrap up his jaws!]

[I might not be able to hold too long Master! Holding its arms together is already stretching my limits!]

[Just do it! I only need you to hold for a little while! We can't let Morrelia steal the experience!]

[What!?] Crinis roared, appalled at the thought, [how dare this woman dream of stealing experience from Master?! It won't happen!]

As if possessed by a demon, Crinis lashed out with her tentacles, wrapping them around the Croca-Commanders jaws and straining to hold them shut.

[Nice, Crinis!] I cheered.

Even as she moved, Tiny had followed orders and leapt bodily onto the creatures other side, landing heavily on its arms before simply throwing his whole body down on them, using his weight to pin the limbs to the ground. The Croca-Commander writhed and fought to resist the grip of the monsters wrestling it to the ground. Had it been at full strength then I doubt we would have been able to achieve this, the damn thing is simply too strong. But here and now, on the surface? This Croc is running on fumes.

This is my chance!

With all four arms accounted for, the twin jaws sealed by the limbs of Crinis and the tails pinned down by the creatures own body, there will never be a better time to strike than now! Morrelia has continued her furious flurry of strikes, her arms and chest coated with the ichor that is now spraying for the deep wounds she is beginning to inflict. I'm not even certain that she's trying to steal the last hit, I think she's just deep in the depths of her rage, but I can't give this up! I've gotta go fast!

Desperate to achieve the last hit, I draw out mana from my core and direct it into my mandibles as I launched myself onto the struggling monsters chest. The Croc struggled even more furiously when it realised it was being stepped on by an ant, literally, but there was nothing it could do in the moment as my mandibles began to glow bright with the influx of raw mana.

I'm going straight for the throat!

Shattering Bite!

With a ferocious crunch, my mandibles extended out as my energy manifested itself in air and came down with the satisfying sound of a symphony of smashed scales.

Not enough! Let's keep this wagon rolling!

Bite! *Bite! *Bite!

With each chomp I dig deeper and the Croca's struggles grow weaker, until finally...

[You have slain level 53 Garralosh Commander]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 27, one skill point awarded]

[You have reached level 28, one skill point awarded]

[You have reached level 29, one skill point awarded]

[You have reached level 30, one skill point awarded]

YASS! The XP is MINE!

Take that Morrelia you poaching - ...

"ggggggGGGGGGGRRRRRROOOOOOWLLLLLLLL!"

....

What the heck was that?!

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Chapter 304: The sound of the inevitable

That growl was so low, and so powerful, I could feel it rattle my external bones. What in the name of the ever loving ant queen is going on?!

Tiny, Crinis and I froze in place the moment we heard that unearthly rumble, still locked in our moment of triumph over the fallen foe. The Croca-Commander lies still beneath me, its neck torn asunder my mandible assault and I allow the mana to fade from my choppers. Morrelia is standing to one side of the monster, both of her blades buried halfway to the hilt in its flank as she comes out of her berserk rage.

Her face appears red and gaunt as she heaves deep breaths into her lungs, the light of anger and bloodlust fading from her eyes and clarity of thought returning. She looked down at the defeated Croca-Commander as if surprised to see it there, a flicker of confusion came over her expression and she slowly shook her head from left to right.

Groooooooooowl!

Again that deep rumbling growl rattled out from a distance, seeming to shake the very land itself beneath our feet. The only one present in the moment to not appear nervous at this development was Tiny, who only appeared satisfied as he gazed down on his defeated foe.

Checking on my core hastily I see that there is still a good 50% capacity still in the tank. The fight was a lot shorter and sharper than I expected it to be, most likely due to the Croc not being able to fully utilise its ability due to wanting to conserve mana itself. I shouldn't discount the possibility that the Croc was already extremely low on mana, which may explain the relatively low amount of fire it spat at us.

If I recall correctly, the first Croc-Commander we fought burnt down a good section of the Marsh expanse without even trying. I've no doubt this double chinned beast could unleash a similar level of devastation if it so wanted. Inside the Dungeon that is, up here? Who knows?

Satisfied that I wasn't likely to run out of mana in the short-term future I begin work on re-establishing the mind bridge to Morrelia that I had let lapse during the fight. I'll still need to be careful, mana-wise. I burned a good chunk of gravitational mana in the fight and I can feel the gland drawing away mana from my core to replenish its stock. Normally, not a problem, the core is replenished a heck of a lot faster than the gland can drain it away, especially when I can get my feet stuck into some Dungeon turf. On the surface, my core does not absorb mana fast enough to sustain me under ideal circumstances, let alone with any extra demands on it. I'll need to retreat back to our mini-Dungeon base to refill the tank before we go any further. Better safe than sorry.

[What's the problem Morrelia? You're looking a little confused?]

[Have you been hearing those growls?] she asked, a little vaguely.

[Well, yeah? Of course. I felt like my carapace had been jammed into a sub-woofer. Way too much base. Do you have any idea what might be causing it?]

Instead of answering my question, Morrelia posed another of her own.

[Do you know what species of monster this is?] she asked, pointing at our victim.

[Yup. Garralosh Commander, no doubt about it. One of the eldest children of Garralosh herself. This is the second time we've put one down] I boasted a little bit, even as my antennae wave back and forth attempting to sense the source of the intimidating noise.

[Have you ever seen it?] Morrelia asked faintly, [Garralosh, I mean?]

Surprised by the question, I turned my whole body to face Morrelia.

[Ah, no. Why? Have you?] I asked incredulously.

GGGGROOOOOOOOOOOWLLLLL!!!!

Again that bone rattling growl!? What in the name of heck is it?

[I think we might be about to] Morrelia muttered.

Waaaait a second. That is the sound of GARRALOSH GROWLING?! I though it a freaking earth tremor or something! No way a monster can make that kind of noise?!

[Are you sure?!] I demanded.

She turned toward me.

[You want to find out?]

[Absolutely not!]

I barked out orders to Tiny and Crinis.

[We are getting out of here on the double! I want to take a few cuts of this prime Croc and then we skedaddle, stage left!]

Morrelia didn't bother to wait for us, turning to run as soon as she realised what we were doing and sprinting at top speed back down the trail we followed.

Tiny and Crinis leapt into action and I assisted in the rather disgusting task of Biomass butchery. The whole Croc was way too heavy for us to carry, but were we really willing to leave behind hundreds of Biomass points lying in the dirt?!

We may be stupid but at least we are stupid for greed!

[Cut like you mean it Crinis! We need to be out of here five minutes ago!] I bellowed.

[What's a minute?!] Crinis wailed.

[Just hurry up!]

In reality it only took two minutes for us to finish separating the two arms that Crinis had been working on during the fight and one of the legs which Tiny promptly picked up and we were out of there!

[Go! Go! Go dammit! Move those legs!] I roared at Tiny as he struggled to run whilst carrying his grisly cargo under his arms. Crinis collapsed onto my back the moment we were finished carving and retracted to her compact, travel sized sphere.

Dashing with all of our strength the trees became a blur as we raced as quickly as possible to put distance between us and the scene of the battle. The inside of my carapace was sweating bullets at the thought of big momma Garralosh rolling over the horizon and burning us all to death in an instant.

Horrible visions of six headed crocodiles with nine tails fill my mind and it isn't long before I'm focusing my attention on the horizon behind us, waiting to see if our doom approaches!

[Come on Tiny, run faster! Eat an arm or something, pick up the pace!]

Only too happy to oblige, Tiny continues to run whilst stuffing his face as we flee from the shadow of the mother of all crocodiles.

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Chapter 305: Regroup

We ran as if the devil himself were behind us liberally applying a pitchfork to our most tender commercial interests. Tiny was significantly slowed by having to carry his Biomass burden but I didn't consider leaving him behind for long. We eventually made it back to the small Dungeon entrance we had used previously and dove inside, slaughtering the small number of spawned monsters before standing still, ears peeled for any sound of encroaching doom.

[You hear anything Crinis?]

[Master, I don't have any ears.]

[You know what I mean! Do you detect anything?]

[... No. I wasn't able to detect anything on the surface either. Whatever was making that noise was far outside my range.]

[Fair enough. How about you, Tiny?]

[Whurfft?]

[Get that Biomass out of your face dammit! And why would having food in your mouth make your mental voice sound different? Do you hear anything?]

[No...]

[Good!]

Somewhat of a surprise, Morrelia had chosen to join us in the Dungeon. Perhaps she wanted the shelter of being concealed below ground level. She seemed to be fairly shaken after that fight. I don't know why she was so rattled, but I can only imagine she has good reason. I haven't seen her do anything she wasn't absolutely sure of.

[You feeling a little better?] I asked her.

At the moment she had her ear cocked into the air, her face was intent as she listened for any hint of pursuit. She didn't respond for a full minute until she seemed to feel confident there wasn't anything coming after us.

[I think so] so sent, [I just couldn't believe that a creature like Garralosh could actually be on the surface.]

[Yeah, shouldn't that be impossible?!] I protested, [it's painful enough for me to be on the surface, some gigantic monster, that is hundreds of years old should have evolved ten times more than I have, should be drained of mana after a few minutes on the surface, surely?!]

Morrelia looked at me carefully for a moment before she continued to speak.

[How much... do you know, about Garralosh?] she asked with some reluctance.

[Pretty much nothing. From the system messages I get when I eat monsters I know a little. That the various Garralosh monsters are her offspring, that she's a giant Croc and that she raised her children for some sort of purpose. That's about it.]

Morrelia appeared to think hard before she continued speaking.

[I can give you a little more than that, though speaking too much would break faith with people I care about, so I won't tell you everything.]

I sense secret knowledge!

[Whatever you're happy to share, I'll be more than grateful for!] I tried to appear harmless and cooperative.

Morrelia snorted, seeing through my guise in an instant.

[You've been willing to help my people so far, Anthony. It's only fair that we help a little back. Now. Firstly, I'll say that Garralosh is probably not as highly evolved as you might think.]

[but how could that be?] I wondered, [she's hundreds of years old, isn't she?]

Morrelia nodded. [She's around two hundred and fifty years old. Nobody can know with precision unless they were there to see her spawn but that's the best guess.]

[So how could she not have evolved much? I've evolved three times already and I'm not even a year old!]

[You're not one year old?] Morrelia's eyes suddenly narrowed as her voice became sharper.

[Ah.. Yes? Friendly person who is an ally? That shouldn't be that surprising should it?] I shrank back a little from her cutting aura.

Seeing my attitude Morrelia's expression softened. [It's a little unusual that would be this strong, this young, according to what I know of Monsters. I was honestly shocked when you unleashed that... ball of death. What was that?]

Aha! The excellence of my magic has made an impression after all! I swelled up with pride.

[That! That was my Gravity Bomb! Fearsome destructive power, no?] I boasted.

[Gravity?] Morrelia asked, her face intent, [Is that the type of mana you used?]

It was my turn to become a little evasive. I don't intend to give up all my secrets, woman! Perhaps a little wisdom is finally starting to blossom in me!

[Let's not worry about that too much] I deflected, [we were discussing the giant crocodile who is apparently out to eat us?]

Visibly disappointed, Morrelia nodded and continued with what she had been saying.

[Garralosh has been prevented from descending deep into the Dungeon. I won't go into too much detail but suffice to say that she hasn't had access to the higher tier monsters and cores she would need to evolve to a massive height. We believe the last time she successfully evolved was seventy years ago.]

[Wow! That is a long time to not progress. Wait a second. Did you say something about cores?]

[I did. Why?]

Cores.... Cores.... Something about cores.

[Crisis?]

[Yes Master?]

[Did any of us take the core out of Garralosh Commander that we killed?]

[You ordered me to focus on the arms and then run, Master. I thought it was odd, but I didn't want to question your orders.]

Oh my Gandalf. There's no way...

[Tiny...] I asked desperately, knowing the answer before I even asked the question. [Did you collect the core?]

The big ape just shook his head, almost proudly. [Nope!] he declared, thumping himself on the chest for emphasis.

DAMMIT.

To the immense and visible confusion of Morrelia, I flopped onto my back and started thrashing at the dirt with my legs, a tantrum of the finest quality.

I could have used that stupid core! Not for me (god no!) but for Mother! If I'd come back with a second rare core then surely the Queen could have been persuaded to accept it, allowing herself to evolve into a powerful form that could support the entire colony and more importantly, keep her safe! Such a waste! Anthony you freaking moron?! What's a hundred Biomass compared to the rare core!?

As quickly as I'd flopped onto my back, I froze and flipped myself over again.

[We have to go back!] I declared to Morrelia.

Her eyes widened. [What?! Are you insane? What will happen if you run into Garralosh?]

[I need the core out of that monster! That's a rare core that we left behind out there!]

She froze.

[You didn't get the core?!] she demanded incredulously, [you stayed back there just to get those limbs?!]

[You freaked me out!] I defended myself, [we heard some supernaturally loud growling and you panicked! Then I panicked!]

[Even so, I'm not going back there just yet. We should lay low for the time being and head back out tomorrow.]

[There is no chance the core will still be there by then! I'll go on my own, nice and stealthy. I'll take a quick peek, grab the core if I can then return. Ok?]

I turned to my two pets.

[I'm going to go back and take a look for the core, you guys stay here with Morrelia and regroup. Feel free to eat what we took from the commander. I'll be back as soon as I can.]

With that said I didn't pause to see if anyone had a response before I ran up the wall and back out onto the surface. If I can get that core for mother then I sure as hell am going to!

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Chapter 306: Stealth ant rides forth, status update

Leaving behind my three co-adventures I made my way back along our trail as quick as I could whilst keeping a low profile. I was on my own this time, I didn't want to stumble into a fight that I couldn't handle.

It felt unnerving to be exposed on the surface, I felt that lack of comfort pierce me right in the confidence now that I was here without any backup. In fact, no Tiny and no Crinis alongside me for the first time in how long?! Crinis had been with me since not long after we reached the surface during the wave, but Tiny had been with me long before that, since finding the colony almost!

That big lug-head. As much as his ... limited decision making capacity and hunger for a fight had been an inconvenience to say the least, it was fun having him around. He wasn't much for conversation but things tended to never be boring when he was around. He didn't exactly 'settle' for the status quo, he pushed himself, he pushed the situation forward, never allowing himself to shy from a challenge. I had to admire that.

Or he was stupid and free from the sense of self preservation. Either way, it was fun to have him with me.

I will perform core surgery on him and buff his intellect though. Every time he charges forward into nigh mortal danger, I feel myself age internally another ten years. If he keeps going at the rate he's going them I'm going to wither away to dust by the end of the year.

If they even have years here. Or rather, how long is each year in this world? It could be one of those places that orbits its star once every six thousand days. Presuming people grow at the same speed as they did on Earth, you'd be eighteen earth years by the time your first birthday rolled around.

Running through the fields I keep my antennae twitching here and there, making use of my range of vision to try and prevent anything from sneaking up on me. I engage in the stealthy patterns of behaviour that served me so well in the first weeks of my life in this world. Obviously I can't attach myself to the ceiling up here, denying me the full experience of my youth, but I do my best to keep my profile hidden in the long grass, sticking my head up every now and again to take in the lay of the land.

I haven't seen anything yet, but that doesn't mean that I won't.

I'm still gutted that I forgot to secure that core. Just when I thought I might be getting a little smarter, a little more wise, I go ahead and do something stupid like this. That core would mean so much for the colony if I could get it to the Queen, I'm sure of it. If she can evolve in an awesome way, who knows what she might be able to become?

Perhaps it's my ant instincts in me, but I deeply want the Queen to be safe and secure in the colony. The thought of any harm coming to her just makes my little ant heart hurt. Personally, I don't think it has much to do with my new body. Having a family, having a parent who cared and valued me, that's something I've never had before. I don't like to dwell on the negative much but my human life had been ... less than ideal.

Even something simple like being accepted without question by my siblings, the trust and care the Queen, my mother, had shown without expecting anything in return. It's nice. I was desperate for this sense of belonging, I can see that now. Perhaps that was why I was so quick to accept my place within the colony. Now that I've invested so much into my new family, I want to ensure only the best for them.

Which is why I want this damn core!

It's quite the journey to make it back to where we had defeated the Croca-Commander. I focus during my travel time exposed under the open sky, crouching low when I can, moving swiftly and carefully.

Even so, I get a chance to check my status and take in a few of the skill level ups that I missed during the fight against the commander. Mana transformation levelled up to 8, which is nice. Splintering chomp made it to 10 and Advanced mind magic affinity jumped twice to reach 4. Battling against tough foes can really net levels at a quick pace. I took a moment to run my eye over my status:

Name: Anthony

Level: 30 (Special core)

Might: 41

Toughness: 29

Cunning: 44

Will: 35

HP: 58/58

MP: 180/230

Skills: Expert Excavation (III) Level 3; Improved Acid Shot (II) Level 9; Advanced Grip (II) Level 4; Shattering Bite (IV) Level 14; Advanced Stealth (II) Level 5; Splintering Chomp (III) Level 10; Tunnel Map (II) Level 6; Mana Transformation (III) Level 8; Condensed Mana (III) Level 1; External Mana Manipulation (I) Level 2; Empowered Mana Sensing (II) Level 1; Core Surgery (III) Level 6; Expert Exo-Skeleton Defence (III) level 3; Pet Communication (I) Level 4; Rapid Dash (II) Level 4; Expert Water Magic Affinity (III) Level 1; Advanced Stamina (II) Level 7; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 1; Mana Scrooge (II) Level 5; Advanced Cerebral Endurance (II) Level 9; Profound Mediation (II) Level 2; Advanced Precise Shooting (II) Level 2; Tearing Bite (II) Level 9; Enhanced Mind Magic Affinity (II) level 4;

Mutations: Omni Focused Eyes +10, Precognitive Infrared Antennae +10, Mana Eating Restrictive Acid +10, Rapid Absorption Legs +15, Empowered Mandibles +15, True Diamond Carapace +15, Rapid Limb Regeneration Gland +10, Persuasive Pheromone Language Gland +10, Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +15, Adaptable Coordination Cortex +15, Dispersive Regenerating Inner Carapace Plating +10;

Species: Dispersed Mind Ant (Formica)

Skill points: 19

Biomass: 212

I have a lot of Biomass to spend at the moment, I'll need to take care of that soon. The other thing I need to think about is that I'll be able to evolve again in ten levels. My strategy of absorbing a portion of the rare core and hoping my body would adapt seems to have worked. The pain and discomfort is still there, but it's diminished over time. There may be a shot that I'll be able to take the rest of the core before I evolve. Claws crossed.

Speaking of levelling skills, I need to ensure I'm taking the time to grind up a few points whilst I'm up here on the surface. I have two sub-brains who are doing nothing but picking their noses right now, may as well set them a task!

I can almost feel the begrudging acceptance as my force my sub minds to begin reaching out and manipulating the thin mana in the air. The lowest skill that I have regarding magic is my external mana manipulation, so I may as well grind it up to the second rank at least.

My two brains grab hold of the mana and begin to try and move it outside of my body. It's a difficult task, much more difficult than grabbing hold of the pliable mana within my core. I need to save that mana as much as possible so forget about using it to practice!

When I allow the two brains to cooperate, they demonstrate much better progress, utilising their resources together they are able to grab hold of more mana and shift it around in lazy patterns in the air.

Ten minutes later I was rewarded with the first level up.

[External mana manipulation has reached level 2]

Nice! Keep at it sub minds! I'm counting on you!

It was a strange sensation, having my sub brains working on something as my main mind dithered. It was me working hard to control the mana outside of my body but at the same time it wasn't. As if my left hand were busy as hell with a task and my right hand was idle but each hand had its own brain?

I continued on my way under the open sky and after my external mana manipulation skill reached level three I finally found the place where we had battled the Croca-Commander. There were still signs of our fight to be found, the disturbed grass, the hemisphere of soil that had been consumed by my gravity bomb. The mana here felt ... odd. My two sub minds were still actively reaching out to the mana in the air, but it felt, almost thin. As if there was just less of it to take hold of in this place.

The body of the Croca-Commander was gone without a trace. In the soft earth near where we had left it was a reptilian footprint, large enough that I could stand in it, my entire body encompassed within.

That's a big Croc.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 307: Return to the others, the plan

Around the scene of the battle I could see the oversized footprints pressed into the ground all over the place. It was clear that they approached from the direction we had pursued the commander, meaning they had come from the direction of the capital city, Liria. It was also clear that the creature who had come here had cleaned up all of the Biomass we had left behind. I'm not certain if Biomass could fade on the surface as it did within the Dungeon, I suspected not, which led me to believe that the creature who had come here had chewed all of it up before departing.

There was no doubt in my mind who these oversized Croc prints belonged to: Garralosh.

The mother Croc.

There were so many damned prints in the ground it wasn't easy to tell how many legs the creature had. Judging by the progression from Croca-Beast to Croca-Commander, I can expect that the number of limbs, tails and heads has only gone up. Images of bizarre formations of Croca parts run through my head. Four heads? Nine tails?! Twenty two arms?!

I shook myself to push the pictures from my mind. Ultimately, it didn't matter. The rare core had been lost in my carelessness and I couldn't get it back. Disappointment and guilt washed over me in that moment. If it had been for me, I doubt I would have cared this much. So stupid!

Only one way to fix it. Try and hunt down another Croca-Commander and present its core to Mother! Heck, I'll bring her the core of big momma Garralosh myself if I have to.

With a upwelling of determination, I decided to ignore the idea that I'd just pledged to defeat a Crocodile who's feet are larger than my whole body and turned back to meet up with my crew. I spent the journey once again huddled in the long grass, my minds grasping at the mana in the air.

Curiously, I found the mana replenished itself the further from the battle site I found myself. Why the heck was the ambient mana so thin in just that location? It seemed weird. There must be a reason.

The only significant event I could think of that had occurred in that place is that Garralosh, a very old, very powerful monster, had passed through the area. But what did that have to do with the mana in the air?

Wait.

Hang on a second.

Big 'ol monster, highly evolved, powerful core, on the surface, needs mana, mana in the air is lacking after it passed through...

There are some dots here that I feel I'm connecting...

Stopping in place, I hesitantly stretched out with my main mind, sending my awareness outside of my body in the strange way that was only possible here in this world, to sense the mana in the air. Like part of the atmosphere, the mana suffused everything, every blade of grass, every leaf and the air itself. Not nearly to the level it existed within the Dungeon itself, but still, it was there.

I grabbed hold of a small portion of mana with my thoughts, gripping it tight in a vice of pure will, and drew it down toward me, toward my body and then inside, toward my core. To my shock, the mana was drawn straight into my core like a drop of water being soaked into a sponge.

Holy moly!

So this means I can draw mana out of the air in order to sustain my core whilst I'm up on the surface? Why the hell didn't I think of that before?! The core draws mana into itself passively, I guess I just didn't think of trying to supplement its automatic replenishment function by controlling the mana around me. Negligent! I've been negligent again! I should not have neglected the External Mana Manipulation skill for so long! What other precious secret does it hold?!

It's obvious now that Garralosh is using this skill and a much higher level than I am in order to offset the demands of its core whilst moving on the surface, but I still feel it isn't enough to explain how such an

evolved monster can move about up here. I'm only estimating here, and on only a tiny amount of data, but I feel like if I were to rank up the skill and devote my two sub brains to constantly pulling ambient mana into my core, I would still be short of breaking even by just a smidge. If Garralosh has risen the skill to rank four or five, and has a powerful mind rig, she would still be running at a massive loss.

Perhaps she can only maintain herself up here for short bursts. Then why come at all? It just doesn't make sense to me. I may need to grill Morrelia further when I make it back to them.

External mana Manipulation had made it to level four by the time I reunited with the gang. The constant use was certainly keeping the skill ticking up a nice rate. The fact I didn't even have to use my main mind to do it was even better. As a rank one skill, it's still limited in the knowledge and skill that it grants. I'm excited to see what it will give at the second and third rank.

When I returned to the improvised Dungeon we had dug I found Morrelia, Crinis and Tiny resting. All three of them looked up at my descent, my pets happy to see me, Morrelia more irritated than anything by the looks of things.

After connecting the mind bridge I told Morrelia what I had found.

[So Garralosh has actually set foot on the surface] she frowned.

[I believe that she's using external mana manipulation to drag mana into her core. The air in the area was extremely thin when I got there].

Morrelia nodded.

[It's a known tactic, even humans use this method to recharge magic items faster.]

[That alone shouldn't be enough, surely?] I wagged my antennae in protest, [a monster that size must have a potent core. If a few skills were enough for monsters to operate on the surface, wouldn't it happen all the time? I understand that it's basically unheard of for Dungeon monsters to run around on the surface!]

[It's true] Morrelia sighed, [the problem is the wave we are experiencing. For some reason it's caused the density of the ambient mana on the surface to rise, that isn't meant to happen. That can cause the normal monsters to rise to the surface, but it shouldn't be enough for a creature like Garralosh. There's something strange happening and I can't explain it.]

She appeared frustrated by her lack of understanding toward this situation. Ever since we had come to the former Kingdom of Liria, Morrelia had contained a simmering anger inside her, well, more simmering anger than usual. I had to remind myself every now and again that this was her homeland we're stomping around in.

[So what's the plan?] I asked, [I'm here for reconnaissance and I would love to get a chance at grabbing another rare core, so I'm going to stick around. What about you?]

Morrelia dropped her chin to chest as she thought for a moment.

[I'll stay] she declared. [I want to get to the capital and see it for myself. I also want to find out just how a monster like Garralosh is moving around on the surface. There must be more there that we can learn.]

[Alright, give me a little while to get ready and then we can go.]

Time to spend some Biomass.

Chrysalis

Chapter 308: Spending and patrol

I've managed to amass over two hundred Biomass since my last big spend, not a heap, not when compared to the last haul, but still healthy. With this I'll be able to get three more mutations to +15, bringing me so close to the perfect full mutation form that I want before my next evolution. If I'd been more patient and chewed my way through more Biomass at the early evolutions, I wouldn't have had to stuff my face so much during this one!

Lessons have been learned. I won't be evolving until my mutations are complete!

As Morrelia sat down to keep watch over us, my pets and I settled in to spend our Biomass. Crinis was already close to the perfect +10 all around. She must be nearly ready to evolve as well. Still only tier two, she can get much stronger yet. Tiny is in the same boat as me, tier two and battling to get enough food into him to get his body fully upgraded.

Alright then. I still have to upgrade my eyes, my antennae, my regeneration gland, my Language gland and my carapace plating. So after this round of mutations I'll still have two to go. So close!

Ok, so which should I go with?

Eyes for sure. Up here on the surface I find my eyesight still isn't up to the task of seeing long distances. In the Dungeon, the wide open spaces are not quite this wide and open and I can get around much better, but up here the long distance vision is still a little weak.

[Would you like to upgrade Omni Focused eyes from +10 to +15? This will cost 65 Biomass?]

Let's do it!

[At this level you may choose to combine your mutations, or emphasise one. Which will you select?]

Okay then! So far I have upgraded my eyes to have a long distance section of vision focused toward the front, then I upgraded them to have other, separate areas of focused vision pointing in most directions. The effect is that I have quite decent vision forward, above, behind and to the sides of me, but with fairly chunky gaps of poor, blurry eyesight between. I'm happy with both upgrades so I suppose the way forward is to fuse!

Nice. Let's hold that one and focus on the next. I think carapace plating will be the solid play. If I'm going to keep fighting against monsters as far out of my league stats wise as the commanders, then I want all the defence I can get!

[Would you like to upgrade your Dispersive Regenerative Carapace Plating to +15? This will cost 65 Biomass.]

Yassss!

[At this level you may choose to combine your mutations, or emphasise one. Which will you select?]

Now this is a little interesting. The two upgrades I have on my inner carapace, Dispersive and Regenerative, are both very useful. The dispersive plating helps my carapace to spread out the damage of blunt attacks, making it harder to crack, whilst the regenerative aspect allows my plating to regenerate itself very quickly. This increases my survivability by a lot since my carapace is tough to penetrate, and heals damage that is done to it.

If both upgrades are equally good, we will fuse them!

One to go.

I think I'll choose my regeneration gland on this one. If I'm going to be battling up against larger, more damaging monster, then being able to repair damage during the fight could be critical, just as it has been in the past. The thing that worries me the most is my legs. The carapace that covers my body is super tough, and getting tougher with every mutation and evolution. I'm excessively proud of it to be honest. So shiny, so strong.

But it doesn't do a whole lot for my stick-like ant legs. Monstrous ant I may be, my legs are still skinny and oh so snap-able. To be honest, I didn't think legs this size would be able to hold me up at my current girth, I suppose I have mana to thank for that. They are a defensive liability, so I desperately want to improve my ability to regrow them at a moment's notice.

[Would you like to upgrade your Rapid Limb Regeneration Gland to +15? This will cost 65 Biomass.]

[At this level you may choose to combine your mutations, or emphasise one. Which will you select?]

The two upgrades I have assist in the growth of missing limbs, which thankfully includes my antennae, and speeds up the process. Both are valuable, so fusion is once again the path I choose!

Alright then! Those choices are all locked in, suppose I'd better confirm them then...

Wait!

I nearly forgot about the itch again! Shifting my head slightly I can see Morrelia is leaning against the wall, almost appearing to be dozing but I can tell her senses are attuned to possible threats here in this small Dungeon chamber.

If she sees me wiggling and rolling around on the ground then all of dignity as the leader of the ants will be lost! In fact, one could almost say that my dignity is the dignity of the colony itself! That may be a little bit of a stretch, but still! I need to get her out of the room. Some sort of diversion is necessary.

[Hey, Morrelia. Any chance you could have a quick look up on the surface? I think I heard something moving around. Through vibrations you know, we ants are very sensitive to vibrations moving through the dirt. It's the antennae, fantastic wiggly things they are. You know what they say, they aint this long for nothing! Ha! Ha! Haaaaaaa.]

Smooth.

Morrelia lifted one eyebrow at my persuasive diatribe before she nodded slightly.

[Sure, I'll take a look.]

So saying she turned and quickly climbed her way up and out of our little chamber.

Quick as a flash I dove behind Tiny. Not content with this level of coverage I began to dig furiously, my mandibles sending dirt flying into the air, covering Tiny who groaned in irritation but thankfully didn't move.

Aha! Now I have secured a small trough in the ground, am screened behind Tiny and Morrelia has left the chamber. I must seize this moment!

Confirm those mutations!

ACK!

So quickly?! Holy mackerel!

STAGRABALLIGANUFFIN!!!

It doesn't take long before I have assumed the now traditional position, on my back and flailing wildly at the air with my legs as the overpowering itch of mutation rips through me without mercy. I can only take some small measure of comfort in the knowledge that I have, for once, managed to not be observed.

Victory!

A few minutes later, Tiny, Crinis and I emerged from the chamber to find Morrelia resting on the surface. I take a moment to re-establish our mental communication that I'd let lapse during my ... er ... episode.

[So where do you think we should go next?] I asked, keeping it cool.

[There are a few smaller settlements I know of in the area that I'd like to visit, there's a chance we'll find some survivors there. Other than that, I want to move toward the capital and get a good look at it.]

[Sounds reasonable] I agreed, [all of that is quite valuable for the colony as well. Let's make a start.]

And so, we were off!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 309: Making Motions

Once Tiny, Crinis and I had refilled our cores and Morrelia had snacked on her travel rations we set out once again, this time moving slower and taking more care as we moved. We weren't trying to chase anyone down and stumbling under the eye of big momma Croc was not something we wanted to experience. I made sure I was training my external mana manipulation as we moved, putting those sub brains to work and making them earn their keep. This had the added benefit of slowing down the drain on my core since I was able to capture the mana in the air and pull it in to replace my losses.

I did try and see if I could sense where the mana I lost went, perhaps to see if I could retain it, drag it straight back into myself and therefore never lose any mana at all, but I failed. No matter how I tried I wasn't able to sense where the mana that left the core went to, whether it bled out into the air, was consumed in some way by my body or just vanished out of my core via some extra-dimensional portal.

This could be a research project for the colony one day down the line.

Morrelia seemed to know what she was doing, leading us down farm tracks and dirt roads to locate isolated clusters of homes that we would investigate in the hopes of locating survivors tucked away in cellars, barns or attics. I was surprised by our strike rate, we did manage to find a surprising number of people who had taken shelter from the monsters and managed to hide themselves.

When we uncovered the first group of bedraggled survivors, Tiny cracking open the cellar doors with his bare hands, I'd been shocked! How the heck had the monsters managed to overlook them?!

Turns out that the monsters aren't the best at checking the nooks and crannies. They may have been put under the compulsion of their Croc overlords through some mechanism I have no understanding of, but they do seem to be a little lazy in the execution of their sweeps.

The larger towns and villages have received the full monster horde treatment. Burnt to the ground, the buildings smashed in and the people eaten or scattered, but the smaller hamlets have been hit with a lighter hand. More of a smash and grab approach, without a vigorous hunt for survivors.

The people we find are not in a good way. Starved and half crazed from their time in isolation, too afraid to stick their heads out into the open air in case a monster happened to be nearby, half of them either attacked or hid from myself, Tiny and Crinis before Morrelia could calm them down. I thought we'd have a hard time convincing the people to move, so fearful were they, but each time we managed to uncover another clutch of starved, desperate people, Morrelia managed to convince them of the security that waited for them in the village to the south.

After Morrelia helped the people pack whilst us monsters sat about at a calming distance. We had tried to assist by lifting and shifting things but Morrelia suggested we move to one side and allow the people to get themselves organised without us, as it would cause less "stress" to the survivors.

Which is fair enough. I do hope that Morrelia emphasised the presence of an entire colony of monsters living right next to this village of survivors. If any accidents were to occur, things could get very hairy down there, very quickly.

Over the span of a few days we covered a lot of ground, running all over southern Liria. We had a couple of run ins with bands of roving monsters, smaller ones this time, without any of the more evolved Croca beasts. We were able to clean those up without much stress, and I made sure to grind my skills across the battles.

It didn't take long for external mana manipulation to level to five and I was able to rank it up to Greater External Mana Manipulation. The rank up imbued me with the knowledge I needed to extend my reach further and grasp hold of mana at an extended range from my body. This increased the amount of mana I could shift somewhat but not by as much as I'd thought. I could use my will to effect mana almost twice as far away as I could before, a range of almost five metres. The extended range, came at a cost though, the further the mana was from my core, the harder it was to influence.

The upshot was that my minds burned more mental energy the further away the mana was from me. Whilst my sub brains were able to grasp mana close to me almost constantly, expanding their reach caused them to flame out before much time had passed. I decided to slowly increase the range of my mana manipulation as my levels increased and I became more confident with the technique.

After we had made a pass through the surrounding region, we had to retreat back to the Dungeon in order to recharge and plot our move toward the capital. I had business with a croc.

Chrysalis

Chapter 310: Settling in

Since leaving Midum, Isaac and his fellow survivors had made good time. Isaac found it was easy to motivate folks when they were escaping a literal horde of savage monsters that had killed almost everyone they knew. Glad to have survived, worried that it wouldn't last, the townsfolk and former guardsmen and women had packed their stuff with alacrity and hustled their way south, following the directions that Morrelia had given them.

Thinking of Morrelia brought a smile to Isaac's face and pang to his heart. He was deep in it, he could see that as sure as he could see the nose on his own face. He'd never been taken with someone on first sight like this in his entire life. Everything about her just seemed to punch him right in his most tender preferences. Strong, no nonsense, capable, decisive and built with a body that looked as if she could pick him and rip him in half with her bare hands.

Not to mention her raging temperament which had made him feel as if that might actually happen at any moment. Talking to her had felt like the best and most dangerous thing Isaac had done in his entire life.

Shaking his head to dismiss the lingering thoughts of the goddess who had captivated him so and tried to focus his mind on the literal mountain of an issue before him.

"It's a pile 'o somethin' alright" he muttered to himself, "just not sure if it's the plops yet."

"You say somethin' Isaac?" Anna, his fellow former Midum town guard queried from his left.

"Nothin' worth hearing" he nodded toward the massive hill of dirt that rose before them, "what you make of it, Anna?" he asked.

The dour guard shook her head. "It's well over my pay grade Isaac. I never seen anything like it."

'Aint that the truth, Isaac thought to himself as he tried to take it all in. He'd been warned before he'd left Midum, spoken to again, at length, when they'd arrived at the village, but he still wasn't prepared for the reality of it. A whole colony of monsters, living right next to a human village.

And apparently everything was... fine?

Isaac watched as hundreds of ant monsters larger than his old dog Toby ran about on the enormous mound of dirt at a feverish pace, carrying dirt out of the tunnels, shifting its position on the hill or using their bodies to press and compact the soil.

"It's so quiet" Isaac observed to Anna as he watched the ants work.

"It's eerie" she agreed after listening for a moment.

The monsters didn't talk, or communicate in any visible way, they just moved around each other in perfect synch. The effort and energy they expended put human labourers to shame, without a word of complaint or a single individual shirking. It was mighty impressive, in a way.

As to what they were doing., they appeared to be building a castle, out of dirt. Oh it didn't have all the trimmings of a cast, the fancy towers and gabled roofs, but in Isaac's more direct mind, this ant hill had the essentials: A big ass wall and a raised fort inside.

It even had a moat! How in the hell a group of monstrous insects managed to engineer something like this was beyond Isaac. Sure, a moat was nothing but a trench filled with water, sure a wall wasn't anything but a heap of dirt piled up, but it was the little things. The dirt wall had been properly braced against thick wooden posts, presenting a formidable obstacle to any who wanted to assault the hill. The moat would normally cause all sorts of problem regarding drainage but it seems that the ants had managed to think of that problem and used a bed of crushed stone, packed down hard, to help minimise.

The moat was even fed from their own channel network for cryin' out loud!

Shaking his head, Isaac turned on his heel and walked back toward the village, Anna trailing behind.

"You're finished looking Isaac?"

"Aye."

"What do you make of it?"

"I haven't the slightest."

"People are fair nervous" Anna warned him, "it's unnerving for them to settle down in a place so close to a pack of monsters."

Isaac grunted in agreement, "not surprising, considering they were just chased from their homes."

There were rumblings amongst the new arrivals, uncomfortable with their new situation, but Isaac had to admit, the locals were a very ... passionate group of advocates. The priest in particular was relentless in his efforts to ease the new arrivals into coexistence with the colony.

As he and Anna drew closer to the village, Isaac saw the one armed silhouette of Beyn hustling towards him. Isaac suppressed a sigh. The priest had been welcoming, helpful, cheerful and tireless in his efforts to comfort the people of Midum, which was more than Isaac could have hoped for. It was just that the man was a little ... intense.

"Greetings friend! Returning after paying homage to our friends?" Beyn called as he cheerfully waved his remaining hand at them in greeting.

Isaac rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't say payin' homage, as such your worship. Just wanted to take a look."

The former town guardsmen's lack of fervour washed off the priest like water. He simply nodded with enthusiasm, eyes shining as he looked towards the ant hill in the distance. "It's incredible isn't it? I can't believe how fast they are learning, how fast they are changing! I swear they are watching us, trying to understand us. In a years' time, who knows what they might be capable of? A miracle is what it is. Divine deliverance!"

"Course it is father, 'aint nobody sayin' any different" Isaac hurriedly cut him off. He'd already been subjected to one of father Beyn's spontaneous sermons and he wasn't keen to repeat the experience. Only the timely intervention of Mrs Enid Bly had saved him.

Before the priest could get wound up again, Isaac cast about to divert the topic of conversation but came up blank. Dang it! He had to act fast or something else would set off the fanatical priest! In desperation he flicked a glance at Anna and she received his panicked signal.

"Ah, your holiness, there, father" she piped up haltingly, "I was, uh, wondering if, you could, ah, tell me some more about the, em, leader ant?"

You idiot! Isaac thought to himself, you couldn't possibly have dropped your foot in the sloppy soil any harder than that.

As expected, the priest's eyes lit ablaze at the mention of his favourite subject. The man's entire face came alight as if it were receiving the mana of the Dungeon directly.

"I would love to!" he boomed, throwing his one arm wide as he stepped forward, closing the distance to his victim.

Isaac averted his eyes from Anna's pleading gaze. Sometimes sacrifices were necessary in order to achieve the greater good. With the priest's voice rising to the heavens behind him, Isaac stepped quietly away and moved toward the village proper.

He'd been fascinated to learn that the ant monster he'd seen with Morrelia had not been a pet and had in fact been the master of the other two monsters he'd seen. Just thinking about it was enough to make him shiver. Had it wanted to that ant could have slaughtered his people without resistance.

All in all, Isaac had to admit that conditions here in the village were better than he had expected by far. He'd only arrived a few days ago and already simple housing was being organised, people were being put to work, fields expanded, combat training undertaken. Despite the recent tragedy, the village town had an incredible energy that was surprising on so many levels.

In a moment of clarity he suddenly realised that the people of the village reminded him of nothing so much as the colony of ants he'd been watching just minutes ago. The single minded, uncomplaining zeal at which they approached their work was unlike anything he'd seen. Something different was happening here, and it wasn't just the monsters, the people were changing also.

It'd be interesting to see what came of it.