

## Chrysalis 31

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#### Chapter 31: Unwelcome guests

The trail has been detected!

It looks the members of my colony have been to this lake after all! This is incredible news, I could possibly just wait here next to the lake for them to show up and follow them back to the nest!

Staying close to the lake I tip tap my antennae on the ground and follow the trail away from the water. It absolutely seems like a solid trail has been laid down here. The more often ants use a particular path the more they will reinforce the trail with pheromones, making the trail more and more solid.

I don't think this path this path has been in particularly heavy use but members of the colony have certainly been here a few times.

I retreat back to the safety of the lake and can't resist a small dance of happiness.

Nearby monsters are looking at me funny out of the corner of their eyes. It probably isn't very often they are treated to some amateur ant freestyle tap.

My new family is within reach!

After being on my own in this Dungeon for days on end it'll feel so nice just to see another entity that doesn't want to eat me!

I'll get to see my Mother in another world, the Queen. I wonder how big she is?

I really didn't get to see my mother much back on earth, most of the time I'd been on my own. Hopefully this time I'll be able to help out a bit more and we can work together!

Gah! I'm too excited!

Need to chill, need to calm down.

It's important I don't forget where I am, this environment is incredibly dangerous. If I run about whilst this distracted I'll just get myself killed.

I scout around for a few minutes until I find a nice nest site and dig myself my now patented L chamber and close over the top.

Ensnared in total darkness I once again begin the exhausting process of training my Mana Manipulation.

\*puff\*

The chamber is briefly illuminated every time the small cloud of mana is released from my mouth.

\*puff\*

Eventually I exhaust my mana, once again failing at my last attempt, unsuccessfully directing the energy due to my exhausted mental state.

The road ahead is still long.

Once this is done I decide to rest, entering the state of torpor, the sleep equivalent of the insect. I'm getting more and more accustomed to this rest. Without closing my eyes, just going still and sort of zoning out for an extended period of time.

Eventually I wake up feeling much more rested and calm.

Phew.

Too many exciting development have happened here. I need to continue to take it slow for a little while and take stock of things.

My original plan of staying here to level up Mana Manipulation isn't a bad one, the added benefit now is that if I keep track of the lake there is a chance I'll be able to join up with a group of my colony mates and follow them back home to the nest!

The other option available is to try and follow the trail back to the nest on my own but I'm reluctant to take that risk when it may not even be necessary.

I'll stay here and continue to train up a few skills!

The other skill I want to increase is Dig. It may not be the flashiest skill, the best use in combat or indeed, particularly useful for anything really.

But I like it!

If you had to ask me what the fundamental skill of the ant is, it would be their incredible capacity to construct their nests and at the center of this is the ability to dig like a boss!

Besides, it is super easy to level up, all I have to do is dig about. With this in mind I start to make extensions to my small chamber, digging small, narrow tunnels in a few directions just a meter under the surface, diverting around, under or stopping a tunnel completely when I run into rock. For some reason the work is soothing, I'm almost humming to myself as I ship loads of dirt back and forth in my mandibles.

The ground here is particularly wet as well, I have to extend away from the lake and it isn't long before I encounter tree roots the buried stems of the giant mushrooms in my tunnels.

Every now and again I dig up to the surface to create a little ventilation and also just to scope out what is happening around the place. This mini exits also provide a nice place to ditch my soil as I go.

I get so engrossed in digging that I didn't even notice when the notification for the skill reaching level came through. When I stop working and try to think about how much time has passed I realise I must have been digging for almost six hours.

Level five Dig!

If only I had a skill point, I'd be super curious to see what this skill will upgrade into!

Come to think of it, I am getting a little hungry, it may be time to think about trying to hunt for some food.

I should also check to see if my colony has shown up for a drink!

Excited I rush back to the lake hoping to see my own kind there getting some refreshments but unfortunately it isn't to be.

There is still a wide variety of creatures drinking here but I can't see any ants amongst them.

Ah well.

Hopefully next time!

I guess the only things left for me to do is to either try and go hunting or wait and continue to train my mana.

Wait a sec...

What the hell is that?!

In the distance I can make out some shapes making their way over the crest of a small hill overlooking the lake. At that distance I can't see perfectly but I can see enough to think that I know what are.

And they aren't monsters!

Without a second thought I dive into my tunnel and start scurrying away from the lake and I don't stop until I make it under the roots of a tree.

What the heck are these humans doing here?!

Those were definitely some human shapes over that hill. Have they followed me here already?

That's way too quick! I came directly down a shaft, the most direct possible route, who knows how many winding tunnels they had to go through to make it to here?

Also, although I didn't get a perfect look at them, something about these humans didn't seem quite the same as the ones I'd seen in the tunnels above.

Perhaps their demeanour? Something about the way they'd looked? I'm not sure...

I'm torn, part of me wants to investigate but another part just wants to get the heck out of here.

Dammit! I can't just keep running every time I see a human! Even if they are super dangerous, I can rely on my stealth to protect me at least a little. There is only so much I can learn by following the monsters around, by shadowing these humans for a while I might be able to learn a lot!

Its decided then.

Deep breath Anthony!

Making my way down my tunnel I find an opening and carefully poke my head through. My antennae has almost fully regrown now, I'll probably need to get more food into me before it will begin to regenerate the final part. At least my senses aren't affected too badly.

Ok, the coast is clear.

Slowly I emerge above ground and enter full stealth mode, keeping my body to the ground and sticking to as much cover as possible.

Moving in a wide arc I aim to circle around the back of the hill where I saw those figures, keeping myself out of their line of sight as much as possible.

There they are!

I snoop a little closer until I can make out some more details, hiding myself in some thick vegetation with my antennae poking out.

There are five humans, all with their back to me as they gaze down onto the lake, or more specifically, the monsters grouped around it. With their attention focused away from me I take the chance to advance a little closer.

[Advanced Stealth has reached level 3]

I love you Gandalf.

I can almost make out the words they saying, although it doesn't seem to be in any language I can understand. They are talking to each other and gesturing down towards the lake. Oh wait, they seem to have agreed on something.

I freeze as the five figures separate and ready their weapons before one of them raises their staff and begins to focus.

Blazing runes form around the head of the staff start to rotate at an ever increasing speed until finally a massive fireball appears, burning brilliantly at the top of the staff.

I can hear the cry and roar of monsters on the other side of the hill as they notice this disturbance. It's almost as if the monsters are shocked that there would be any sign of attack here at lake!

Before they can react, the staff is swept down and the fireball rockets out of my sight.

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#### **Chapter 32: Seeking but not finding**

The fireball streaks out of my sight like a meteor, but I don't have to wonder what happened. Immediately a tremendous shake rocks the ground accompanied by a massive explosion, lighting up the area with a brilliant flash of light.

The roars and screams of monsters below immediately fills the air. That blast must have wounded quite a number and aggravated a heck of a lot more. I can see the other four humans are chuckling to each other as they brandish their weapons and begin to advance down the hill towards the lake, out of my sight.

The spell caster remains on the hill. I think its female? I'm finding it hard to tell, perhaps my eyes are still too poor to discern those details. She begins to prepare more spells, not quite of the same size as before, conjuring flaming lances out of thin air and sending them streaking into the monsters below.

It feels strange to see the peace of the lake broken in this way.

I mean, I shouldn't be surprised right?

Imagining that humans had come across a valuable resource, would they share it? If they had the strength to take and monopolise it, would they leave it be and allow others to use it? I don't think they would. They would lie in ambush and kill those who came. They would build fences and walls to keep others out. They would keep everything they could to themselves and grow their strength so that they could take and keep even more.

The monsters here in this place are very stupid. If we look at the stats in the system, I can imagine most monsters I've seen have a cunning less than ten. They can be tricked, baited and trapped easily.

For some reason they don't even think of taking and controlling the resource that is the mana lake. They don't even fight there, ensuring that they themselves and others can benefit. From a human standpoint, it's stupid.

Not to mention, what are monsters to humans anyway? Just resources, just experience. If I'd been born a human I'd be doing just what they are doing, right? I'd be attacking monsters and gaining XP, taking their cores to sell and celebrating.

But I wasn't born a human in this world.

I was born something else.

A monster.

And for some reason, seeing these humans here, breaking the peace of the lake.

It just really pisses me off.

I don't think too much, I just turn, take aim, and fire.

POW.

Sizzling acid streaks through the air directly towards the female mage. I've aimed directly toward the back of her head.

Splash!

The acid impacts a barrier of some kind, spreading over the surface to reveal a spherical, invisible barrier covering the mage and protecting her from harm.

Startled, the mage turns around, trying to locate this source of this surprise attack, but I've buried myself back into the vegetation, completely hidden from view.

I'm nervous that she'll be able to detect me using a spell of crystal like the guards in the upper cavern, but after staring hard at the terrain she returns her focus to the battle happening below.

POW.

Once again acid arcs through the air, splattering over the barrier. I can hear the acid sizzling as it tries to chew through that layer of protection.

The mage turns fiercely and launches a jet of fire from her hand, scorching the area behind her, sweeping the flame around like a flamethrower to burn away any cover close to her.

I'm not that close.

Still, the searing flames twinge my still healing antennae. Good lord Gandalf but that is hot!

I'm not even sure what it is I want to achieve with this intervention...

I just wanted her to stop bombarding the monsters below.

Well, mission successful I guess Anthony, what the heck are you going to do now?

The mage is observing the flaming wreckage of the forest immediately behind her, trying to identify the pesky source of these acid attacks.

However, I am not about to show my adorable face!

The mage is visibly irritated and not finding what she is looking for but her attention is dragged back to battle below.

Her allies are probably relying on her support as they fight the monsters and she cannot afford to have her attention diverted.

Now that her back is to me once more I take a little time to reposition myself, darting out of my cover to move slightly further away. I dive in amongst the roots of a nearby tree and turn to observe my target again.

She has returned to conjuring the brilliant lances of flame and sending them flying into her targets below. The lances begin as a hovering ball of dense fire before they streak forward, accelerating until they resemble a long spear of pure heat.

Just as she is about to cast once again I take aim and fire.

[Advanced acid shot has reached level 2]

Nice!

From this extended range my aim is less perfect but the majority of the acid still impacts against that invisible barrier, eating away at the mages defences.

What I didn't expect is what happens next.

With an audible shattering sound the barrier vanishes and the acid which had been covering the surface immediately drops through, a small portion of it falling directly onto the mage.

She cries in rage as the acid begins eating into her robes and stops casting her spells instantly, trying to brush away the offending acid and protect herself from further damage.

I actually didn't expect I'd be able to harm this mage at all, seeing my acid doing its deadly work against a human is somewhat more shocking to me than I expected it to be.

Without the support of the magic bombardment from above, I imagine the other four fighters below will be having a harder time of it.

My main objective has been accomplished in that the mage has stopped working so I decide to try and sneak out to see what is happening down by the lake.

Moving carefully I emerge from my hiding place and sneak about in a wide arc, making sure I'm a good distance away from the mage and the path her allies would take. I skirt around the hill and make my way back towards the side of the lake.

What I see is a scene of devastation.

Dozens of monsters have already been slain on the edge of the water, some had clearly tried to charge up the hill only to be killed by the mages' four allies without achieving anything.

The monsters on this side of the lake have already been routed, those prepared to charge and fight are dead whilst the more discreet creatures made good their escape as soon as they could.

The humans are picking through the bodies now, I can see them using long knives they had strapped to their legs to open up the creatures and search for their cores, cursing when their search fails or chuckling merrily as they pocket the shining, gem like material.

The mage has made her way down the hill to her allies and they laugh as she angrily speaks and gestures towards the hill, probably explaining the sneak attacks I had performed, causing her to be burned by the acid.

One of the others, a particularly large warrior looking type, pulls what appears to be some kind of bottle or flask from a carry bag on his hip and passes it to his wounded ally who gratefully accepts and drinks it immediately.

Healing potion?

Once they have completed their harvest of cores the five of them group up together and make their way over the hill, their silhouettes blurring into obscurity as they move further away and then disappearing as they leave altogether.

The edge of the lake and the distance up the hill are strewn with the dead and I feel numb.

As a former human and a current monster, what exactly is the morality of this world?

Regardless, there is a wealth of Biomass here and no monster would approve letting it go to waste. I'll eat first, then think later.

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#### **Chapter 33: A mutation sensation**

Before the remains faded and were claimed by the Dungeon I was able to gain seven Biomass, an unprecedented harvest. This is due in part to the three new creature types I was able to get a bite of, gaining three bonus Biomass and then filling my stomachs with a further four points.

[Basic profile of the Scintillam Simiae unlocked]

[Basic profile of the Serpens Canis unlocked]

[Basic profile of the Lacertae Terram]

Combined with the two Biomass I had already saved I have a total of nine to spend. Wanting to mutate in peace and still nervous those hunters may return I move to my previously prepared nest, although I have to widen it a little to fit my now bulging backside through.

Once inside I take the extra time to cover over the opening before spending my Biomass.

My intention had been to upgrade my eyes to +5, firstly to maintain my superiority in vision over the monsters in this area but also to see what the system would do once I mutated to level five.

Skills advance at level five and my hunch is that my body parts might also.

[Do you wish to improve eyes to +5? This will cost five Biomass]

I'm nervous for this...

... yes.

[At this level you may choose a mutation advancement, select from the menu]

Instead of the painful itch I was expecting the gruff but soothing tones of Gandalf ring in my mind once more.

Aha! So level five is a significant milestone after all! As it should be! I've spent fifteen Biomass on my eyesight now! Reward me more!

Once Gandalf has finished speaking a long list of possible eyesight upgrades appears within my mind. Seriously there is so much to choose from?! Heat sensitive vision, motion sensitive vision, mana vision, see through vision?!

Holy crap some of these sound awesome!

It takes me quite a while to sort through the list, consulting Gandalf who is able to elaborate on what each of the options does before I'm able to finalise my selection.

Despite how tempting some of the options are (Being able to see through stuff sounds pretty damn useful!) I eventually take a slightly more mundane option that will nonetheless cover a weakness and enhance a strength.

Focused compound vision.

I was very pleased when Gandalf explained what this particular mutation does as it was something I'd wanted for a while now.

If you think of the compound eyes that an insect has, rather than having one, large and strong pair of eyes that you can move around, compound eyes are hundreds of individual eyes that are always watching the same area but cannot move.



As I've mentioned before, this gives me a fantastic advantage of being able to watch almost every angle at once, especially since upgrading my eyes has caused them to extend further from my head, almost allowing to see backwards without turning around.

But my compound eyes are not as strong at focusing long distances as a humans.

However this mutation will help cover that weakness. Essentially, For each of my eyes a small section of compound eyes will gain the ability to focus further away, giving me a small field of vision that can see a long distance. I still can't move my eyes so to shift this field of vision I'll have to actually move my entire head, but with this upgrade I'll be able to take the best of both worlds, long distance focus, combined with surroundings awareness.

The ultimate eye!

Joyfully I confirm my selection with Gandalf.

OH GOD!

I FORGOT THE ITCH!

Starting deep inside my head and then boiling forward is the sharpest and most painful itch I could possibly imagine. Worse than anything before by a hundredfold.

I'm being stabbed!

Needled!

MY DAMN EYES!!!!

Fgarp!

I'm reduced to flopping about on the ground madly scrabbling with my legs but nothing helps.

And it goes on.

And on.

And on.

Before finally it stops.

[Would you like to advance your Acid to +4? This will cost four Biomass]

NOOOOOOO..... yes.

GODDAMIT.

Not nearly as bad but still horrible is the acid mutation. Since upgrading to +5 gives such incredible benefits I want to advance everything to this level as quickly as possible, since acid is already at +3 and doubles as my primary weapon at this stage, I'll prioritise it first.

[Be aware, at your current stage of evolution you can longer advance your eyes]

Hmm. So until I actually manage to evolve myself I won't be able to any of my mutations past +5 eh? Fair enough, with only two more levels I'll be able to evolve, I'd like to think it won't take that long.

Having spent all of my Biomass I decide to stay in hiding and train my Mana Manipulation once again, expending all of my mana in small puffs out of my mouth and completely draining my mental energy once again.

However I am rewarded for my efforts!

[Mana Manipulation has reached level 3]

I immediately open my status to admire my progress.

Name: Anthony

Level: 3 (core)

Might: 15

Toughness: 12

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 30

MP: 12

Skills: Digging level 5; Improved Acid Shot Level 2; Grip Level 4; Crushing Bite Level 1; Advanced Stealth Level 3; Chomp level 1; Tunnel sense Level 4; Mana Manipulation level 3

Mutations: Focused Eyes +5, Antennae +2, Acid +4, Legs +1, Mandibles +2, Carapace +1

Species: Hatchling Ant Worker (Formica)

Skill points: 0

Biomass: 0

With my mana expended and my mutations complete I'll rest here for the time being before making any further moves. With the addition of these human monster hunters this area is even more dangerous than I thought it would be, I have make sure I maintain my best condition.

When I eventually awake my mana has restored four points and I've digested a good amount of the food I'd eaten.

Poking my head out of my chamber I don't spy any humans or combat so I emerge fully and take a look around with my newly upgraded eyes.

Whoa.... This may take some getting used to...

The center of my vision contains a small space that almost feels like a zoomed in view compared to the areas of vision around it... and it isn't like the more long sighted areas blur into the lesser ones, there is a

clear marked distinction between them, which makes sense since the upgrade has essentially improved a small set of my compound eyes and the compound eyes don't really overlap in what they are looking at.

As I turn my head the zoomed in area sweeps across, always remaining in the center of my vision.

Gosh, it's a little hard to keep track of, having two different tiers of eyesight. Having said that, I'm still extremely pleased with my choice, I'll just have to adapt quickly. With this enhanced section of vision I can easily scan the opposite side of the lake and inspect the creatures on the other side, I can even see the Titan-Croc is still lazing about over there, probably sleeping.

I also quickly look about to see if any ants from my colony have made their way to the lake only to be disappointed. Still no sign of them.

Sigh.

Whilst I'm here I'll drink from the lake to restore my MP faster and then decide what to do next.

I'm not as inclined to stay here now, since I now that there are human hunters about who can rain fire down on me at any moment. I'd also like to gain XP and evolve as quickly as possible. With the added stats and strength from my evolution my chances of survival as well as my ability to gain Biomass will go up, hopefully by a lot!

With that done I'll feel a lot more confident following the pheromone trail into the forest to track down my colony.

Gaining information is probably the most important thing right now, as well as hunting for prey.

It might seem like an odd decision but I think I'll go and find the humans camp before I do anything else.

Since they are the most dangerous thing around here it may seem strange to want to rush towards them, but in reality, since they are so dangerous I want to know where they are and what they are doing.

With my new upgrades I can spot them from a much greater distance than I could before, otherwise I wouldn't take this course of action.

Not sure what I'll do once I find them to be honest, but at the very least I'll be aware of the location of the threat.

Ok! It's decided! Onward, to the human camp!

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#### **Chapter 34: Camping ou**

Moving with extreme caution I move away from the lake. I'm fair game out here and there are many monsters who would love a slice of this delectable pie.

In the war for survival stealth is still my most powerful weapon.

I've been able to gather quite a bit of Biomass, probably more than usual for a creature of my level, by operating as a scavenger, picking up the rewards when others have done the dirty work, but unfortunately this doesn't work very well for XP.

With the exception of the completely bizarre battle between the Dragon Wolf pack and the centipedes, I've had to carefully pick and choose my prey in order to get XP and that remains the case.

It would be nice if, on this trip I can successfully carry out a hunt on my own and defeat my opponent one on one.

I need the confidence as much as the XP, I won't be able to stumble across wounded opponents forever.

Keeping myself as hidden as possible I dart from cover to cover, keeping all of my senses sharp.

After that last stomach full I've returned to full HP and my antennae is showing no signs of the extensive damage it endured during my last fight, thankfully my leg had healed long ago.

This forest really is strange, it feels like every time I turn a corner I see something weird I hadn't seen before, like this bright orange fern looking thing. The tip of every branch has a thin tendril of an almost weblike material hanging down to the ground.

Won't be touching those!

Out of curiosity I flip a stone using my mandibles towards that plant but nothing happens. My wariness doesn't totally dissipate though. It's possible the plant will only react when something organic touches it.

Instead of standing about eyeing off a fern I keep moving.

I come across a few different creatures as I move in the general direction I saw the hunters leave in, a large pack of small, ape like creatures were congregating around a particularly large tree. I give those guys a wide berth.

If only I had the support of more of my kind! Seeing these large groups of smaller monsters really gets me down for some reason.

I also saw a few Dragon Wolf cubs on the prowl, yet another group I couldn't take on.

Feeling a bit stifled by my inability to find something I can fight I decide to do something I wasn't able to do before.

Climb a tree to scout around!

Finding a nice looking tree I use my claws and the potency of my Grip skill to swiftly make my way up and have a look about.

Ohhhh. I can see so much further now! Behold the power of my improved eyes!

Ah!

I can see a hill in the distance and there are a few shapes on it, possibly tents? This could be the camp of the five hunters...

I shall investigate!

With my destination in mind I continue to snoop about while making my way towards that distant camp.

I don't want to start any combat whilst those hunters are about, if they come over to investigate I'm going to be really dead, really fast.

Eventually I make my way to the foot of the hill and start to take things very slowly, darting from cover to cover and avoiding any sound or sign of monsters.

About half way up I can make out the shape of the human hunters at the top of the hill. They appear to be sitting in a circular shape on stones and bits of wood they've put together as chairs. Possibly they are sitting around a fire pit or cookpot?

I can see three separate tents arranged in a semicircle around their seating area, a few large back packs are strewn about the place along with some monster remains they've been able to hold onto somehow.

A line has been strung across two poles and at first I think they are hanging their clothes from it but when I stare a little harder I realise they are monster hides hung up to dry.

Clearly this group is here to hunt monsters and take cores and materials back to the surface for profit.

I settle into a good position and decide to watch them.

Now that I've identified where camp is I have a crazy idea forming in my mind.

Patience is a virtue to the monster, this is almost the first instruction in my creed.

After a few hours the humans stand and begin to gather equipment, preparing to head out once more. As I watch they strap on their armour, check the edge on their blades and banter back and forth.

Then something interesting happens, as a group they step out of the camp and once they are about ten metres away they all pause whilst the mage concentrates and prepares her staff. Once again she focuses for an extended period, runes appearing and rotating around the head of her staff before she taps the foot of the staff against the ground.

Immediately a few stones I hadn't noticed before flare around the outskirts of the camp glow brightly for just a moment before dimming again.

Once this has been completed the group moves away from the camp, heading towards the lake once more.

It seems they are just farming the lake, ambushing the unsuspecting monsters who have gathered, then returning here to wait until the lake has gathered together the monsters once again.

Fairly efficient way to slay monsters I suppose.

Just to be sure I shadow the group until I'm certain they are heading towards the lake, then I double back and head towards their camp.

You guys must have harvested a lot of monster cores eh?

Be a shame if something were to .... Happen to them.....

Gweheheheheh.

I'm very wary of the spell that was cast as they left however. I'm sure that if I walked towards their camp an alarm would go off or I'd be melted on the spot or something equally horrible.

There is no way I'm walking over that barrier.

I'm willing to try going \*under\* it though.

Behold! The power of Level 5 dig!

Working furiously, I start to dig with all of my might. I probably have a little over hour if we account the time to travel to the lake and back, as well the time to fight and scavenge. Plenty of time to dig myself a small tunnel.

My mandibles work at lightning speed, empowered by my Dig skill I can shift a surprising amount of dirt with each chomp and it isn't long until I'm dug under the magic boundary and into the camp.

Muahahahaha!

Curious, but aware that I don't have that much time I start to poke my nose into the tents to inspect the stuff. More bags and goods meet my eyes, it appears the mage and another member of the group are sharing one of these tents together.

I can see some food supplies stored in a bag but that isn't what I'm looking for. Using my mandibles I grab the bags one by one and try to shake them open, like an angry dog.

I don't have hands! How am I supposed to open them?!

After ten minutes of shaking and tearing at their bags I manage to find what I'm looking for. Buried in the bottom of one bag was a smaller leather sack sealed with a drawstring pulled tight.

Not tight enough to stop these chompers!

After I puncture a hole in the bag the precious wealth spills out in front my eyes.

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

Nice monster cores you have here guys... As they say finders keepers!

They have over twenty monster cores here in this bag and I start absorbing them one after another. After I take my fourth one Gandalf throws water on my burning joy.

[Monster core has reached capacity for your current stage of evolution].

Dammit Gandalf!

There are still seventeen monster cores left here! How could you do this to me! Despite running out of time I can't help but agonise over the incredible bounty before me.

Eventually, I push the cores together using my claws and try to scoop up as many as possible in my mandibles. Due to how cumbersome my jaws are and how small the cores are, I'm only able to grab four.

Although my heart is bleeding it will have to do.

Retreat!

Like a thief in the night I scamper away with my treasure, crawling through my tunnel and then running down the hill and back into the forest.

I don't go too far until I find a particularly large tree and dig a deep hole in an area shielded by the exposed roots. Inside I bury my pirates gold and carefully conceal my handiwork.

Hopefully I'll be able to come back for these after I've evolved...

Good thing I can't smile, otherwise my face would hurt. What a haul! Thanks, you stupid humans!

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#### **Chapter 35: On the hunt for XP**

Now I have even more reason to try and level up quickly so I can evolve. Once I've been able to do that I can reclaim those monster cores and use them to reinforce my own.

The longer they stay buried the more nervous I'll be that they'll get discovered, either by the humans using some magical means I'm not aware of or perhaps another monster will sniff them out somehow.

I have to evolve, I have to do it now!

First I have to find something I can hunt. Too many creatures are still beyond my means to fight, even though I've come a long way in many areas I still haven't gained too much combat strength. My heavy Biomass investment in my eyes doesn't directly increase combat strength, nor does a lot of my skills, or even my reinforced monster core that now stores 20 MP.

I can feel the monster core within, burning away with more intensity than ever before. It's also definitely increased in size. It almost feels like having a burning stone in your gut, but in a nice way.

Kinda...

It doesn't really matter though since I can't use my MP to do anything useful at the moment. Hopefully once my Mana Manipulation skill has reached level five I might be able to purchase new skills to unleash my magic potential.

For now I'll have to make do with my acid and my mandibles.

I do have a target in mind, at the very least, I know I can probably fight them and I know they are somewhere nearby.

It will be difficult though, they never fight fair.

Centipedes...

Back at the lake I saw a large tangle of the basic Claw Centipedes. If I can find a small group of two, possibly three, I may be able to take them on my own.

I'll have to be careful that none of the larger, evolved centipedes are anywhere around, I'm certain that those could crush me easily.

Having decided on a course of action I make my way back to the lake in a wide circle, I do \*not\* want to run into those hunters, even though I wish I could see their faces when they get back to camp.... Heheheh.

I manage to sneak back to the lake and appear essentially on the opposite side to where the hunters had been fighting, close to where the Titan-Croca is still chilling.

What is with this guy? Doesn't he need to go out and hunt? It's possible he already has, I suppose, whilst I was away. This guy seems to spend a massive amount of time relaxing regardless.

Luckily for me there is another pile of centipedes at the lake right now. Seriously, I hate the way these creatures pile on top of each other, constantly twisting and turning and they look like they're trying to tie themselves into a knot.

Moving around the gigantic Croc I move to the water and get a few sips in, filling my mana back up to full whilst I wait for the centipedes to move.

After perhaps an hour the pile almost spontaneously disentangles itself and the centipedes streak away from the lake at full speed, all headed in the same direction.

Caught by surprise I almost lose sight of the horrible things before I start running after them.

These guys are seriously moving!

Thankfully I don't have to stay quite as close to keep a good eye on them as I did before. I'm a bit nervous though, moving at this pace it's basically impossible to stay hidden from anything nearby. Those damn centipedes may be moving in a big pack but I'm not!

Thankfully we don't have to travel far before we come to raised mound in the forest. The mound is about two metres high and there are several holes around the outside. Almost without slowing down the bustling caravan of centipedes I've been following dive into the mound and disappear almost instantly, leaving behind an eerie silence.

Ooookay.

I guess I've found their nest?

Keeping a safe distance I circle around the nest, especially watching the holes. Thankfully I don't see any that seem particularly large, so there may not be any of the massive, evolved centipedes here. I'll have to stay careful, just in case one shows up.

I try to keep an eye on the nest and the forest at the same time, it's possible a hunting party could return to the nest from behind me at any time, so I have to be cautious.

After doing a full circle, I think the mound is probably five metres in diameter but I suspect that the nest itself extends underground. At least eight centipedes are in there already and I'm guessing there are actually much more than that.

Just imagining the vile tangle of legs and claws inside that nest gives me the heaves. I hate these things.

Which is exactly why I'm going to hunt them.



The next step is to wait. I don't plan to dive into the nest and trash the joint, getting myself immediately eaten. I'll bide my time until a smaller group leaves, either to visit the lake or to hunt. The odds will be against me but I'm hoping that in a two on one or a three on one situation I'll still be able to take them out, thanks to my human intellect and superior mutations.

I find a vantage point up a tree where I can remain perfectly still, maximising my stealth bonus and keep an eye on the nest. When my target number of centipedes leave, I'll be ready.

Yep.

Any minute now.

...

Do something you stupid bugs!

After a few hours of waiting there has been absolutely no action from this mound. What the heck are they doing in there? Actually, don't answer that.

Ten minutes later I get excited when I hear a noise but then I realise that a group of six centipedes is returning to the nest from the forest. Dammit!

After that a group of five head out towards the lake.

Then a group of seven head out to hunt.

Then nothing.

Then those two groups come back.

Then nothing.

Are you teasing me you idiot centipedes?! How scared are you?

Just when I'm about to burst with frustration a group of four clamber out of the mound, claws clacking, before they group up and move into the forest in single file.

Chance!

I'm too impatient to sit in this tree for days, waiting for the perfect opportunity. It doesn't seem like these guys are going to move in anything smaller than a group of four so I'll have to take this fight, even if it's a worse situation than I'd anticipated.

I carefully make my way down my tree and give chase. Thankfully the targets are not moving at their full speed as they move a little carefully, scanning for prey and trying not to attract too much attention.

I'll have to wait until they get further from the nest before I make a move. The last thing I want is to get swarmed by reinforcements.

The other thing I worry about as I tail along behind the convoy of disgusting legs is whether I should attack before they find their prey or wait and hope to battle a weakened enemy as they make their way back to their nest.

Normally you'd think that waiting would be best but my concern is that if I wait this group of centipedes will lose and all be finished off by a stronger monster, one that I won't be able to tangle with. If that were to happen then I would get completely nothing.

No. I have to take the more difficult path and fight the four of them before they encounter any other monster.

Having made my decision I don't hesitate and start to execute my strategy.

Accelerating quickly I move to a flanking position. The four centipedes are moving together in a line on my left. Remaining hidden from them I hurry forward, trying to get a little in front of them.

Ok, in position. Take careful aim....

POW.

Acid flies through the air in a powerful burst, launched directly from my business sector.

It isn't easy to hit a moving target at this range but my skills have stood me in good stead and the first shot connects nicely on the leading centipede.

The creature screeches to a halt and begins writhing on the ground whilst those following behind cluster around and fiercely clack their claws at the surrounding forest.

POW.

Second shot is launched directly from my commercial district and connects with another centipede who joins his ally rolling about on the ground, trying to minimise the damage from the sizzling liquid.

At this point I turn to face my opponents and start viciously clacking my mandibles, stepping into the clear to reveal my position.

Come at me!

[Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 36: Battle! For Darwin!**

It doesn't take long for the two uninjured Claw Centipedes to notice my provocation. Seeing a lone hatchling ant they are unafraid and charge towards me with all of the speed their many legs can muster!

Just as I'd hoped.

As soon as they approach I turn and run away, but not too far.

I speed directly to a tree I'd spotted earlier and upon reaching, grasp tightly with my claws and scale directly up!

The two enraged centipedes begin their ascent just behind me, clacking and snapping at my heels. In the distance their two injured allies are recovering and beginning to make their way towards us.

I turn my head slightly to eyeball the frenzied monster climbing the tree directly behind me?

Getting a good look are you centipede?

Maybe you shouldn't be quite so close to what some of my enemies have come to know as the Business Zone!

POW!

Point blank acid jets directly into the centipedes face!

The monster instantly shrieks and drops off the tree, rolling in the dirt at the base.

That leaves only healthy centipede on the tree with me. One on one. Ant to .... Gross bug thing.

The tree gives me a slight advantage in that the most deadly weapon of the centipede, the poison stinger, will be much more difficult to use here. I'm not sure they can support their bodies on this vertical surface if they were to let go with enough legs to bring the spike overhead.

Which means this will be a claws vs mandibles showdown.

The remaining foe continues to charge upwards, claws pinching and clacking as it advances towards me. The claws on this one seem a little larger than usual, must have mutated them, dang it.

Nonetheless I brace myself to meet the beast head on.

For a few seconds we nip back and forth, one advancing, the other retreating. I dart forward suddenly, but I lose my footing! A slight stumble at the critical moment!

There is triumph in the eyes of my foe, triumph and a burning rage!

The centipede lunges forward with fangs and claws, ready to deal the knockout blow.

When it strikes, it hits nothing but empty air.

Aha! The perfect feint!

My acting skill is over 9000, dumb centipede!

As the centipede attacks I wait till the last moment and then withdraw, my grip skill and strong legs giving me the perfect control on this battlefield.

Once the centipede is overcommitted I lunge forward with my mandibles wide open. Receive the bite of my raaaaaaage.

Once again my mandibles glow and close with extreme crushing force. Empowered by the chomp skill the bite easily splinters the carapace, crushing the centipedes head completely. Lifelessly it falls from the tree.

[You have defeated level 3 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

One down, three to go.

Thankfully the remaining, injured prey are not dissuaded by my display of insect dominance and continue to attack. In their simple minds this is still a three on one and the enemy is only a single ant. They charge up the tree together, each on a separate side.

This isn't good!

Scrabbling for grip I shift myself out onto a branch, moving away from the trunk. At all costs I mustn't get surrounded!

This branch isn't thick enough to allow for a stable grip, it's almost all I can do to hang on properly. Thankfully only one enemy is able to join me on this branch, his injured allies remain circling the main trunk hissing at me.

Slowly my new dance partner creeps out on the branch, claws held at the ready. It's only then that start to worry about our weight.

CRACK.

Just ruddy perfect Gandalf...

As the branch lurches the centipede and I are both rocked on our feet. But I recover first. Have at you centipede! Once more my mandibles stretch wide and crunch shut on a centipedes head, however this time I'm unable to deal fatal damage.

SNAP.

The branch breaks clean off the tree, sending me freefalling with a monstrous centipede trapped in my mandibles.

Twisting my body I use my momentum to swing the creature down into the ground before I land with a sickening thud.

Gah!

I think I broke something... I landed heavily on my side, but thankfully I was able to protect my legs. Quickly back on your feet Anthony! No time to daze out! Shaking off the impact I scramble my legs beneath me and zero in on the centipede who fell with me. Unable to protect itself when it fell it seems to have ruined several legs upon landing. Seizing the initiative I dash forward and finish it off with another bite.

[You have slain level 2 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

Two centipedes left.

The remaining foes are feeling less certain of themselves now, but they've little choice but to fight, since they have to come down the tree to escape anyway. From the way they move I can tell they want to come at me together and I'm not sure there is much I do about it.

Fingers and mandibles crossed, this is where it gets tough.

Moving cautiously the remaining foes descend the tree, claws raised to attack at the first sign of movement. For my part I watch every movement carefully, waiting for the correct moment.

Both centipedes reach the ground at the same time. I turn and run.

Flee!

The sight of my rapid escape seems to bewilder my enemies for a moment before they are seized with the desire to hunt and begin running after me with all of their strength.

Fools.

POW!

One more acid blast is unleashed when they close in on me, scalding and eating away at the closest pursuer.

Haha! Didn't expect me to recharge a shot in that time did you? Thankfully you guys are dumb enough to fall for the same trick twice!

Whilst the unlucky centipede tries to cope with his second dose of +4 acid the other shapes up to do battle. I've been able to create another one on one situation and I need to finish it before the other enemy recovers and joins the fray.

I decide to make a risky play. I don't want to drag out this fight and give my opponents the chance to bring their dreaded stingers into play, it's the only thing that could finish me in one strike.

My foe draws near carefully, feinting and posturing with jaws and claws.

I charge directly at it with full speed.

Bring it oooooooooooooon!

The startled centipede reacts swiftly, snapping forward with its claws and grabbing hold of a leg with one and gouging a scrape in my face with the other. But my momentum isn't to be denied.

With my larger and more powerful mandibles I dive forward and as I crash into my enemy I attack once more with my fearsome Crushing Bite.

[Chomp has reached level 2]

The centipede frantically tears at me with its claws, inflicting damage but it isn't enough.

Crushing Bite!

[You have defeated level 3 Claw centipede]

[You have gained XP]

The final centipede has suffered greatly from my two acid attacks and isn't able to put up much of a fight. I finish it quickly with a few more bites and the sweet tones of Gandalf ring in my ears once more.

[You have defeated level 2 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

[You have reached level 4. One skill point awarded]

I did it.

Victory!

I have triumphed over the hated foe. Four versus one and you still couldn't get it done you worthless crawlers! Haha!

I perform the best victory dance I can with my injured legs.

Checking my HP I've been reduced to 20 but I'm not too worried. After consuming this Biomass I'll be back up to full or close to it.

Speaking of which, these disgusting grubs aren't going eat themselves.

After consuming the lot of them, I had to take a break in the middle, I manage to gain four Biomass and something else unexpected.

[You have unlocked the intermediate profile: Claw Centipede]

I've finally consumed enough of these things to open up the intermediate profile eh?

Well, that is secondary. My primary concern is that I've successfully reached level four. Only one more level and I'll be able to evolve, finally! It's so close I can almost taste it!

I have to make plans.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 37: I hunt, therefore I ant.**

I climb back up into a tree and hide amongst the foliage whilst I formulate my next moves. Making things more difficult was my fat abdomen but after some sustained effort I got up there.

Ok then, the first thing to worry about is what to do with my skill point. I could upgrade Digging immediately, or I could wait, hold onto the skill point in case I buy something interesting once Mana Manipulation reaches level five.

After considering for a while I decide to ahead and upgrade Digging. After all, what sort of ant doesn't prioritise being able to dig!

[Digging -> Excavating. cost 1 sp: Increases the ability to shift large amounts of material in a shorter span of time]

Purchase!

If I need to save a skill point I can always keep the next one. I don't think I'll be able to max out Mana Manipulation before I level up again, after all, I'm going to keep on hunting centipedes until I get it.

Once I've evolved I'll feel a lot more confident following the trail back to the colony. Not to mention I can go and absorb those hidden monster cores.

Now the Biomass... Four is such an awkward number! Just one more and I'd be able to take my acid to +5! But using it all now and I could upgrade my mandibles to +4...

Arggh!

In the end I decide to upgrade my mandibles right away. That last fight wasn't so one sided that feel completely confident going into the next one without any real improvement to my fighting ability.

[Do you wish to improve Mandibles to +4? This will cost 4 Biomass]

Go ahead Gandalf!

My face is immediately on fire.

Just .... Why?

When the mutation is finally done my mandibles have become slightly larger and more menacing looking. These chompers are getting more and more potent all the time!

What sort of upgrade will I be able to get at +5? I can hardly wait. With my Biomass spent and my skill points used I'm almost ready for action. All I need to do is what for my digestion to kick in so I don't look like I'm dragging an expanded sack behind me as I move.

Whilst I wait I practice my Mana Manipulation a few more times, leaving myself gasping with something of a headache. I feel like it's getting a little easier to move my mana about but not much.

Since I'm already fairly well hidden up here I may as well take a quick nap to get myself back to full fighting shape.

I awake several hours later, ready for round two.

I carefully make my way back to the centipede mound and once again take up my scouting position high in my tree. If I spend any more time up trees I'm going to into a weaver ant. Those ants bend leaves and stick them together to create a nest.

I'll stick to digging.

For now though I play the waiting game. There doesn't seem to be much action, certainly no response that would suggest the members of this colony are upset that four of their number have gone missing. I would guess that it isn't unusual that occasionally a hunting group would disappear, never to return.

After waiting patiently for several hours and watching a few groups leave and a few others return another contingent of four departs the mound and makes their way towards the lake.

Oh ho!

Going for drink of that sweet, sweet mana water eh? I hope you enjoy that drink. For it shall be your last!

After the four targets have moved a good distance away I follow along behind them. I'm not too worried about keeping close to this group, since they are only heading to the lake I don't need to worry about them being killed hunting.

I'll set up an ambush and take on this group when they leave the lake.

Following along the trail I choose a large tree with a good view of the path the centipedes have taken, I want to see them coming, and I prepare to lie in wait.

Whilst I wait I decide to take a look at the intermediate profile of the Claw Centipede. Perhaps it has some useful information?

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

Might: 11

Toughness: 14

Cunning: 8

Will: 7]

Huh, so those are the base stats of the centipede? The might and the toughness are quite similar to mine but the cunning and the will are completely in the tank. I shouldn't be too surprised I suppose. I doubt every hatchling ant has a cunning as high as 25. My guess is that my high cunning stat is the system assigning a value to my human intellect.

This is my real trump card. Without my ability to reason and make planned decisions I would have been dead long ago. Not to mention I can easily exploit other monsters with extremely poor smarts.

About an hour later my patience is rewarded, the four centipedes are returning, once again moving in single file.

Ah, another visitor? Stay awhile! Stay FOREVER!

POW!

With my steady position and aim bonus there is no way I would miss a long centipede moving in a straight line. The arcing stream of acid lands accurately along the targets back. A perfect hit.

The centipedes are immediately enraged, posturing fiercely around their thrashing comrade.

POW!

Another direct hit! One more centipede is sent thrashing on the ground as they experience the terrible burning of my potent acid.

With two shots discharged I make my position known to the remaining healthy centipedes. Fiercely clacking my mandibles and waving my antennae at them provocatively.

Just like before, the horrible crawlers are completely provoked, rushing forward to consume this pesky ant.

As they reach the trunk of the tree they grasp hold with their many legs and start climbing, directly into my third shot!

POW!

Yet another centipede has received my acidic blessing! The unfortunate victim tumbles out of the tree, So far the plan is working just as well as it did last time!



Only one target remains on the tree with me. Just like before use my incredible acting skill to feint a slip and the centipede completely falls for it, allowing me to deal a decisive chomp!

Although I don't quite manage to deal fatal damage with this bite the cracked carapace and distorted shape of the monsters head are telling of just powerful that attack was.

Hissing in pain the centipede lashes out, catching a glancing blow on my head with its claws before I close in and deliver the finishing crushing bite!

[You have defeated Level 1 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

One down, three wounded to go.

Checking my status quickly as the remaining centipedes approach the tree I see I've only taken one damage so far.

Good to go!

The three centipedes charge up the trunk together but this time I don't head out to a branch. I still don't want to be surrounded however so I undertake another risky manoeuvre.

When a centipede is directly before me I directly let go of the tree.

Unable to react fast enough the centipedes can only watch as I directly crash into one of their number, biting wildly with Crushing Bite as I fall.

My victim and I both fall directly out of the tree, grappling and biting at each other before we hit the ground with a thump!

Desperately scrabbling to avoid the poisonous stinger I use my momentum to roll away and back onto my feet.

My opponent is still scrabbling back to its feet so I charge as fast as I can and attack with my mandibles.

Crushing Bite!

The mysterious white energy empowers my jaws as I crunch down with all of my strength.

[Crushing Bite has reached level 2]

[You have defeated level 4 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

And then there were two!

Now for the tricky bit. The remaining two centipedes stick together as they descend the tree. I don't quite feel like I have another acid shot in the tank yet, this is going to have to be done up close and personal.

As soon as they reach the ground the two monsters split apart and threaten me from two sides, thankfully it isn't hard to watch both of them at the same time. The advantages of compound eyes are showing now!

Not willing to give away the initiative I turn and charge towards the creature on my left.

The centipede rears back, threatening me with claws and jaws as I approach.

Then I stop.

Then I turn and charge in the other direction!

The monster who had been behind me froze in surprise. As I'd charged at its ally it had immediately raised up its rear section, revealing the deadly poison spike at the tip of its tail. The sneaky git had thought to creep up behind me as I was distracted, not so easy chump!

After hesitating a beat the centipede strikes forward with its tail, the stinger plunging toward me at lightning speed!

I'd been waiting for this!

Predicting the move I dig my claws into the ground and leap to the side, letting the deadly tail pass by my left side. Before the monster can recover and draw its tail back for another strike I turn and bite with all of my strength.

Carapace cracks and crunches under my force and the centipede hissing with rage. That tail is now useless.

Seeing the other opponent approaching behind me I waste no time and leap directly at the injured foe, taking injuries from its furiously grasping claws. Shrugging off the pain I deliver the final blow with another bite.

[You have defeated Level 3 Claw centipede]

[You have gained XP]

And now it's one on one.

Unwilling to give the final monster time to raise its poison sting I grit my mandibles against my wounds and charge directly at it. A quick status check shows that I still have half of my HP left.

Easily enough to finish this!

No tricks.

The centipede and I charge and rip into each other, mandibles crashing, claws scraping and grasping on carapace.

But my opponent is no match for my superior mutations and skills.

[You have defeated level 2 Claw centipede]

[You have gained XP]

Finally! Not enough to get level five, but at least another four Biomass has been secured.

That one was hard, I've been reduced to ten HP. Dents, scratches and cracks cover my poor carapace.

Can't waste a second, have to eat!

[You have gained one Biomass]

Om nom nom.

[You have gained one Biomass]

Wait, what is that sound?

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 38: Rudely Interrupted**

Perhaps it wasn't the best idea to fight and eat here, directly on the path the entire centipede nest takes to get the lake.

Before my despairing eyes another five centipedes are approaching, wriggling along in single file through the forest on their way to the lake.

When they see me, mouth full of dead centipede, they don't even break stride and immediately charge.

Hey! Let's take it easy fellas! Any chance we can discuss this? A peaceful resolution is always the best way forward, yes?

We can agree that I have eaten those of your kind, those are the facts. But can't we also agree that we are part of the circle of life? That all things are both predator, and prey?

Didn't think so.

Run!

I turn and fire off a quick acid shot, spraying across the leading centipedes' hideous maw before I bolt into the forest. How the heck am I going to deal with five centipedes? I've only recovered about half my HP! This isn't good, not good at all!

Any help Gandalf?

...

Damn you and your incredible pipe smoking skills Gandalf!

I could potentially make a break for the lake, it's possible they wouldn't fight me there, but being as injured as I am there isn't any guarantee that I'd be able to outpace them.

I'll have to fight this one out, and there is no way I can fight fair!

As I run through the forest I look around frantically for something I can use. Eventually I see a large tree with a wide trunk.

Before my opponents can gain on my I run around the back of the trunk, breaking their line of sight and haul myself up the tree as fast as I can.

Gogogogo Anthony pump those little ant legs!

Not far behind me the five centipedes arrive at the tree, the one I'd hit with acid lagging a little behind. They immediately start to climb after me.

I climb as fast as I can and then out onto the thickest branch I can find still low to the ground, before I turn and wait to see what the enemy will do.

When the centipedes see where I am they continue to charge out onto the branch, one of them crawling along the bottom the bough and the other on the top.

Just before they reach me I let go, throwing myself down to the ground.

Landing with a thud, I push myself back up and quickly check on the centipede response.

Unwilling to jump after me they start to backtrack and climb back down.

The centipede closest to the ground, far behind his allies is the one I've hit with acid. As soon as his head is in reach I dash forward and bite!

[You have defeated a level 3 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

One down.

Now run!

As the rest of the centipedes make their down the tree I flee, trying to obscure my fleeing form by running through foliage and behind trees.

When I find a particularly dense area of vegetation I dive into and then remain perfectly still. My best chance now is to let my advanced stealth do some work!

The rest of the centipedes aren't far behind me, but they haven't been able to see where I went.

The four of them move past me in a group, their own antennae patting about on the ground and their claws snapping angrily as they move.

A centipede has drawn within five metres of me but I don't dare to move. I barely breathe. If they spot me I'll get ripped to shreds! Please centipedes... stay stupid!

Without any sign of me they split up, scouting around to try and find me. One scurries off to my left, another to my right and one heads back towards the tree. One centipede remains here, scratching around trying to get my scent or some sign of my passage.

In a one on one battle I don't fear these monsters at all!

The clueless creature continues to search the area, turning this way and that as it attempts to locate me.

Once it turns its back to me I start to creep out of my hiding place.

Moving closer.

And closer.

And then I strike! Suddenly leaping forward I deliver a ferocious bite to the tail! I have to remove the chance of getting stung with this damn thing!

The centipede reacts slowly and I deliver a second bite to the tail, shattering the carapace and rendering it useless.

[Chomp has reached level 3]

Holding onto the tail I drag the centipede toward me, keeping away from its claws to deliver another bite behind the head, finishing it off.

[You have slain level 1 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

Still not level five?! Argh!

Still, from five centipedes down to three!

Desperate to regenerate my health I start eating as quickly as I can. Rather than being weighed down with Biomass my precipitously low HP is of far more concern.

Thankfully I'm not interrupted before finishing off the meal.

[You have gained Biomass]

Quickly checking I see my health has recovered to 16. Better than nothing!

With the centipedes split up and their numbers diminishing I feel a lot more confident. If possible I want to finish them all off, I might gain enough XP to reach level five and finally evolve.

I've managed to regenerate possibly two acid shots whilst eating, increasing my options. You want to try and hunt me? You foolish centipedes... you will all be my prey!

Chuckling to myself I head towards the left of my previous hiding place and it isn't long before I encounter the monster who had headed that way returning after a fruitless search.

Looking for me pal? I was here all along!

As soon as the beast gains sight of me it hisses, clacking its claws in rage before it charges, directly into my b-zone!

BAM!

Acid directly into the face!

The creature releases a horrible shriek of pain but I won't let it off, pouncing directly into its claws to deliver the finishing bites.

[You have defeated level 4 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

The voice of Gandalf is still ringing in my head when I pause for a moment.

Did I see somethi-

Oh heck!

In a very un-antlike move I hurl myself to the side and roll as a vicious tail spike plunges through the air where I'd just been. Another of the centipedes returned whilst I tangled with the my foe!

With its surprise attack having failed though there is no hope for this monster. Regaining my feet I charge directly forward, not giving it a chance to position its tail for another strike. Leveraging my larger mandibles I go directly for the head, chomping down twice to finish it off.

[You have defeated level 2 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

[You have reached level 5]

[You have reached the level cap, evolution menu available]

Oh yeeeeeeeeeees!

It's finally here!

Once again I do the best happy dance an ant can manage. Mind you, with six legs I can really get some moves going.

Calm down Anthony! Not in the clear yet.

I have to get my head back in the game. Celebrate once I make it into a safe nest and not before!

Looking around I see no sign off the final centipede. Not wanting to waste the resource I chow down on the centipede.

[You have gained Biomass].

Thankfully all this fighting has really greased my digestive process. Now that I have four Biomass I really want that one more so I can improve my acid to +5. I'll have to go back to the tree that I jumped out of, hopefully the centipede I defeated there is still available.

I sneak through the forest back to the large tree. There still isn't any sign of the last surviving centipede but the remains of the one I defeated are still here.

Thank goodness!

[You have gained Biomass]

Ok. Let me just say this, if I never have to eat one of these disgusting bugs again I'll be a happy ant. After stuffing myself with the horrible things I am completely sick of them.

I don't even bother going back to look for last two bodies. I'm completely stuffed anyway. It looks like that last centipede has successfully made an escape. Lucky thing!

I move back to the lake, making sure to stay on the Titan-Croca side of the water and scout around to locate my old hiding chamber.

I'm so excited to evolve I'm practically shaking! I'm pumped for this. It really feels amazing to have finally achieved this goal.

When I find my old hidey hole I widen up the opening and expand the chamber a little bit. It's possible that I may be larger after I've evolved and I don't want to squish myself to death underground during the process.

Renovations complete I hop down into the chamber and seal the entrance.

Time for some serious changes.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 39: Finally! Evolution!**

Finally! Finally I can evolve!

I'm emotional. It hasn't been easy, I've had to struggle and use my wits, but I finally made it!

Thanks for your support Gandalf!

Thanks for persevering, me.

Okokokok.

The first thing I need to do is spend my five Biomass to upgrade my acid.

[Do you wish to improve acid to +5? This will cost five Biomass]

Yes!

[At this level you may choose a mutation advancement, select from the menu]

Nice!

Once again a large list of potential options appears in my mind, so many choices! Searing acid? Concentrated acid? Freezing acid? All of these sound amazing. I have to be careful with my selection, I only get one shot at this choice and I don't want to make a mistake!

Some of the upgrades seem to have an elemental flavour, such as shock acid, for example. I'm not sure if I want to take that path. For sure they all sound powerful but I don't want my acid to become ineffective against creatures who are resistant.

I know that the Wolf Dragon cubs are resistant to heat damage, if I were to choose searing acid then my effective combat options would be greatly reduced. There are potentially monsters out there who are straight up resistant to acid damage, which means I have one potential weakness already, I don't like the idea of doubling that to two!

Reluctantly I put aside the awesome sounding elemental acid options and look at the remaining choices.

There's an option to increase the aerodynamics of the spray, greatly increasing my range... I don't really feel like I need that. I'm happy with my current range.

Another option keeps the acid burning for a longer time, basically increasing the duration that the acid will continue to do damage. More damage sounds nice, but having to wait a long time for it to work won't help in a pinch situation...

Oh ho! This option seems interesting!

[Restrictive Acid: This upgrade will cause acid to become sticky and solidify after being fired. This effect will make the acid adhere to the target and restrict their movement].

I like this one! Not only will the acid stick to the target, which will have the effect of increasing my overall damage, it will also gum up the enemy and make it harder for them to move.

If I spray one larger enemy three times then I might have a chance to slow them down and make it harder to move, if I spray a smaller enemy once they'll be much easier to avoid, increasing my crowd control options.

Confirm Restrictive Acid!

OH GOD.

The +5 mutation is on another level. Truly it propels the word 'itch' into a higher plane.

I shall endure!

I hope!

Finally the horrible feeling, deep within my abdomen begins to fade away.

Phew....

Ok.

Now for the big one.

Evolution!

[Would you like to use the Evolution menu?]

Heck yeah!

[Congratulations on reaching the maximum level for your current species. Evolution will allow you change your form and increase your stats as a monster.

Warning: evolving will make securing XP and Biomass more difficult as fewer rewards are given for preying on creatures less evolved than yourself.

Your evolution options are as follows:

- Mature Worker Ant (formica)



- Monster Worker Ant]

OK! A new option has appeared? What does this mean? Has maxing out my core unlocked a new choice for me? So my two choices are to become a fully grown version of what I am now, keeping my species as Formica or become a non-species specific monstrous ant?

I'm not sure exactly what the benefits of losing my species during evolution... but I don't want to consider this option, if I were to lose my species then I'm not sure I would be able to be accepted back into my colony, meaning I'd have to continue making it on my own in this dungeon and even my old kind would hunt me down as my enemy!

Too cold! That kind of life would be so damn cold Gandalf! I'm already sick of being wary and fighting every creature I see, it would be so nice if I could find something that didn't want to eat me all of the time!

I will remain as my current species and re-join my people!

Choose Mature Worker Ant (Formica)!

[Your monster core has been formed and enhanced, it will provide bonus energy to your evolution]

Aha! So forming my core and upgrading it will allow me to boost my stats further when I evolve?! I made the correct choice condensing my core after all!

[Due to high Cunning Stat, manual evolution has been unlocked, would you like to enable manual evolution?]

Uh... Yes?

Suddenly my mind is flooded with information and large window with evolutionary steps and stat allocation screens unfolds. Why the heck are there so many options! I was almost looking forward to not having to choose anything Gandalf you crazy wizard!

Alright then. Being able to personally allocate everything gives me more control over the evolution, that seems like a good thing all up.

Let's have a look then.

It seems I have a set amount of evolution energy which has been boosted by my core and I need to spend this energy to change myself during the evolution process? So if I had chosen not to use manual evolution... Gandalf would make all of the choices for me I guess?

Ok. So as part of my evolution I'll gain a new organ, the pheromone gland. Nice! Then I'll be able to lay my own trails, this will come in handy when I make it back to the colony, I'll be able to create new paths to let my fellow workers know where the food is and so on.

I get to choose one additional new organ... Ok. It feels kind of weird to be choosing new body parts for myself. Let's have a look at the options then.

You must be kidding.

A massive list including everything from extra legs, a second set of mandibles, wings to additional eyes, camouflage skin, stink glands. Even the Coral Slug mucous skin is in here!

Or I could add a tail... What would an ant even do with a tail?!

If you were to mix and match in here you could turn yourself into a truly messed up looking monster.

There are also lots of internal organs and glands to choose from, some of them I have no idea what they even do. The adrenal hyper stimulator apparently induces a kind of frenzied, berserk state. Sounds risky...

It takes about ten minutes to scroll through all the options before I settle on one I really like.

[Regenerative healing gland: can release a burst of healing fluid that will result in rapid regeneration for a small span of time]

With this baby I can trade hits with other monsters and still come out on top. It also provides incredible insurance for emergency situations. If I'd had this gland when I was found by the five centipedes whilst I still wounded I'd be able to regenerate a couple of points of HP and not be in quite such a dangerous position.

If I upgrade this gland to +5 I might be able to regenerate a lot of HP quickly and get some other cool options!

I lock in that selection and then turn to my stats.

So, currently my stats are:

Might:15

Toughness: 12

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

Looking at my Might first I have two options when I add stats. I can either increase my overall muscle mass, which will increase my size, or increase the muscle density which costs more but doesn't increase my size by nearly as much.

Next is Toughness. It seems like I can either increase the solidity of my external defence, or improve the robustness of my internal resistance.

For Cunning... whoa. Thanks to my already high Cunning stat, it is super expensive to increase it.

Checking my options I can improve my processing speed or increase my brain matter?! That's freaky! I can even add another brain?!?!

Right....

It looks like I can add smaller, self-contained brain sections to look after certain processes on their own. I can think of a few animals like this, such as an octopus has a separate brain to manage each of its legs. I

could attach one to my acid release zone back in my business district that would handle aiming for me. Effectively giving me automatic aim.

But doing anything here costs way too much. I'll leave it alone for now.

Improving Will can improve either mana manipulation or mana regeneration... Since my Will is already pretty high, this isn't worth it for now.

I decide to pour all of my evolutionary stats into Might and Toughness. For both of these I go for a 50:50 balance of both options. If I put all of my Might into just size increase, I'll end up with a higher Might score, but I'll be far larger, which will make sneaking around and scouting much more difficult. By taking the balanced approach I lose out on raw stats but regain in flexibility.

I hope.

When I'm done allocating this the manual process is finished.

Uh, I think I'm good to go?

[Would like to confirm your choices and evolve?]

Yes.

The world fades to black.

[Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 40: Check out my new ride!**

Do monsters dream when they evolve?

I can't even close my eyes, let alone properly sleep. When I evolved I had no concept of time or sensation. I can remember confirming my choices and then... nothing. All of my thoughts vanished. Almost as my brain had been completely switched off.

...

And then back on again.

Whoa! What the heck??

I feel... Different.

Um... this is weird. I feel like my core is gradually cooling, as if it had been on fire just moments ago. What is that about?

It's really strange. It isn't like as a human you could go to sleep and then wake up in a different body. Like, I can already tell I'm significantly larger than I was before...

Forget this! Check the status!

Name: Anthony

Level: 1 (core)

Might: 31

Toughness: 22

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 50/50

MP: 0/20

Skills: Excavation Level 1; Improved Acid Shot Level 3; Grip Level 4; Crushing Bite Level 2; Advanced Stealth Level 3; Chomp level 3; Tunnel sense Level 4; Mana Manipulation level 3

Mutations: Focused Eyes +5, Antennae +2, Restrictive Acid +5, Legs +1, Mandibles +4, Carapace +1, Regeneration Gland, Pheromones

Species: Mature Ant Worker (Formica)

Skill points: 1

Biomass: 0

Hmmm.

Hmmmmmmm.

Huuuu ha.

Hahahaha HAHAAHAHAHAHAHA!

Behold! Witness my power!

My strength has grown by leaps and bounds! I managed to more than double my Might stat and also increase my Toughness significantly! Evolution is clearly incredibly important to a monsters' growth in this place. After just a single evolution I've been able to make such a huge difference to my stats!

This is also due to my extremely wise decision to condense my core, as well as the good luck I had to reinforce it to the maximum before evolving. The bonus provided by the core was no joke and my evolution would not have been nearly so powerful without.

I have to make sure I max my core out before I evolve the next time as well.

Ha!

I haven't even had a look at my new self yet and I'm already thinking about the next evolution.

Out of the chamber!

Chortling with glee I did myself out of my seemingly much smaller chamber and out into the forest again.

Oh ho! The evolution has done a lot! I'm significantly larger now, probably twice as tall? Maybe the same for length? Which would make me roughly sixty centimetres tall and a bit less than two metres long?

Holy mackerel!! If you'd seen an ant that size on Earth you would absolutely lose your mind!

The size change has impacted in other ways as well. My Mandibles are significantly larger than before, with a little more edge in them, which should assist me in getting through enemy defences. I can also feel that my acid gland has increased in size along with the rest of me, possibly enough to store five or six shots at once!

I can also assume my stomach capacity has increased, allowing me to take in more Biomass at one time.

Ho boy! So exciting!

I jump about a little bit and turn on the spot, trying to get used to the feeling of my new body. I really feel much stronger than before! I can't wait to test it out!

Being excited is good but I need to chill out a moment. Checking my status again I notice that my mana is empty so I join the monsters around the lake for a quick drink.

The Titan-Croc appears to have gone out whilst I was evolving. I'll have to be extra careful since I don't want to run into him away from this neutral territory.

I take about half an hour to drink five times, taking it slowly and feeling out my new body.

What should I do first?

Considering how important it is to improve my monster core during an evolution, it's even more important that secure more monster cores.

So the first mission is to go collect my buried stash.

It doesn't take long to move around the Lake and head towards the camp again.

I try to stay hidden and not move on the path they took directly from their camp to the lake. Eventually I arrive at the tree where I buried the cores without incident.

Thankfully Gandalf doesn't have an issue with me absorbing all four of them and my max MP goes up to twenty eight.

Last time it took five cores to max me out, for this stage of evolution can I expect it to take ten or perhaps twenty?

No matter what, I have to get all of them before I evolve. The bonus is just too juicy.

With my first job done the next logical step for me is to test my new body in combat.

Although I hate to do it, I think targeting the centipede nest makes a lot of sense. I was able to defeat them before without evolving and the risk is low. Let's go see what I can do now.

It take me about an hour to make my way back to the centipede mound and up into my scout tree once more. I'm significantly heavier now so climbing trees is a bit more difficult ,but not much more since my weight increase is balanced with an increase in strength.

I'm not even sure how many centipedes I should take on at once now. I was able to do three, four with a bit of trouble. Five was a nightmare from which I'd had to turn tail and hide.

Let's try four...

Despite me picking on these centipedes quite a bit, their numbers don't seem much diminished, if anything there is more activity here than there was before. Large groups of up to ten are leaving and returning with a higher frequency than I'd seen not that long ago. What is going on with these guys? Population explosion?

I have to wait a fair while before a group of four heads out into the forest for hunting.

Once I spot them I don't miss the opportunity and immediately climb down to follow them.

I can move quite a bit faster now, with my longer legs and more powerful frame. I'm able to overtake the convoy easily.

For some reason I just don't feel the same sort of tension I did before.

I'm so much larger than these centipedes now. Where once they almost looked me in the eye I'm now able to look down on them comfortably. Almost like I'm bullying the tiny little things.

Bah! No sympathy for centipedes!

Once I get in front I don't waste any time and place myself directly in front of them.

Welcome! To your doom!

POW!

The first blast of restrictive acid is launched with superb accuracy, covering the lead centipede across its back and down one side.

Without watching the result too carefully I quickly line up and fire again.

POW!

Take that! The second centipede is directly struck as it moves forward to assess the threat to its ally.

Come at me you little grubs!

However, the uninjured centipedes don't charge forward as they did before. Seeing the large, evolved ant they hesitate and remain with their wounded allies, clacking their claws threateningly.

I probably have three more shots of acid left in the tank to be honest but instead of continuing the ranged assault I decide to get up close and personal. I won't learn anything if I just shoot them down from range.

The two centipedes I've already struck are struggling to recover their feet, the hardening, sticky acid is locking some of their legs and gumming up their body sections, even as it continues to burn them. They won't be able to fight for some time yet.

Fine then. If you guys won't come to me, I'll go to you!

I charge and quickly build up furious momentum. I can almost see fear in their beady, red eyes as I rush at them like an insect tank. I don't try anything fancy, I just barrel directly into the closest centipede, not giving it time to defend itself. The claws reach up and try to rip at my carapace but are simply not strong enough to do much to me.

I dart forward, my larger and deadlier mandibles glowing brightly. Crushing bite!

[you have defeated level 2 Claw centipede]

[You have gained XP]

One hit KO.

I didn't even target the head. My mandibles simply shattered the defensive carapace and tore the centipede clean in half.

Holy moly!

The remaining unharmed centipede has approached with its tail high in the air, ready to strike! Instead of backing away I launch myself forward, catching the tail out of the air as it begins to descend and severing it with one more ferocious chomp!

Then another to finish the monster off.

[You have defeated level 1 Claw Centipede]

[You have gained XP]

The two shot centipedes are still writhing on the ground, unable to even stand properly. I think my restrictive acid may be super effective against these centipedes, considering how many legs and segments they have it must be a nightmare for them if they get gummed up and can't move half of their body.

I finish off the other two with one bite each.

....

That was a demolition!

They couldn't threaten me at all! I could probably take on a group of five, even six!

This is the difference a single evolution can make! I might even be able to take on the massive adult centipede.

Even though I said I'd never eat, I won't let good Biomass go to waste.

After eating all four of them I manage to gain two Biomass.

Looks like my ability to gain Biomass from these guys has at least halved. This is the penalty for being an evolved creature attacking those weaker than them.

I'll save these points for now until I can build up to five and upgrade my mandibles. Now that I've become this strong I feel a bit more confident now.

At least, confident enough to follow the pheromone trail. Time to find my family!