

## Chrysalis 431

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#### Chapter 431: Dust to Dus

Lightning crackles through the air as Tiny unleashes his full arsenal. His fur floats in the air as he positively writhes with snaking lightning. It curls around his arms, sparks of his ears and runs down his huge silver back. As the creature continues to coalesce around us, Tiny begins to blast lightning from his fists. Every time he swings his mighty hands a spear of lightning would fly out and annihilate one of the blobs. They scatter and begin to form once more, but each time a little smaller than they had been before.

Even so, dozens of clumps are still forming, each one now the size of a person. It's creepy as heck. These things pulse and shift all around us, on the ceiling, the walls and the floor of the tunnel in front of us and behind. Just when I start to wonder how the monster is supposed to attack us, the closest blob flexes, changing its shape and revealing a mouth ringed with razor sharp barbs.

[Look out! Mouths!]

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I step backwards but Crinis has already acted, lashing out with her tentacles to seize the offending shape. Her limb wraps around the blob and tightens, crushing it in an instant. It doesn't seem to slow the monster down though, as the individual particles begin to gather once more.

[It's on me!] Crinis cries and I realise that the dust which had stuck to her tentacle was slowly creeping its way towards her main body. [Get off of me you filth!] she roars and whips the coated limb through the air, flicking the dust offensive dust away.

[Tiny's hurting it, but not enough. Do you think we should run for it?] I call to my pets.

"ROOAR" Tiny bellows, his face alight with glee as he blasts out electricity everywhere in the tunnel.

[How dare you touch me you traaaaash!] Crinis screams as he tentacles begin to fly in all directions, scattering the blobs around the tunnel.

Ooookay. So no tactical retreat? It doesn't look like it's possible at any rate. In front of us, and behind, the blobs in the distance had merged together to block the tunnel. Before me lay a pulsating wall formed from the dust particles and the same scene lay behind me. As I watch, the wall shifts and a huge bulge protrudes, taking the shape of a circular mouth, massive in scale, with the needle like barb teeth.

What the heck is this monster?! My mana sense is telling me that the monster is all around me, as if I were already in its stomach. The feeling isn't great. And if I'm not mistaken, the more time passes, the faster the thing is able to move. As if it's waking up, or perhaps the more its able to bring itself together, the more control it has over its body.

Movement is everywhere, mouths and teeth are starting to protrude from every direction, faster than Tiny and Crinis can destroy them. I'm frozen by indecision. How do you fight something like this? Biting

won't work! I don't think gravity magic will work. I could hose it down with water, will that do anything?! Should I try and connect to its mind? I just don't know!

Seconds pass as I try to settle on a plan of attack but the decision is taken out of my claws as the yawning mouths extend to try and consume me. My antennae blaze with warnings of attacks coming from all sides and my nervous system lights up like a Christmas tree. Without having any time to think, my reflexes fire, informed by my defensive Skills. I dodge two bites and allow another to scrape across the tough armour of my carapace on my side. I flinch in pain as the teeth gouge into my exoskeleton. These teeth are something special, yikes! I'll need to be careful.

And to make things better, the giant formations that block the tunnel in front and behind have begun to advance on us, attempting to squeeze us in the middle. Come on, Anthony! There has to be something you can do! Gritting my mandibles so tight they grind against each other, I shunt control of the healing mana construct to one of my weaker sub-brains. It's going to push that mind pretty hard but this will free up resources.

I don't think water is going to work on this monster and I don't want to take a chance on mind magic. Tiny's lightning was able to burn away small chunks of the creature, maybe fire will help? I quickly throw up the menu and buy the Fire Mana Affinity Skill as my two free sub-brains start to throw together the fire construct. It takes precious seconds to puzzle out the unfamiliar shape, time I don't have.

[Tiny! Time to go all out! Crinis, you too!]

Tiny's been having the time of his life. He's been blasting out wave after wave of electricity out of his fists at every blob he can see. Anything that comes close to him he scatters with his hands directly. Every blast of lightning illuminates the savage grin that twists his features and reveals the fiery light in his eyes. At my words he howls bright and pours out the last of his reserve of lightning filling the air with chittering sparks that fly in all directions.

From her place on my back, Crinis expands to her full size, her mouth opening to reveal the void she carries inside, ringed with teeth. Dozens of tentacles extend rapidly to fill the tunnel, the thick limbs whipping through the air so fast they blur to slap and tear at the dust wherever she can reach it. It slows them down, a little. The individual pieces of the creature continue to lunge toward us and I rely on my defensive skills to dodge or deflect their bites, whereas Tiny and Crinis slap the enemy away more directly.

As fast as the pieces are scattered, they come together. The entire tunnel is full of the beast now, no walls, floor or ceiling, only congealing and amassing mouths that gnash and leer at us from all sides. The situation is looking grim as the fire mana construct snaps into place and I immediately feed mana into it. My antennae twitch and my limbs fire as the mouths descend from all sides. It looks as if the tunnel is collapsing as darkness fills my vision on all sides.

Omen Chomp!

The dark, ethereal mandibles punch a hole in one side as I leap through it, the rest of the teeth scraping on my carefully angled armour. I activate my mediation skill in an attempt to push away the chaos that threatens to wash away my calm. Take the fire mana, shape it, quickly.

It glows a deep red and my minds seize upon it, weaving it and shaping it. The knowledge of basic fire magic has been trickling into my brain since I purchased the skill and I grasp onto a shape that I know well. The water cannon spell, it has an equivalent here, and hopefully it works the way I want it to.

The monster is all around me now, visibility is gone. I hear Tiny bellow and roar from nearby and Crinis the crunching sound of Crinis slamming her limbs into the rock echoes from above as I weave my spell.

[Duck!] I cry.

A torrent of fire erupts from in front of my face, so bright and so hot that my eyes and antennae flare with pain. Actual light and heat! I didn't realise how much I'd missed it down here! Greedily I feed mana from my core into the fire magic construct, taking hold of the magic and pouring it into my spell.

As the first tongues of flame lick against it the creature unleashes an ear splitting shriek! The form that presses in all around me shudders as I direct the fire to burn it. Fire was a good choice! It's super effective!

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#### **Chapter 432: The Deep**

The monster thrashes this way and that as I pursue it with my flame thrower. Ha! This feels awesome! I didn't realise how cold I was until I had an enormous fire exploding from right next to my face. Whoops! Need to be careful not to singe the antenna! I snatch my two sense organs back before they dip dangerously low into the jet of flame. Mana flows out of my core at a fast pace, but I'm absorbing plenty of energy through my feet. Interestingly the dark attributed mana of the strata is what's sucked through my legs, but when it arrives at my core it's changed back to pure, unattributed mana. My suspicion is that the core is unable to accept any type of mana other than clean, untainted energy.

Luckily, my reserves are being replenished just as fast as they are being expended, which means, thanks to the hard work of my two sub-brains, I can keep this flame thrower going forever! Gweheheheh!

Burn baby, burn!

I leap left and right, blasting the monster all around with the jet of flame as its shrieks and cries pierce our ears. All around us the creature shudders as the fire incinerates its strange body. Roast you uppity monster! Be burned by the flames of your own gumption! Also by me. I don't want you to think that I'm not part of this situation, I absolutely am. And I'm taking a great deal of joy in it.

Fire does appear to be the creatures Achilles heel. The body that we struggled to damage effectively before has now become kindling, quite literally ash in the wind. Everywhere the fire touches the monster melts away, the air filling with the scent of burning flesh.

After ten more seconds, the monster has had enough. The blobs are all shifting away from us, revealing the stone and soil of the tunnel that had been concealed beneath. Far more sprightly than it was when it had first awoken, the creature still isn't very quick. Luckily for us.

[Don't let it go, guys! We need to destroy it, seize its core and feast on its Biomass!]

[Agreed!]

[Harr!]

Still fired up (heh), my pets are eager to chase down the creature as it attempts to flee. Gleeefully keeping my flamethrower active, we chase one half of the monster down the tunnel in the direction we came from. After roasting it all to pieces, we turn around and race to catch up with the other half, still busily glooping its way down the tunnel. Burn sucka!

[You have slain level 41 Venator Atramento.]

[You have gained experience.]

[You have reached level 15. One skill point awarded.]

Take that! You want to ambush us? Want to feast on this incredible diamond hide? No chance! MUAHAHAHAA!

There isn't much left of the monster after I'm done burning it to a crisp. What's left doesn't look particularly appetizing either. What had originally appeared to be tiny specks of dust are actually little bloblets, more fluid than dirt. Each individual piece is a tiny drop of shadow flesh that somehow the creature is able to spread out and control even if there is no connection to its main body. This is something I've not seen before, it was certainly creepy as heck. All that remains is gloopy, wet looking mess of Biomass that we reluctantly chow down on.

[Venator Atramento, Ink Hunter (V). This monster uses its ability to disperse its body to prey upon unsuspecting victims. Extremely difficult to defeat through physical violence, the creature has a fearsome ability to prey on those weaker than itself.]

Oh, I'm sure. When it picks on someone stronger it gets cooked and eaten! The Biomass proves to be quite rich as well. There isn't as much as we'd like but we share it out. The final surprise comes when we get to the end of our meal.

[Compatible rare core detected. Would you like to absorb it, or reconstitute the monster?]

Hmm. I think we can hold onto this for later. I let Tiny keep the core. He stashes it somewhere in his fur, I'm not sure exactly how, one moment it's in his giant hand, then he reaches up to an armpit and the core is gone. Whatever, I'll take it. The creature was actually tier five? Interesting. I guess that explains how weird it was. If it had been tier two or three, I'd be terrified of what it would look like after a few more evolutions.

After resting briefly, we continue our journey through this branch tunnel. Funnily enough there aren't many other monsters around this section of tunnel, probably preyed upon by our friend the hunter. In short order we make our way back to the main tunnel and I decide that we'll stick to one side and follow it. The tunnel continues to shift downward but at the same time we are descending, we are trending in the direction of the colony. Once we get back to underneath it, I plan to rise up the tunnels, scout out the lay of the land and reconnect with my family. This way I can hunt out any threats and do the heavy lifting for the colony as they start to take on the second strata.

After a few tough fights and a whole heap of easy ones. I think we're ready to see what this Strata really has to offer. I want to get into an expanse, see what we can see. We continue our journey for another day. We had to shift off to a side tunnel and carve out a space in order to rest. The sweet embrace of

torpor was most welcome to me, and I rested secure in the knowledge that Crinis was watching over me.

Naturally I had to top Tiny off before I could rest, and then again the moment I awoke. The invasive mana is still rampaging through his body, causing damage constantly. My healing skills have improved thanks to the constant exertion but not yet enough to increase the rank of the skill, the only thing I can think might help me remove it. Regardless, refreshed and ready we continue our travels, fighting when we need to and carefully avoiding the many forms of venomous plants that are becoming more and more common.

After another six hours of delving there's a notable change to the feel of the mana in the air. Our tunnel has curved this way and that but always sloping downward. I've noticed a few tunnels coming together, merging and I suspect that I know why. Carefully, with all senses attuned, we advance and it isn't long before the tunnel floor drops away, the ceiling rises impossibly high and a vast, open space of incredibly dense dark mana yawns before us like an underwater ocean.

This... is not what I expected.

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#### **Chapter 433: Wide open spaces**

The expanse before me is truly deserving of that name. It's impossibly vast. How the heck can such a space exist underground? Is this planet even stable? I start to become nervous about the ground beneath my feet. All of this is possible with mana, be cool Anthony. Magic planet is magically stable despite being hollow like a piece of Swiss cheese.

My eyes aren't able to penetrate the dense Shadow mana before me, visibility is only twenty metres at best. But to my mana sense, I can trace the veins that line the walls as they rise, and rise, and rise above my head, and fall the same way below my feet. The space in between just feels... empty.

[Well. We found our first expanse guys. Let's head on down and see what we can see. Surely there's more to it than this.]

With Crinis riding on my back and Tiny climbing beside me we begin to make our way down the wall. It's steep and my increased size doesn't make life easy. I really need to continue to level up my grip skill if I want to be able to climb like this. I firm my resolve. It's time to go back to climbing on the ceiling, or at least the wall, as much as I can. The skill seems to level up faster now that I'm heavier, so I'll hopefully see some progress pretty quick.

Down we climb. The stone and rock is ice cold beneath my claws, much like the air around us. Insects don't like the cold much, ants are known to hibernate in winter, entire colonies going dormant and hanging out in their nests, waiting for warm weather to return. I have to admit that I feel a sluggishness that creeps into my limbs. But my Will is strong and I fight it off. It's going to take more than cold to slow this ant down.

Holy shadow mackerel! What is this I can sense? Out in the open space, above my head I can sense a gigantic lifeform twisting through the air. No wait, not twisting. It's swimming? Seriously? The monsters' mana is dense and powerful, a strong core is definitely found in the heart of this beast. Not that I'm super tempted to fight it or anything, I can't even see it! It turns back on itself like an enormous snake, or elongated whale before it speeds away, vanishing at the edge of my perception.

If I had lungs I'd let out a tense breath. Yikes! That is one heck of a monster! Well, there must be more stuff here, since there's no way a creature could evolve to that kind of size without feeding on something. A heap of something! Hopefully we can avoid whatever the heck it was until we learn a little more.

[Crisis, did you get a good look at that creature?]

[Yes, Master. It looked strong.]

Tiny immediately turns his head towards us before snapping it up to the air. He peers into the dark but quickly becomes frustrated, his ears twitch as his irritation builds.

[You can't fight it anyway you moron! It basically flies, you can't reach it!]

He growls, his ears drooping in disappointment.

[I'm going to 'forget' to heal you one of these days,] I threaten him.

A wide grin splits his face and he flexes his arms impressively at me, disregarding my anger. I can't help but chuckle at his antics. It's hard to stay mad at him.

[The monster was very large, and strong. But that isn't all, I sensed strong magic in it.]

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[What is shadow? Or poison?]

[No, it was Death.]

[Well, butts.]

Death aligned creatures are just ... no. The rabbit was bad enough, I don't want to deal with some undead sea leviathan of darkness! No part of that sounds good! But I'm not willing to turn back. Whatever challenges we face, we'll smash through directly. What sort of ant shirks hard work?

Ignoring the fact that I am avoiding my work at the colony right this moment, we continue to descend and after thirty more minutes of claw cramping wall climbing, I notice the wall is starting to curve toward level. What's more I can sense, rather than see, large obstructions rising from below. As we get closer I can see that they are massive versions of the tiny corals and vegetation that we were able to see in the tunnels outside. More climbing reveals that these corals climb almost a hundred metres into the open air above, rising from the dark soil of the expanse floor that finally comes into view.

The scale of this place is really hurting my head. I think it might be as much as a kilometre high, maybe even more. It's difficult to say, I can neither see nor sense that far, but if we assume that we entered the

expanse at roughly the vertical halfway mark, then a kilometre sounds about right. Which feels insane, but I'm going to suppress my Earth logic. This is Pangera, there's magic for goodness' sake. What's a giant evolving ant monster to say this would be impossible?

When we reach the bottom, it's a surprising scene that we see before us. Thick and tall fronds wave to the movement of a wind or current that only they can feel. Enormous corals tower taller than trees and form an elaborate maze of tangled stone that looks impossible to navigate. It feels like a reef for titans, but instead of a riot of bright colours the palette is flat and grey. The leaves are dark, almost black and the corals are muted whites, as if bleached. Here and there I can detect life, monsters, flicking in the gaps, feasting on the plants or on each other. And somewhere above the leviathan swims, perhaps with other creatures that treat this world of shadow as a vast ocean.

Alright Anthony, time to get your game face on. Let's shake it out. I flex each of my six legs and rattle my body to try and loosen any kinks in the system. Brain check. All of the brains appear to be on task and working hard. Central sub-brain is in control of the healing construct, left sub-brain is healing Tiny up, right sub-brain is practicing external mana manipulation. Main mind is checking on the others. Nice. Stamina feels good, Skills are locked and loaded, core is full and mana gland is topped off. We're ready, we're pumped up.

Finally, we're going to be let loose in a hunting ground that's close to our level. No more pesky experience penalties or Biomass reductions! When I think of the Skill level ups and mutations that await us my mouth starts gnashing at the air uncontrollable. My thirst for adventure is unquenchable! My appetite for levels can never be sated!

[Tiny? Crinis? You ready to head in?]

In response, Tiny just nods and grins. Crinis lifts herself from my back and begins to crawl forward, supported by her tentacles.

[Master, I suggest you allow me to go first. I'm better suited to the scouting role here.]

[Well, I have to admit that you're right. Lead the way Crinis. Just make sure you don't take all the prey for yourself!]

[I wouldn't dream of it, Master!]

[I'm sure.]

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### **Chapter 434: Reunion**

Commander Titus was a stoic man with a reputation for an Iron will and an unbreakable sense of duty. And it was true, he'd lived a hard life and had made hard choices without hesitation. Where others would shirk their responsibilities, Titus shouldered his burden with pride. For this, he was both loved and respected. The commander knew his reputation and did his best to live up to it. Square shoulders and a stern countenance were synonymous with Titus, as if his face and body had been carved from granite.

But if there was one thing that could push him to the edge of cracking, it was the person he saw coming toward him now.

The Legion had marched hard back to Railleh as the wave had waned and the shocking news of Garralosh's demise spread. The Legionaries had been in dire need of rest, but not all were able to receive it. As the technical crews, smiths and enchanters laboured long to repair worn weapons and armour, scouting parties had been dispatched to ascertain the environment within the Bulwark. Messages were sent to every outpost, ritual spells of communication were enacted to reach out to the wider Legion network and now they awaited word from their superiors.

With the wreckage of their homes weighing on their minds, Titus and his troops had been unable to rest. After the centurions had found the third party attempting to escape the barracks and venture to the surface, Titus had considered relenting and allowing a team to establish an outpost on the surface. When the fourth escape party had contained a good number of centurions, Titus finally gave the order that he himself would lead a full column to the surface. All advanced gear was left behind, only leathers and basic weaponry allowed. The soldiers were eager to be away.

Despite their victory in the lines, the soldiers' mood was grim. They knew roughly what awaited them above. A ruined city, a destroyed nation. How many of their loved ones had survived the slaughter? They pushed hard and Titus marched at their head, as relentless and unyielding as a stone. The Legionaries stuck to the main paths, as direct as they could be. What monsters they found were ruthlessly crushed.

On the fourth day, as they were climbing up the main tunnel, they'd heard footsteps coming down. Titus raised a fist, then pointed to his left and right. Immediately archers had moved to covered positions along the walls of the tunnel as shield bearing legionaries formed up beside him. There they had waited as the sounds of approach grew louder. Humans, by the sound of things, a small group, ten or less.

Titus' ears were far from normal. At his level, with his skills and class benefits, he was barely the same species as those who dwelt on the surface. He could clearly hear the footfalls of those approaching, though they were still two hundred metres away. He could make out the tone of their voices, almost the words as well. Then he heard a woman speak, harsh, cutting, and the other voices grew quiet, their steps more careful.

Titus nearly dropped his axe. He knew that voice, would recognise that wasp tongue whenever he heard it. It was all he could do not to break ranks and run forward. To the soldiers around him it merely appeared as if he grew as still as a winter pond.

Ears strained hard, Titus held himself back as the other group came into view. When they did, his eyes narrowed. Farmboys and merchants' daughters with shoddy gear, no levels and little training. In normal times he'd roll them up, smack their heads and boot them out of his Dungeon, but these were not normal times, and the hard faced woman in stout leathers leading them demanded his attention.

Her name was on his lips but he dared not call it out, lest his will break and he ran to his daughter. He wouldn't stand for such a break of decorum, besides, if he tried Morrelia might just punch him. She wasn't one for public displays of affection.

"Is that Morr? Morrelia! Hey! Longtime no see!" A male voice called out.

CRACK!



The stone beneath Titus' feet shattered into dust, sending a cloud of stone chips flying in all directions. Shouts of alarm and confusion arose but Titus himself hadn't moved, instead he remained at ease, his hands clasped behind his back and his axe strapped across his shoulders.

To one side, Donnelan cursed his own stupidity. How could he be so careless as to call out to Morrelia in front of the commander? It was well known that the legendary commander of stone doted on his daughter, even if he never let it show. The young Mage felt ice cold sweat rolling down his back as he felt as if he were grasped in a giant fist. He prayed that his voice hadn't stood out too much and wasn't recognised, otherwise death might come for him!

Indeed, Titus had recognised Donnelan, and his mind seethed with the torturous drills he would put the Legionary through the moment they got back. As she approached the Legion force, Morrelia couldn't help but sigh. She'd hoped to run into her father and her former comrades here, but it was awkward. And she knew exactly what Titus was thinking about at this moment. Some things never changed.

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The Legionaries waited patiently as the smaller villager force approached. When they drew close enough, Morrelia stepped forward as the representative and moved to greet the Legionaries. The villagers themselves were quite overawed. The legendary Abyssal Legion lived up to its reputation. To these people's eyes, despite the glorious victory they'd achieved, these soldiers looked like heroes, returning to the surface after defeating who knows what horrors in the deep.

"Commander Titus," Morrelia greeted her father.

"Daughter," he returned, rejecting the formal tone she attempted to set.

He saw his daughter's eyes narrow at that and he felt his heart swell with pride. She was as stubborn as he was. She'd taken more after him, less like her mother. It was a curse and blessing.

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#### **Chapter 435: Reunion Part 2**

"Morr, you seem well."

"Father, you seem to be in good health also. Not that I should be so surprised."

Titus, frowned.

"What is that supposed to mean."

Morrelia rolled her eyes.

"Only that you're basically unkillable up here. Other than Garralosh, what monster could possibly harm you in the first or second strata?"

Perhaps it was foolish, but Titus still felt pride that his daughter recognised his strength. In his mind, she was still the little girl who would follow at his heels, striking fiercely at his back with wooden training swords. She was a warrior born, a lion cub, ready to be a legionnaire from the moment she opened her eyes.

"I'd never seen you happier, than you began your training. You had a fire in you then, you were like an inferno. Everyone was warmed by your zeal," Titus said wistfully.

Morrelia looked up at the commander, confused.

"It's unlike you to reminisce about the past, father." She chuckled a little bitterly. "We both know that to be a legionary was everything I'd ever wanted, to follow you and mother into service. And we both know why I left. That's history now."

Titus cocked an eyebrow.

"You're barely into your twenties, far too young to be talking about history." His voice softened. "We would have you back. At any time. Just say the word and I'll make it so."

"That's against regulations. I'm a deserter!"

"Damn the regulations. You are my daughter. If the Legion wouldn't have you then I'd quit myself."

Morrelia's eyes widened and she dragged her father away from the crowd toward one side of the cavern. The Legionaries, disciplined and reserved, had not batted an eye at their commanders words and the villagers had been too far away to overhear them. But how could she allow the commander, the hero of the Legion in Liria, to speak such words out loud.

"Watch what you say!" She hissed. "If the people found out you would abandon them..."

"What people?" Titus asked. "Tell me truly, daughter, what is left above ground? Is there any kingdom left? Do not doubt this, even if every one of them were still alive, I would put you first."

Tears sprung up in Morrelia's eyes.

"Why are you saying this now? Has something changed?"

Titus shrugged his broad shoulders, his stony countenance as unreadable as ever.

"Things are moving Morr. There's change in the Dungeon, I can feel it. First this wave, then Garralosh getting killed. I don't know what, and I don't know why, but I have a feeling that things are going to get messy. I want you to be safe."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know you can. But I don't know what's coming. This old man would rather you were close by, where I can help if you get into trouble. It's a father's right to worry for his child."

Morrelia gripped the hilts of her two blades as she stared up at Titus.

"There's more, isn't there? What aren't you telling me?"

Titus stifled a sigh and turned to look back at the Legionaries assembled and waiting for him in the centre of the tunnel.

"With the kingdom gone, and the lizard dead, there's no reason for the legion to maintain the Bulwark. It's costly in blood and coin, the high command will be eager to move those resources elsewhere."

As she realised what he was saying, Morrelia's eyes widened.

"You mean...?"

Titus nodded.

"I think they're going to call us in. Open the gateway and bring us to the Black Castle."

"Mother." Tears threatened to spill over but Morrelia controlled herself and blinked them away.

"Yes, daughter. You would be able to see her again. I must say, it'll be nice to see my wife again after all this time."

"Not that I could tell, looking at your face," Morrelia laughed.

It was true, even now Titus maintained his usual, stern demeanour.

"You don't have to join again if you don't want to, you can just come with us."

"There's no way they would allow that! A non-Legionary at the seat of their power?"

"Don't underestimate what your mother will allow in order to see your face again. You're the only one we have left."

"But ..." Morrelia hesitated, "The people here, they need my help."

"Tell me," Titus said.

Morrelia told him of the survivors, and their growing town. She told him of the daring rescue mission she launched with the aid of a 'mysterious mage' and his pets. That even now people were flowing into the town.

"I never trusted mysterious mages," Titus grunted, "handsome is he, this fellow?" The commander's eyes narrowed as he imagined some perfumed fop in silks with books leering around his daughter.

"Anthony? No." Morrelia laughed. "I would say that he's quite hideous in fact. I don't think he's anything like what you're imagining."

Titus relaxed a fraction.

"That's good then." He shrugged ever so slightly. "You don't have to make your decision right now. Think about it. Come and talk with us. I'm sure you have some old friends you could catch up with. I should go and have a word with a few of your people as well. Not that I don't trust you mind, just to maintain friendly relations."

For some reason, his daughter appeared mildly worried by that, but she nodded, even if it was a touch reluctant. Titus was a bit offended. Did she think he was so charmless he couldn't avoid scaring a few farmers? He clapped his daughter on the shoulder and gave her a gentle shove toward the Legion ranks before he turned to walk toward the gathered villagers.

Morrelia cursed a little under her breath. Her fathers' version of 'gentle' and any normal humans were a long way apart. She'd gained a few levels since she'd left the Legion, spent most of her time delving and

fighting, but she was still a mile away from reaching his ridiculous strength. What would it take!? Grumbling, she walked towards the Legionaries and began to spy out some familiar faces.

"Greetings good people," Titus began his charm offensive. "I must apologise for the Legion being unable to defend you in person, I understand you have suffered much. Rest assured, we did all we could in the tunnels below to prevent an even worse tragedy unfolding."

Even as he said it he knew it wasn't enough. What did it matter to these people that the Legion had fought, bled and died in the tunnels whilst their homes had been destroyed and their family members consumed by rampaging monsters? He'd be lucky if they didn't spit in his face. He was prepared to take it. It was the least he could do for failing to protect them.

To his surprise, they simply nodded. A middle aged man clutching a simple spear stepped forward and bowed clumsily.

"It's ah, nice to meet you commander. We've heard a lot about you. We was provided for, in the end. Maybe it was fate, or destiny, but the Great One gave us shelter and showed us the way forward."

Great one? Perhaps the mage Morrelia had mentioned.

"Morrelia spoke of this, Anthony. A mage of some power I understand. I hope he's not spending too much time with my daughter." Titus half joked, his eyes narrowing a fraction.

The villager blanched.

"Oh no sir, the Great One is busy helping his family most of the time."

The man had a family? Even better.

"No sir, it's Isaac who's pesterin' her. Proposes every day from what I hear."

Stone shattered and exploded in every direction as the tunnel became filled with a dense murderous intent and invisible pressure that weighed on everyone like a ton of bricks.

"What," Titus said, "was that name again?"

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## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 436: Light the way**

It doesn't take long before the sheer, overwhelming darkness wears me down. I can't take it anymore! I've had it! I've had it right up to the tips of my antennae! Through constant use, my mana sense is improving, but too slowly to satisfy my need for sweet and tender sensory input. Therefore, I decide to push my minds even harder and craft up a fire mana construct. Now one of my weaker sub-minds is maintaining the healing mana construct, the other the fire construct and the more powerful sub-mind is alternating operating the two in order to keep Tiny's health topped off and provide fire mana for me to produce some damn light! Having to upkeep the constructs is hard for the sub-brains, right on the edge of their capabilities and it won't be long until they start to ache under the strain. Whatever, they'll just have to toughen up.

The spell is simple enough, thank goodness, much less demanding than the flame thrower. The end result is a ball of fire that sits a metre above my head. With concentration, I'm able to move it around and I can feed it more mana in order to increase the intensity of the light. Of course, there are drawbacks. The heat source so close to my antennae makes them light up and constantly blast me with the strong signal, like having a powerful smell right under your nose all the time. It's not a bad smell, just strong, and constant. The other issue is, although my compound eyes that face forward are now able to see something, those pointing straight at the flame are constantly blasted by the light which, here in this lightless realm, is freakin' bright!

After ten minutes of it my eyes grow so sore that I ask Crinis to intervene. With care, she's able to extend a few slender tentacles to form a bridge above my eyes that shields them from direct light. The very first pair of ant sunglasses has been invented! Sort of...

With these actions we are finally a little more comfortable to explore the expanse, which, to be honest, is extremely creepy. The tangle of overgrown corals are like gigantic roots made of stone that have woven together to form a three dimensional maze dozens of metres high. Under the light the endless nooks and hollows flicker with shadows that seem to hint of tunnels and openings that fade to nothing as we draw closer. And there's monsters here. Lots of them. We don't see much of them, but I can hear them and sense their mana as they duck and dart through this place with speed and grace where we trudge through like snails.

I swear, if I don't find and chomp one of these creatures soon and I'm going to start going wild on these corals. The only thing holding me back is the suspicion that they might all collapse down on my head were I to try. Crinis seems perfectly happy here, riding on my back and soaking in the thick mana that matches her affinity perfectly. Tiny shares my irritation. Being close to my own size, he shares my struggle to navigate the narrow openings we squeeze through.

Just when I think I can't take it anymore, I poke my head through a gap between two rival corals and notice there's a clearing ahead with some actual open space! At last! Even better, it's full of monsters to fight!

[Tiny! Crinis! Something to do! Let's crack in!] I cheer as I charge forward and out into open air. Because naturally we were ten metres off the ground at this point.

I can't make myself care about it. I slam into the ground, my legs straining under the pressure, releasing unpleasant popping sounds. Thankfully, they don't break. In front of me is what appears to be a nest of some sort of crab monster. They've created a depression in the floor of the expanse, carving out the floor until it resembles a bowl. Smaller crabs skitter about, startled by our descent but in the main the crabs are big and nasty looking.

Instead of crab legs they have slippery tentacles that support their hard, shell covered bodies. Their faces are a mass of writhing polyps tipped with dripping limbs, making them resemble a cluster of sea anemone more than anything else. I pump more mana into my fire light to study the creatures better and they flinch back from the flame. I don't believe they have eyes, but I think the heat scares them. Nonetheless, the larger and more powerful looking specimens come forward to shape up to us. Flexing claws filled with narrow spikes that weep a dark black fluid.

It's always toxins down here. It's starting to get annoying. I have the remove poison spell, but I'd like to have more protection against it. My carapace has been the best defence so far, since the monsters have a hard time penetrating to inflict their nastiness on me, but if they happen to get through, I want to be able to resist. If I open up my menu and find poison resistance that I haven't purchased I'm going to be super irritated.

[Tiny! Try not to get poisoned! I want you to hit 'em with lightning and stay light on those twinkle toes of yours. Got it?]

[Hrrn] he nods, reluctant.

Playing defensive isn't his style, but he's going to have to cope with it for the time being. If he's careful he can still get his swings in.

[Crinis, go wild.]

[I will, Master.]

[Let's do it!]

Full of vigour, I charge toward the mass of crabs, my mandibles flexing with anticipation. The larger crabs are big boys, as tall as I am with plenty of mass behind them. No way they aren't tier four. They don't back down and came rushing forward on their tentacle legs to meet us, their faces writhing in a disgusting manner.

Let's see if your shell is able to match up to this!

Omen Chomp!

Like the manifestation of an angry god, the two dark jaws manifest and slam shut in time with my own, catching the crab metres in front of me and with a massive CRUNCH, its shell begins to crack under the pressure. The crab falls back into its allies, arms swinging wildly and I step back a little to create space. I only need a little room to raise my rear end high and unleash my acid!

POW! POW! POW! POW!

I blast out four quick shots, not aiming at anything specific but just hoping to cause a little chaos. Tiny has had to heed my orders and rather than leap into the middle of the thick cluster of crustaceans he dances along the edge, powerful arms swinging and delivering powerful shocks to everything he hits.

This of course makes me the focus of attention and it isn't long before more crabs slither around their injured comrade to surround me. Luckily I have an anti-surround weapon on hand, which I call Crinis. Tentacles explode from the ball on my back, snatching up crabs left and right. A second after she grabs one the air becomes filled with the high pitch screech of her barbs scratching away at the dense shells. Desperate to free themselves, the crabs start to snap at her limbs with their claws, tearing and ripping them as much as they can. Some crabs are able to free themselves, with help, but others aren't as lucky. With their outer defences broken, the poor creatures are as weak as I myself would be and quickly fall.

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Come on crabs. I'm still hungry!

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 437: Crustacean sensation**

I hope these crabs taste good, after all the nasty monsters we've had to eat on the second Strata so far, I'm hoping that they live up to the reputation of Earth crabs for being delicious. I suppose I need to finish the fight first.

Omen Chomp.

CRUNCH!

Another crab reels, its shell cracking as slinters fly in all directions. The disgusting mass of anemone on its face roil and grasp for me but I'm already moving. My fast reflexes and future sense thrive in a situation like this. Monsters surround me on all sides but I'm able to move deftly with a speed that belies my large size. My synapses fire with incredible speed as I feel the monsters around me move. Claws reach for me, gross mouth parts seek to drill into me and in the midst of it all I shift my position with precision.

Angle the carapace here. Shift my legs now. Tilt my body to the left. Each movement presents a better angle, each time I step with my six legs, I'm able to dodge by a hair. They strike my carapace repeatedly. The sharp spines in the claws are damn sharp. Whenever they grab at me, they dig and chip into my hard shell, trying to inject their venom. So far, my carapace holds. Its' actually starting to give me a great sense of pride! How's that you damn crabs? Your shells are like nothing before us, but mine still holds strong! The ant reigns supreme yet again! MUAHAHAHAHA!

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But if the fight drags on too long, they might put my endurance to the test. Although the Inner Carapace plating is doing its sweet work, I don't want to put it to the test, and I don't want to rely on my healing gland too much. I need to save it for replacing legs more than healing chips in my precious diamond carapace.

Even if they aggravate me!

Stupid crabs! Omen Chomp!

CRUNCH!

Gweheheheh. Enjoy that, you stupid crab! Although, I'm starting to get tired. Too many uses of the Omen Chomp in a row is a massive drain on the stamina, I'll have to shelve it for a moment to let myself recover. I'll have to do something to get these monsters off of me.

Solar flare!

I pump mana into my fireball and it blasts the clearing with light, chasing away the shadows and sending the creatures around me skittering back in fear. Nice! Since they fear the heat so much, I'll just have to give them an extra dose!

Using my main mind to shape the spell I draw out more fire mana and feed it into a basic bolt pattern. I'm familiar enough with this working that I can whip it out in seconds, even with the minor adjustments for the fire mana. Shortly, I have a rough and ready fireball ready to throw!

I blast it towards the closest monster and it reacts sharply, flinging up its claws to keep the hateful heat away from itself. Surprisingly the monster doesn't burn. I was kind of expecting it to light up like a candle but no such pyrotechnics take place. However, the crab definitely hates it. After absorbing the bolt with its claws, it begins writhing on the ground, out of the action. I'll take it.

I put my strongest sub-mind onto the task of spitting out firebolts and concentrate my efforts on biting, firing acid and making a general nuisance of myself as Tiny rips up the outside of the fight and Crinis works hard to keep the monsters from swarming me. Every firebolt puts a crab down, even without dealing fatal damage, they are easy pickings for a quick chomp.

Like this we rip through the clearing until the only monsters left were the smallest crabs, tier ones probably, scuttling away into the coral forest, slipping into gaps through which we can't hope to follow.

[Nice work team! Tiny, I'm impressed you did so well following directions, thanks to that you aren't dead! Crinis, nice support! You did great!]

I pat her with one of my antenna, causing her to freeze in place with joy. She's still working on that apparently.

We have claimed this clearing for the colony! Our first piece of territory in this expanse, indeed, in the entire second strata! Although I don't think we can claim it for long. I walk to the centre of the depression in the floor and right at the bottom there is a dense pool of mana. Spawn point. Explains why the crabs occupied this territory. Very normal behaviour for monsters with a base level of intelligence, so the Sophos told me. They like to grade monster intelligence based on a few simple behaviours. Apparently, the dumbest monsters usually are physically powerful roamers, wandering about smashing stuff until they either become too powerful to stop and take over an area, or more likely they get eaten when they run into something stronger.

Above them, you have pack hunters, creatures with some level of social behaviour in order to overcome relatively weaker individual strength. Above them, you have crude societal structures, like these crabs, or even the claw centipedes. At least smart enough to form a group around a spawn point and act together in mutual defence. Of course, higher than that you have things like my colony. Creatures capable of sophisticated social behaviours. Naturally higher than this is the monsters who begin to approach human intelligence. Alone or in groups, they're a much higher threat than anything else. According to the Sophos, monsters tend to get either smarter, or stronger, or both, the lower you go in the Dungeon. These crabs seem to be literal bottom feeders here in this expanse, which tells me that there are much stronger creatures we'll have to contend with.

It's kind of nice not to be top dog. After sensing that massive leviathan earlier, I'm quite sure that I'm not even close to the biggest and baddest monster down here. Which is exciting. A new challenge! A great feast! I can't wait.



For now. We need to count our gains from this crab harvest. I got quite a few skill ups. Omen chomp, healing mana, fire mana, defence. I even got a level! Quite the profitable fight! Hopefully Crinis and Tiny reaped an even greater reward.

Time to eat!

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Allium Major Capsule (IV). One Biomass awarded.]

[Allium Major Capsule: Greater Claw Anemone (IV). A hybrid between a successful plant species and a crustacean archetype, the Greater Claw Anemone has a strong defence and multiple ways to apply deadly poison. Beware its mouth parts which are capable of tunnelling through flesh to consume its victims from within.]

Well that's horrifying. Also, the taste is awful. These crabs have made it onto my hit list.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 438: Digesting Gains**

The taste may be terrible, but the rewards are good. Ever since I was reborn in this Dungeon, the one thing that has remained constant, is my belief that level ups are delicious. With some Biomass under my belt and a little peace and quiet here in this clearing, it's an ideal time to take stock and mutate a little. A chance to fortify ourselves before we continue our mission of conquest.

[Alright then, squad. Time to mutate and upgrade anything you need to. We'll get it done before we set forth.]

[Alright, Master.]

[Uuoooo!]

Tiny's excited. Speaking of which, better heal him.

[Healing Magic Affinity has reached level 5.]

Oohhh. Nice! I can spend a point to upgrade that to the next level. Maybe it'll give me the secret medicine I need to rip foreign mana out of Tiny's body. In fact, I might as well go through all my skills right now. Be a little more thorough. There's a couple of things that have come a long way since I'd last gone through my full status. My core shaping skills that I practiced with the Sophos have levelled nicely. I've been continuing to train with every core we can spare, but mastering the fusion techniques has proven difficult. I'm certain I'll be able to get it, but it's going to take more time. My defensive skills are levelling at good pace, my mental skills also. I've had to spend a lot of skill points on upgrading recently, I never thought I'd ever run out. I still have ten in the bank, but that could disappear in a flash, especially if I try another skill fusion.

I've been considering, since I purchased the fire magic affinity, why not get all of the elemental affinities and aim for the fusion of all four? The elemental mastery skill sounds powerful. People usually don't go for it, since the time required to raise each of the skills to an appropriate rank is a drain. But with multiple brains on the job, I might be able to get there. I don't know when I'll finally get access to Gravity Magic Affinity, and elemental spells are proving more useful than I expected. May as well go for it. But not yet.

For now there's other business to be about. And what's that business? Mutation! Naturally! It's time for me to once again indulge in the love of carapace! I'm determined that the first thing to reach +25 is going to be my exo-skeleton! It couldn't possibly be anything else! But to go from +20 to +25 is going to take some serious Biomass. One hundred and fifteen smackers, just for this! For one upgrade! But for my precious Carapace, it's worth it!

The last upgrade took me from True Diamond Carapace, to Hardened True Diamond carapace, which further toughened the sections of carapace bonded to the tough diamond exterior. There's probably going to be a ton of options again, but I'm all in on diamond. I will be unbreakable!

[Would you like to upgrade Hardened True Diamond carapace to +25? This will cost 115 Biomass.]

Confirm it! Don't even talk to me about the cost.!

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

I won't be distracted! So many options, but I don't care! I rush through the menu searching for the upgrades that will further let me walk the path of shiny diamonds. Aha! Here it is!

[Complete Diamond Carapace. Expands the range of Diamond coating to cover the entire exo-skeleton.]

It's here! Finally the time when my entire exterior is coated with precious diamond! I don't know why but I've become addicted to feeling this expensive! To improve matters, this is going to remove the last weak points in my exterior! No more worrying about whether a stray stab is going magically stab straight through me. Now, all attacks must go through the full might of the diamond carapace!

Confirm it! Confirm it immediately!

HAGOOF!

It itches! It itches so bad! It starts strong and spreads so fast that my entire carapace feels like it's on fire in an instant. I can feel the sections of diamond coating spreading out to cover the last of me, crawling over my face, tracing the edges of my eyes and running up to the base of my antennae. I'm becoming encased! It's glorious!

When the itch fades away, I'm happy enough that I ignore the odd looks I get from Tiny and Crinis. There are a ton of other things that I could have upgraded first, but I'm glad I went through with the carapace mutation. I have the satisfaction that at least one body part is prepared for the next evolution. I only have 48 Biomass left. Enough to do a little bit of work with, but I'll leave it for now. At the end of the reflection session my status looks like this:

Name: Anthony

Level: 16 (Rare) (V)

Might: 91

Toughness: 79

Cunning: 64

Will: 45

HP: 158/158

MP: 250/250

Skills:

General:

Expert Excavation (III) Level 7; Expert Grip (III) Level 1; Advanced Stealth (II) Level 9; Tunnel Map (II) Level 9; Iron Mind (IV) Level 4; Expert Stamina (III) Level 9; Profound Meditation (III) Level 14; Flicker Dash (III) Level 9;

Mana:

Mana Transformation (III) Level 19; Condensed Mana (III) Level 10; Finer External Mana Manipulation (III) Level 9; Mana Coveter (III) Level 5; Expert Water Magic Affinity (III) Level 3; Empowered Mind Magic Affinity (III) Level 1; Expanded Mana Sensing (III) Level 6; Enhanced Healing Magic Affinity (II) Level 1; Fire Magic Affinity (I) Level 4;

Pet:

Distant Pet Communication (II) Level 5; Core Surgery (III) Level 14; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 1;

Defensive:

Expert Exo-Skeleton Defence (III) Level 19; Advanced Dodge (II) level 2; Advanced Endure (II) Level 2; Grace (I) Level 4;

Offensive:

Deadly Acid Shot (III) Level 9; Expert Precise Shooting (III) Level 2; Omen Chomp (IV) Level 6;

Mutations:

Senses:

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Perimeter Eyes +15, Future Sight Infrared Antennae +15,

Defence

Complete Diamond Carapace +25, Supportive Inner Carapace Plating +15,

Physical

Rapid Absorption Legs +15, Empowered Mandibles +15, Regrowth Regeneration Gland +15, Loquacious Pheromone Gland +15, Gluttonous Stomach + 15; Instant Twitch Musculature +10, Wide Gated Sub-Neural Network +10;

Acid:

Mana Binding Acid +15, Hyper Pressurised Acid Nozzle +10; Potent Acid Concentration Gland +10, Fatiguing Acid Stimulation Gland +10,

Mental:

Adaptable Coordination Cortex +15,

Mana:

Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +15, Collective Will Vestibule +5;

Species: Juvenile Colony Paragon (Formica Sapiens)

Skill points: 10

Biomass: 48

[Alright guys! It's time to move out!]

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 439: Advancing into the unknown**

The nice thing about having this flame is that it illuminates our surrounding, giving the sweet light of... light, into this dark world of shadow. That's great. I'm a huge fan. The bad part about it is that we essentially light a signal fire to all of the monsters with the eyes to see it. Perhaps they can even feel the flickering heat my orb of flame emits. It seems unlikely, but it's the only source of heat I've found down here, maybe they can.

After we leave the crab cavern, it quickly becomes apparent that whatever creatures have been flicking about on the edge of our awareness have continued to track us. Crinis was the first to notice, with her highly sensitive ability to track mana sources. Whatever they are, these monsters are slick, able to sneak away anytime we try to get an eye on them. They're also smart. Perhaps a pack monster. There's quite a few of them out there, enough to keep tabs on us from all directions at once. Organised, numerous and cunning. I don't like it. At least I can assume they're weak, otherwise they would have come for us already. They know where we are, they know we're alone, it's perfect. Clearly, they think they still cannot take us. Which means they're waiting for an opportunity or for juicier prey to come along.

It's frustrating, but since I can't seem to hunt these creatures down and fight them on my own terms, I'll just have to keep moving forward with the expectation that whenever we get into a fight, we might also have to deal with a pack of slippery somethings. I wonder if they didn't jump into the crab fight so they could watch us fight? If so they might be smarter than I thought. Or perhaps they were busy feasting on the little crabs that escaped.

Whatever, it's time to move on!

Our business done, Tiny, Crinis and I get mobile once more and hit the road. Except in this case it's less of a road and more of a horrific, dark, stone coral jungle of death. With the flame burning bright, we're able to navigate a little more carefully, which helps a great deal. The atmosphere down here is oppressive. Despite being an ant, I find the coral jungle kind of claustrophobic. There's no order, no pattern. Instead of neat tunnels and friendly scent trails, there's just a tangled mass of pain the backside.

[I've had it! Let's see if we can get a little height!]

[Master?]

[We saw that the stone corals and plants reached up to a point and then stop right? We could climb up to the top of the corals and then walk along that. We don't have to struggle to push our way through the this mess. If we sense anything below us, we can crawl down and fight it, right? So we should cover way more ground this way!]

[Okay!]

Crinis is happy enough to agree. So we start to choose paths that take us a little higher in this mess and I immediately notice that the higher up you go, the more free space we see. It makes sense that things would free up I suppose. The other thing I notice is that with more space comes more monsters! Whoo!

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After squeezing our way up we run into some more spiders, a lower tier than that nasty bug we fought up in the tunnels but assuredly the same base species. The moment he sees them, skittering along the stone and baring their fangs at us, Tiny goes nuts. Lightning crackles and flashes across his hands, so bright I can barely see and he blasts every spider he can see with both barrels. A dozen of the eight-legged pests are exterminated in moments before he then decides he's not satisfied blasting them from a distance and runs in to get his fists dirty.

I think he's holding a grudge against these spiders. I suppose it can't be too comfortable having this mana ripping up his body constantly. He doesn't seem to react much to what I'm sure must be a quite painful ailment, but clearly he's mad about it!

[Let's go and support, Crinis!]

These spiders appear to be only tier two or three and we make short work of them. I crunch any that come close with my mandibles and flare my fireball every now and again to scare them which makes them easy pickings for Crinis. In short order, thirty of the hideous beasts have been destroyed and it's time to feast once more.

[Make sure to gather up any cores that you find guys!] I remind my pets as we munch on the Biomass.

Our income of cores has been fantastic down here. The spherical mana stones seem much more common in the Second Strata, as opposed to the first. Up there maybe one in five monsters had a core unless they were close to a source of mana they could absorb, down here where the ambient mana is so many times thicker the ratio is closer to one in two. For monsters tier three and over, it's more like ninety percent. It seems that creatures who don't form a core run into a wall pretty quickly, outclassed by their kin who are able to absorb more mana and gain more from each evolution.

I made the right call, all that time ago! I knew I was right! Forming the core immediately was absolutely the right choice. It's nice to have ones' choices reinforced in such a direct manner.

I gain a few Skill levels from the fight and another thirty Biomass, which is a nice haul. Tiny did most of the damage, so I didn't manage to level, but crucially, my Fire Magic Affinity reached level five so I can

rank that skill up. The knowledge of new, totally sweet fire magic starts to seep into my brain the moment I confirm the upgrade, dropping my available skill points down to nine. To make matter worse, I pick up the Earth Magic Affinity, putting them down to eight. They seemed to plentiful at one point, now I'm starting to run dry! Ah well. Hopefully I'll start to level faster once we get into some more fights.

It shouldn't take long before we find a few, maybe up on top of the corals there'll be more action.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 440: Attack from two sides**

As the fish swirl around us, biting and tearing at us from a dozen angles at once, from below comes a new threat. Almost like dogs, wolves or hounds, they run and leap, agile as monkeys across the stone as they come snapping our heels. Slippery as eels and mouths frothing they ran around us, circling at speed as the fish keep snapping at us. Although some of dogs look larger than the others, some of the fish more powerful, I'm fairly certain these are lower tier monsters, only threatening in their numbers, not their strength. They are all rather irritating though.

[Crisis, try to deal with fish, I'll take of the dog situation!]

[Okay, Master!] Crisis declares, sounding determined.

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When she decides to go all out, Crisis can be quite intimidating, to say the least. More than three dozen tentacles explode out of her rapidly inflating body, creating an instant web of barbed death for the fish that nibble and rip at her. With her little tentacle brains steering them without her having to think about it, a large number of the limbs are mobile at once, making complex manoeuvres that chase and whip toward the fish with deadly precision. The fish are small and are able to twist past her grasping tentacles more often than not, but she starts to take hold of them and gradually whittle down her numbers.

For my part, I need to help Tiny. The dogs are circling him, nipping at his feet as he bellows as takes wild swings at them. Whenever he tries to zap them they duck away into crevices and gaps where he can't see them, only to emerge again when he turns away.

The big guy's getting pretty frustrated, his eyes have gone red with rage. Any longer and he's going to start smashing the terrain into pieces and we might just fall into a den of vipers beneath our feet! My claws grip the coral hard and I dash forward, my bulk scatters the dogs in front of me as I catch one in my mandibles.

CHOMP!

[Chill out, Tiny! I'm here to support!]

The moment I show up on the scene the dogs scatter away, not willing to stand in front of me. Instead that loop around to my sides and start to prowl, nipping at my legs and business district. It's low! These damn dogs are so sneaky and their tactics are so dirty! Where's the eager, upfront battle of monsters?! The clash of strength, the contest of will? All of this sneaking and backstabbing is diminishing our dignity as monsters isn't it?! Even if I used to do it!

Fortunately, I have just the thing to deal with enemies who want to stay behind me!

POW! POW! POW!

Acid flies out to strike with precision against the unsuspecting dogs. In moments the liquid hardens, weighing them down even as it burns them. A moment later the dogs abandon their strategy of remaining behind me and start to stick to my sides. So persistent!

With my attention elsewhere, I barely notice one of the dogs sneaking up from below until my antennae tingle a warning. From a gap between the layers of coral a monster leaps forth, larger than the others. With its mouth open wide its tongue lashes out, a pointed barb on the tip, stretching over two metres to stab towards me from beneath! Dodge! My reflexes fire and I twist my body to one side.

CLANG!

The pointed barb shears off after my carapace deflects it, the diamond coating saving me once more. The tongue gets reeled back in and the creature vanishes back into the darkness below me.

"Rooaaar!"

When Tiny roars I turn to see him collapse on his side, one of his legs impaled by a spear like tongue. The moment he goes down the dogs scatter and retreat, at least, those not covered in my acid do, but I can sense their lurking presence below us.

Now they want to poison and run?! The cheek of these mutts! It's almost enough to make me wish I was a spider so I could wrap them up in webs and torture them at my leisure! No, Anthony, don't think such dark thoughts. If you were hunting as an ant should, you'd have hundreds of your siblings by your side right now, cutting off their retreat and swarming them at every opportunity. The ant way is still the superior way.

Since Crinis has the fish under control I move closer to Tiny, working my Healing Mana construct with my main mind to shape together the poison removal spell. As I work, the flesh around the puncture wound is necrotising rapidly, it must hurt like hell. What sort of poison is this?! It works damn fast...

In the minute it takes me to piece the spell together, Tiny is already starting to appear faded, his breath becoming shallow and his bat features going pale. When I finally cast the spell, I can sense the poison being drained out of him, the spell purifying and cleansing it from his body. In such a short time it had done a ton of damage and I move quickly to heal him back up.

Hmmm. The poor ape. His offensive power is still able to cut it, but he's beginning to show some weaknesses here on this level. As a creature with skin, his defence isn't able to ward off these insidious poison attacks as effectively as I can, and Crinis, with her amorphous shadow flesh, is much more capable of removing poisoned limbs before they become a problem. There's a lot of gaps that his next evolution needs to cover, I'm going to have to work hard to make sure it can happen.

When Tiny stands up ready to fight once more, I can sense the dogs slink out of range, not wanting to continue the fight. Yeah, you better run you mangy mutts! At least I have three of them I can eat! And eat them I do.

[New source of Biomass consumed Umbra Venandi (I), One Biomass awarded.]

[Umbra Vanandi, Shadow Creeper (I). This creature is weak by itself, but if able to will form packs under the leadership of a higher tiered creeper. They are quite intelligent, able to utilise tactics to corner prey, striking when at its most vulnerable point, injecting their venom before retreating to await the victim to weaken.]

Well that squares away with what we saw from them.

[The fish are defeated, Master!]

[Oh! Well done Crinis! I wonder why those fish decided to chase after us?]

[They didn't seem to like the fire much...]

[Yeah, but are they afraid of it, or do they want to attack it?]

[Both, maybe?]

[Both, huh.]

Certainly, when we stuck our heads up, the monsters seemed to pay a lot of attention to the flame. More accurately, it really seemed to tick them off. Perhaps Crinis is right and they are afraid of the flame, so they hate it? Want to extinguish it? Perhaps we can make use of that...

[Crinis, have you ever gone fishing before?]