

Chrysalis 61

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Chapter 61: The first War - War is Mother to us all

As soon as my confidence was beginning to rise, just when I thought victory had been secured, that was the exact moment I was thrown back into the pit of despair.

It always seems to work like that, doesn't it Gandalf?

I continue to support my colony brethren in the battle for our future. I'm totally exhausted by this point, having bitten so many times the muscles in my face are completely sore. What's even more irritating is that, in order to support my fellow workers as much as possible I've been deliberately wounding my enemies but not taking the extra time to finish them off before moving on to the next target, leaving the crippled victims behind for the rest of the ants to deal with.

Despite my best efforts there have definitely been casualties on the ants side. Without an upgraded carapace like mine their defences were like paper in the face of the rabbit's fangs and some were instantly killed when receiving a bite to the head.

Others have fallen to the centipede's claws and jaws, battling in places I couldn't see or reach in time. My heart is heavy knowing that some of my own siblings have been laid to rest as a result of my own actions. I have to comfort myself with the knowledge that victory will benefit the colony as a whole tremendously, and that is the goal the workers truly strive for at all times.

However, almost as if mocking me, the ground begins to shudder beneath my feet. Powerful vibrations rattle through the ground over and again, surely in response to some rather tremendous feet.

Please don't tell me...

My despair takes material form when crashing through the trees in an appearance worthy of a final boss is a massive Titan-Croc, flanked on either side by two Croca-beasts, almost like henchmen following their leader.

Why are you stupid monsters so organised in such a dumb way all of a sudden?!

The new arrivals growl menacingly, the rumbles vibrating the air so powerful they send my antennae dancing. The lead Titan-Croc surveys the field of lesser monsters with discernible greed lighting up his eyes. Even for an evolved creature like him, the sheer amount of food here will be enough to fuel his mutation, as well as the two following him.

Lured by the noise and the aroma of Biomass these big baddies have arrived to wrap up the battle and stake their claim over the food here. Not many monsters would be willing to battle such colossal powerhouses, what kind of suicidal creature would take on those kinds of odds?

THIS ANT RIGHT HERE.

I refuse to surrender the spoils of war! The colony has already sacrificed precious workers in this battle and I refuse to see us walk away with nothing to show for it because a few fat crocodiles turned up!

The only thing that has changed is the menu!

Of course, completely exhausted and punctured with minor wounds, I have no idea how I'm supposed to deal with these powerful monsters. The Titan-Croc alone could probably fireball us all to hell, not to mention when he has help!

I barely have enough acid in the tank for a single shot...

Then I see something.

At this moment, salvation is delivered.

In hour darkest hour, she will be the light.

From the corner of my eye I can see the top of the ant hill begin to shudder, as if a large monster were pushing through the tunnel inside. The very top of the hill shakes, some of the loose dirt collapsing inwards and more spilling out, rolling down the slope as the shaking and shuddering becomes more and more pronounced.

Bursting from the top of the hill comes an enormous ant, her long antennae swinging angrily through the air as she clacks her massive mandibles threateningly.

With another heave the ant pulls the rest of her body from the tunnel which was never dug wide enough for her to move through easily. When the colony was threatened she once again ignored her guards and rushed to the battle!

Easily five times my size the Queen looks down on the battle imperiously from the top of the hill, her antennae already beginning to surge with healing light.

Mother is here! And she looks pissed...

It's true, her eyes have a dangerous glint in them as she takes in the scene, the pile of wounded struggling ants at the foot of the hill and the deadly struggle continuing within the trees where ants and centipedes continue to clash violently.

Then she looks at the huge interlopers, still eyeing off the battle and awaiting their moment to strike.

I'm nervous now. If the Queen is killed here then everything will be lost! I wasn't too concerned when only rabbits and centipedes were about since I didn't think they'd be able to harm her majesty at all, but it's different now.

The Croca-beast may not be up to the task but the Titan surely is.

Come to think of it though, I really have no idea how strong the Queen is in a fight...

I mean, her primary purpose is to lay eggs, which isn't exactly a combat role, she also has specialised in a healing magic, which again doesn't lend itself to direct combat.

I'm really worried!

Mother doesn't seem to share my concerns as she chitters angrily and after a brief moment of concentration releases her powerful healing spell. A wave of light rolls out from her antennae, flowing over the ground and encompassing all of the ants in the wounded pile before rushing into the forest like the tide.

The healing energy laps against me like the waters of a river and I greedily drink it in, recharging my energy and healing my small wounds, restoring my Hp.

All around me the workers are being healed and reenergised, throwing themselves into the fight with renewed frenzy. This wave of healing has stamped an end to the hopes of the centipedes in this conflict, already outnumbered the return of injured ants to the combat has only tilted things further against them. Their snapping claws sound despondent and hopeless where before they were aggressive and vicious, almost as if they can sense their impending doom.

The three large interlopers, the Croca-Beasts and their apparent leader, the Titan-Croca have seen enough. With the combat reaching an end they want to sweep away whatever resistance remains and claim the Biomass for themselves.

Their indignation is almost palpable as they watch a few small worker hatchlings starting to drag away the food, a few rabbit bodies are already being taken over to the nest from the back of the battle. Looking at their furious eyes I can almost hear them smirking as they think "How dare these puny monsters take away our Biomass! Know your place, midgets!"

Up yours Croc! I will let you experience the shout of my soul!

As the massive Titan-Croc rears back to his full height and steps forward through the trees his two subordinate henchmen advance on his flanks, looking like little bullies attaching themselves to a larger one.

For some reason it really bothers me to see these damn Crocs cooperating. Since when did this sort of thing happen?

Aren't you guys supposed to be the lonely kings of the jungle sort of thing?!

As they advance forward toward the fight I try to blend in with the rest of the workforce, gradually pushing myself towards the massive beasts through the bustling crowd of workers. As I do so I reach internally with my mind, grasping hold of the vaporous energies within my core.

With the force of my mind alone I direct my mana to flow out, concentrating it into a tight ball in my throat. As the monsters draw closer, powerful fangs gleaming in the brilliant light of the forest I continue to force more and more energy out of my core and into the powerfully swirling marble of mana I've formed within me.

Idly I wonder what might happen to my head if I were to lose control of the mana as I draw it out and condense it.

Best not to consider it really...

[Mana Shaping has reached level 2]

[Forceful Mana has reached Level 2]

Oh ho! Even in this situation I can't help but be a little excited at my mana skills improving. Immediately I can feel the process of shifting and condensing the mana become slightly easier. It isn't much but every little bit helps

In my peripheral vision I can see the Queen, unsatisfied with merely healing the colony has begun to advance down the hill towards the battle.

I can't help but think things are going to get very dicey in a moment.

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Chapter 62: The first War - Winner takes it all

The pressure continues to build within my throat, the small spherical mass of mana is becoming tighter and tighter, the dense energy fluctuating and spinning wildly as more and more mana is forced into it.

I'm reaching the limits of my tolerance, I have to act soon!

I can see the Queen advancing into the forest, her personal swarm of guards being forced to move with her. It's clear that she intends to personally enter the battle and defend her colony against these large interlopers.

I think if these damned Croca beasts hadn't shown up she would probably have been content to just release her healing spell and then retreat back into the nest, but with such a large portion of her workforce under threat she must feel compelled to act.

A caring mother, striding into battle for her children... It's very moving Gandalf! And no I'm not crying! I can't cry, I'm an ant, but within, I am deeply moved by this maternal devotion.

For the moment I'll gloss over that this situation is entirely my fault...

On my back Tiny has continued to survey the battlefield, hooting aggressively at our foes and occasionally lashing out with his little fists whenever he could locate a target. I'm impressed the little fellow has managed to maintain his seat all this time, it couldn't have been easy in the swirling melee.

I'm drawing closer and closer to the Titan-Croc even as they are drawing closer and closer to me. They've almost reached the ants now, just a few more meters and those claws will begin to reap a dark harvest of ant experience. I won't let it happen!

Suddenly accelerating I charge forward out of the pack, brushing aside my fellow workers in my mad rush to reach the crocodiles before they are able to act. I want to draw their attention away from the colony as much as possible, I have to be fast!

Go!

My force mana sphere is as dense as I can make it, no matter how I try I can't force any more energy into it. It is wildly spinning inside me, a tiny, ultra-dense, hot fog of mana just begging to be released.

As I reach the edge of the field I climb onto the back of a nearby worker and leap into the air. Directly before my face the Titan-Croc looms. Cruel eyes stare directly into mine. Massive jaws part to reveal a wealth of barbed teeth, ready to snap out my life.

Delivered to you fresh like the cold mountain winds, receive the shout of my people!

Opening my mouth I finally release the energy I've contained within. Like a bullet from a gun, like a directed explosion, the mana bursts out with irresistible force, as if I shot a cannonball from my mouth.

Time seems to slow down in this moment. Or perhaps my perception speeds up. The chaotic motion all around me stills and the small details become larger and larger in my eyes. I can see the huge bulk of the Titan-Croc in front of me as I float through the air, it's maw opening wide, ropes of saliva clinging to each tooth, ready to crunch down on this meal that has delivered itself by airmail directly.

The two Croca-Beasts on either side ignore me, preparing to advance into the horde of ants with claws bared, their arms are already being drawn back, thick cables of muscle bulging beneath their scales.

Behind me the workers continue to battle the centipedes, a ferocious melee of insect vs insect in all of its savage glory. Only a few workers have responded to the impending threat of Croca-beast, I can see their antennae slowly twitching in the air as they turn to face this new threat, no fear or shock showing in their faces, only dedication.

Then the magic is released.

A concussive force erupts, bursting into the air with the power of a battering ram. With my heightened senses in this moment I can see the very air itself warping and twisting around the fearsome energy.

It was difficult to aim after leaping into the air so my blast doesn't smash into the Titan-Croc's mouth as I'd hoped but rather cannons into its chest.

At that moment of impact, I could see the change come over the monster's face, an ever so slight flicker of surprise registering in the eyes.

Then the strange sensation of time slowing ends.

And the Titan-Croc catapults away into a tree like a crocodilic missile.

The tree shatters in half as the enormous mass of monster crashes into it like a thunderbolt. The burst of noise is deafening.

Then silence.

Then Gandalf.

[You have slain level 12 Crescente Gula Garralosh]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 8]

...

One hit.... KO?

Are you kidding me?!

The Titan-Croca lies amidst the broken remnants of the shattered tree, unmoving. The monster's massive chest appears to have been caved in, as if struck by a giant's hammer. The two smaller Croca-Beasts are wearing an expression that could only be the heartless monster equivalent of shock.

I land on my feet before them, looking up at their crocodile faces.

They look down at me, not seeming to quite understand what it is they are looking at.

Then Mother arrives.

Moving with the irresistible power of a freight train the Queen crashes into the Croca-Beast on my left. Her immense jaws immediately scissor the Croca-Beast across its mid-section, directly cutting the dreadful monster in half!

Holy heck Mother?! How much Biomass did you spend upgrading your mandibles? They look sharper than mine!

After defeating the first Croca-Beast so decisively the Queen turns toward the second, her powerful mandibles clicking ominously, covered in ichor. The monsters in this place do not know the word retreat and the remaining Croca-Beast shows no sign of backing down. I don't know if these creatures are incredibly brave or just immensely stupid but they do not retreat.

The Queen doesn't slow down, aggressively advancing towards the final monster, who roars and swings one powerful claw towards the larger creature. The Queen doesn't even react, allowing the claws to rake into her carapace. The force of that impact would have sent me flying but she doesn't budge, cold eyes staring down at the Croca-Beast with contempt.

Only when the Croca draws back its arms do I see that the blow hasn't even left a mark on the shiny dark carapace of Mother. Exactly how highly upgraded is this Queen?!

Then I remember the dedicated workers, constantly battling for food and returning as much of it as possible to the nest for the Queen to eat, not only giving her the energy to produce the young but also allowing her to take in ferocious amounts of Biomass.

There is no doubt she is the most highly mutated member of the colony, probably possessing many mutation advanced to boot. For whatever reason her advancements seem to be the less ostentatious kind as I can't really see a visible difference in her carapace or mandibles yet they are clearly immensely strong.

Not wasting the opportunity given by the opponents reckless strike, Mother opens her jaws wide and plunges them down, all of her crushing weight behind the strike. Even the powerful Croca-Beast is no match for the Queen in a contest in strength and is smashed into the ground, pinned by those potent mandibles.

After adjusting her grip slightly, Mother puts the beast out of its misery...

...

So strong!

What the hell was that?! I don't think even the Titan-Croc would have been able to resist her strength for long. I had no idea you were so strong Mother!

The Queen doesn't seem too fazed by the experience, standing tall once again she surveys the battlefield with her cool, imperious gaze. Merely being in her presence has driven the workforce into a frenzy, redoubling their efforts and driving the centipedes completely into the dirt. The battle is all but

over, many workers already having switched to transport duty, moving injured ants out of the fight and breaking up food for transport back to the nest.

We've won! The spoils of war shall be ours!

When the Queen spots me dancing in triumph in front of her she makes her way over to me, suddenly casting her immense shadow over my face.

Uh, hi? How are you Mother? ...

Raising one powerful foreleg the Queen suddenly slaps me on the head. Not hard enough to injure me but certainly enough to smack my head down into the ground and make my brain spin.

Before I can recover myself she has already turned and started to make her way back to the nest, a detachment of workers following her every move.

Did I... Did I just get told off by Mother?

This is quite depressing!

I think I can understand why. Despite the fact that this victory will provide the fuel that will ignite the colonies engine, at least thirty workers have laid their lives down here. Those thirty workers would still be alive if not for me starting a fight so close to the nest, drawing in the workforce and being unable to contain the conflict.

The other thing I hadn't considered, is that although this food might allow the Queen to lay many eggs, there are now thirty less workers to help hunt for them, feed them and care for them, which will stretch the remaining workforce right to the limit.

Sigh...

I hope the Queen isn't too mad. I'm definitely reflecting on my mistakes...

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Chapter 63: Core concern

The aftermath of a monster battle is a fairly gruesome place, especially when it's ants picking over the field.

This area of the forest has a veritable carpet of deceased monsters. Black furred rabbits mixed with centipedes and the two wolf-dragons cover the ground. On top of them the ants make another layer, bustling with insect urgency. Their job is now the rather messy work of butchery. Most of these workers are still hatchlings, only a few having evolved into mature workers like me. This means they can't carry an entire monster body back into the nest in one go, instead they are forced to break up the food and transport it in pieces.

All around me this somewhat distasteful work is being done, workers using their mandibles to carve away at the food at then lifting their prize and merrily sprinting off towards the nest in order to make their delivery as quickly as possible and return for more.

Even with over sixty workers here it is going to take a little while before the work is done.

With the Queen now having retreated back to the nest I've decided to stick around until the workers have completed their task. If more monsters come to act the vulture and try to steal our hard won prize I want to be here to help defend it. I didn't work this hard and make the Queen mad just to risk losing everything we worked for!

Still, looking over the remains of the battlefield I feel a slight sense of accomplishment. Each of those monster bodies represents experience that has been funnelled into the workers already, fuelling their growth and bringing more and more of them closer to evolution.

As long as the colony can last until the next generation emerges then we will be in a tremendous spot, growing explosively and becoming much safer.

Tiny has already leapt from my back and started to feast, his little hands shovelling the Biomass into his face with incredible speed.

Slow down there little buddy.. You might get a stomach ache.

I'm pleased to see his increased appetite, the sooner he grows and begins to show the fearsome strength of the monster I took the core from the better off we'll be. Recalling that his core came from creature strong enough to go toe to toe with a Titan-Croc makes me hopeful that Tiny will be able to exert that same kind of strength in the future.

With all of the monsters here focused on the Biomass I have a different prize in my sights.

There are a few large, evolved monsters here and I am desperately hoping that they will have some cores for me. I refuse to evolve without maxing out my core!

I move over to the two wolf-dragons first and begin chewing through them, not just gaining Biomass but also hunting for a possible core. My own core is deep within the center of my body and it has been thereabouts in every monster I've found it in so far, so I have to eat my way down to find it.

I gain two Biomass from the first before I decide there probably isn't a core and rather than finish it off I rush to the other one, pushing a few workers out of the way in order to secure my place to hunt for that precious sphere.

[You have gained Biomass]

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

Bwhahahaha!

The prize is mine!

Even if I have the Core Mechanic skill I'm not willing to waste any monster core on practicing it until I have achieved my most important goal, the maxed out core!

Absorb that core!

As the core melts into the air I can feel the energy flowing into my own, strengthening and enlarging it, increasing its capacity to store the mana that infuses this world.

Excellent!

Keep hustling Anthony, there is more to go!

Having checked both of the wolf-dragons I now abandon the center of the battle and sprint over to where a few workers are starting to pick over the Croca-beasts.

Mine, mine, mine, mine!

Pushing aside a few workers I greedily dive into the first Croca-Beast, this one was the first monster the Queen directly cut in half, making it fairly easy to look for the core. After barely eating at all I decide their isn't any core to be had and I hustle over to the next one.

Hopefully my worker brethren don't feel I'm being too greedy ... If I can evolve with a fully maxed core I'll be able to repay the investment many fold! Forgive me guys.

[You have gained Biomass]

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

Yesssss!

Reinforce Dat Core!

Once again the pleasant stretching sensation occurs as my core absorb more energy, growing more dense and larger. The power!

With this my Max Mp has reached 40, which is double what I was able to sustain before evolving. I kind of expect that this means I've reached my maximum?

Only one way to find out. Crossing my metaphorical toes I move towards the remains of the Titan-Croc. The body lies leaning against the stump of the shattered tree, it's chest a broken ruin.

I cannot believe I was able to fell such a massive creature in one blow. The power of Forceful Mana is not to be underestimated! It may be a little cumbersome to use in a fight right now, but as I get more and more level and my core becomes stronger, what sort of power will I be able to unleash?

My mind is boggling!

Concentrate on the present Anthony! Control your drool, man!

I tentatively approach the Titan-Croc. I almost can't believe that it's dead. I feel like the massive creature could just open its eyes and start wrecking my face at any moment.

It's impossible though, the all-seeing voice of Gandalf spoke to me, the beast is surely dead. The whole situation just feels so unreal I guess. It wasn't long ago I riding on the coat tails of one of these monsters, depending on it for safety and feeding on a few scraps it left behind.

Now I have conquered one and will feast on Biomass!

No need to hesitate any further, dig in!

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Crescente Gula Garralosh, you are awarded one Biomass]

[Basic profile of the Crescente Gula Garralosh unlocked]

[Crescente Gula Garralosh: Growing Maw Garralosh, The evolved form of the infant Garralosh this still growing offspring of the Garralosh has reached its development stage. Able to convert mana to fire, beware of the fireballs released from its mouth]

What the hell?

Are you telling me that this enormous monster, the beast of nightmare that I have dubbed the "Titan-Croc", is still in its development stage?! Exactly how stupidly massive are these damn things supposed to get Gandalf?!

And again with the Garralosh! All of these damnable crocodiles are the offspring of a single monster? Is this thing like the croc version of Godzilla?! How would something that big even more through the tunnels down here?

Gah, I don't even want to guess. I still have very little idea what lies in the tunnels beneath this place, for all I know, if you go deeper you'll find even larger open spaces than this, huge open areas the size of continents. Why the hell not?! I didn't think an underground area like this one could possibly exist but here I am, chewing on a giant croc-monster right underneath a sparkly glowing tree with purple leaves.

So who knows?

I'm not going to try and prejudge what I might see anymore. I've been shocked so many times I no longer see the point.

[You have gained Biomass]

Thanks Gandalf. Nice to be kept informed.

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

Ah wha?

Special Monster core? What the heck is that?

After thinking for a moment I decide to dig out the core and take a look at it. After a more minutes of chomping I'm able to free the core and drag it out with my mandibles.

It's frickin huge.

What the hell is with this core?! It's massive! Easily larger than the core that birthed Tiny even!

This Titan-Croc must have reinforced the heck out of his core for it to reach this tremendous size. I'm absolutely gobsmacked.

I can't be exactly sure how large my own core is but I'm certain it cannot be even close to half the size, maybe it's a fifth as large?

According to Gandalf I can absorb this bad boy. Seems bizarre that a core this large is still compatible... is it because the Titan-Croc has also only evolved once?

I feel a little nervous about this. It should be fine... right?

Uh.... Reinforce my core?

[Your core has already reached maximum capacity for your level of evolution. Absorbing the special core will take you beyond this limit. Do you still wish to proceed?]

What the heck Gandalf?! So talkative all of a sudden? Why can't you just give me information at a time that isn't the last possible second!?

So my core has actually already capped out at 40 MP as I thought it might. For some reason this core is special and will allow me to further improve my core beyond the normal limit?

Doesn't this just mean that my evolution will be even further fuelled next time?

Maybe there is a down side to absorbing the core now. Perhaps I'll only be able to draw limited benefit from the core, say only increasing my max MP by four points, whereas if I waited until after I evolved to absorb it I could take the full benefit and get eight.

It still seems worth it to take the core now. Knowing that a stronger monster core means more energy to fuel evolution ... I just can't turn it down.

Reinforce my core Gandalf!

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Chapter 64: Right to the core

The enormous core, looking like a lustrous dark pearl, slowly begins to dissolve into the air before me. As it does so the solid matter that makes it is released as energy that swirls and flows in the air, tiny particles dancing and spinning. Each individual particle eventually meets another and then those two meet another and in this way the individual dots of energy become grouped into flowing streams that trail each other.

Eventually these streams begin to be drawn towards me, flowing directly through my physical self as if it weren't there and being drawn towards my core. As they grow closer the energy acts almost as if it were water circling the drain, looping around the core in wide circles at first before the loop draws tighter and the flow faster, increasing in pace the closer it gets.

As the energy finally begins meet my more I can feel the spherical gem begin to grow, greedily absorbing every particle of light that touches it, using that energy to construct itself anew.

More and more energy is flowing with every second, growing faster still as the enormous core continues to dissolve, releasing all of its potential.

The spinning energy is no longer like a bath drain and more like a raging whirlpool. A veritable ocean of power being drawn deep into my core.

It hurts!

As my core expands further and further a dull pain begins to throb in my abdomen. Distant at first and then sharper with each passing moment.

I clench my mandibles and brace myself against it. C'mon Anthony! You can take it!

More. More. MORE.

The pain continues to build until it is agony! My core is a screaming mass of pain, ultra-dense and far larger than it should be for a creature of my strength.

I can feel that deep inside, my core is unstable. Growing too quickly and holding too much energy. Damn it hurts!

Finally the Titan-Croc's immense core is completely gone but the pain remains. The ripping agony flares every few seconds, causing me to almost collapse.

Even Tiny has noticed something is wrong, coming over to place a gentle paw on my back. Thanks little buddy. That's real nice.

OUCH.

Damn this core! I don't recall Gandalf mentioning the searing agony involved when pushing your core beyond your evolution level!

With my willpower being sapped by fighting off this pain I can't do much. Blearily I check my status and the result shocks me into alertness again.

MP 11/50!

Fif... FIFTY?

No wonder the whole process was so painful, my core is literally a full 25% larger than a body at my level of evolution is supposed to be able to handle!

Even though this process continues to cause such terrible sensations within me, I can't help but be excited for what this could mean for my next evolution. Will new, rare options be unlocked? Or could I just gain a heck more evolutionary energy to spend upgrading my stats... perhaps this will provide enough for me to afford that subsidiary brain for magic!

I've managed to amass seven points of Biomass so far from this battlefield but looking at the remains of the Titan-Croc, I've barely managed to touch it.

I'm in so much pain that I seriously don't want to eat any more, frankly I don't want to do anything anymore. I need a sleep.

But I force myself to keep working.

I refuse to let this wealth of Biomass just go to the colony completely. They can have the rest, but this Titan-Croc is mine. I'm allowed to be this selfish, right?

I'll conveniently ignore that I gobbled up all of the cores from the large monsters at this point...

With Tiny helping me along I limp towards another tree near the Titan-Croc and begin to excavate a temporary nest. I would normally just drag this food back to our own little chamber within the colony but right now I don't think I have the strength.

The excavate upgrade shows its power here and I'm able to dig out a surprisingly roomy chamber beneath the tree relatively quickly.

With that job done I drag myself over to the remains and start the unpleasant job of breaking it up into pieces and then burying them in my new hiding hole. The carcass is so large it takes almost an hour to complete this job and several times I have to chase off a few workers coming over to grab a bite.

By the time I'm finished the flaring agony I had experienced has receded to a lesser but consistent pain that batters at my mind constantly.

Ugh... I hate thiiiiis.

The busy workforce has also completed their mission, transporting all of the Biomass down into the main nest to be consumed there and fed to the brood.

After one more look at the now bare area around me I drag myself down into the chamber and once Tiny has joined me I close over the entrance.

The long battle has finally ended and the colony has been victorious. Time for a nap.

Zzzzzzzz.

I'm UP!

Several hours later I startle myself out of torpor, snapping awake in an instant.

Phew! Good sleep!

The pain of my core has continued to fade over my nap and has now been downgraded to persistent ache. I can probably attribute this to my insides being squashed by the larger than intended core occupying too much real estate in there.

Not to worry! As soon as I evolve it'll be nice and snug in there once again.

Looking at Tiny gradually shaking himself awake I can see he has grown again after stuffing his face yesterday. Honestly I think he's grown a little too large to comfortably fit on my back, which is a little sad, but I'm glad he's managing to get larger and stronger.

You'll prove yourself useful eventually you little ape!

Now that my core has reached its maximum potential and then a bit more I don't really begrudge him the core I spent to bring him to life anymore. It all worked out in the end and I got a little monkey buddy for my trouble.

My mind now turns to the business at hand, namely, continuing to eat this Biomass! I've resolved that until all of this Croca has been consumed, Tiny and I will live the shut-in lifestyle! We won't leave until the meal is over!

I estimate we'll be able to fill ourselves up at least once more, possibly twice, before the food is entirely gone.

C'mon Tiny! Time to dig in.

...

Om nom nom.

...

Gah! I'm stuffed! Tiny is looking so full he's practically a monkey basketball! That's another seven Biomass in the tank!

Such riches!

Since we are so full, the ape and I decide to just sleep again, a well-deserved holiday after our efforts.

When we awake we finish off the food and I gain another four Biomass.

Rest in peace Titan-Croca, I will never forget the mutations you allowed me to gain.

Checking my status I have amassed a ridiculous eighteen points of Biomass!

This is so many points I almost don't know what to do with it!

Settle down Anthony... Let's start planning out the costs now.

I need nine points to max out my antennae, so there goes half of my wealth immediately.

Then I have another nine whole points to spend. I can upgrade my regeneration gland to four with my remaining points. I really like the regeneration and have already promised myself to prioritise it. So this will leave me with two points remaining.

I guess I could spend those on either pheromones or legs...

Legs would be useful in general, running around, climbing, these are all things I do constantly.

Pheromones will help me with managing the colony and workers. I mean, an extra +1 isn't going to make a huge difference to either choice so I'm not too concerned.

I think I'll take pheromones. The ability to move the workforce faster, even by just a second, could be critical at some point. Not to mention, we are going to need a lot of food to keep growing the colony. The more successfully we can hunt the better off we all are.

[Would you like to upgrade Antennae to +5, Regeneration Gland to +4 and Pheromones to +2? This will cost eighteen Biomass]

Heck yeah!

[At this level you can choose an mutation advancement, please select from the menu]

Here we go!

Once again the dizzying number of options unfolds in my mind like a flower. There is always such a ridiculous number of suggestions!

What on earth am I supposed to pick?!

Enhanced sense Antennae for an empowered sense of smell? Sounds handy. Bladed Antennae, equipping each antennae with a bladed tip and turning them into weapons?! Holy heck! Precognitive Antennae, sensing vibrations from a moment in the future? Are you frickin' kidding me?!

There are a few that tickle my fancy, such as the mana detection antennae, allowing the appendages to sense the flow of mana, but I already have a skill that will hopefully be able to perform the same job. Another choice improves the strength of any magical energy that is channelled through the Antennae, I can't help but wonder if the Queen selected this upgrade...

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 65: Mutation Trepidation

Gah! The extra options really make my head spin sometimes.

As usual, I need to decide exactly what I want my antennae to be for and then choose the advancement that will make them better able to do that job.

If I wanted to make myself a purely magic focused monster then the Antennae magic enhancement would be a very solid choice, letting me build advantages on advantages. However I'm not the sort of person to go for the specialist option. Perhaps it isn't the smartest path but I don't want to be bad at any particular aspect and cover that up by being especially strong in another.

Perhaps my magic would reach greater heights with an advancement like this but wouldn't my sensory options be too limited?

I just don't feel comfortable moving away from what the antennae were originally designed to do, which is to detect stuff, be it scent or motion.

So I'll narrow my options down to those that increase my detection ability.

After letting go of some of the juicy but far out there selections I settle on a few that seem to make the most sense to me.

Of those the one that purely enhances smell is probably the most pedestrian. This option is a little beige even for me.

Another choice adds more sensitive hairs to the outside of the antennae, turning them into potent motions sensors. I like this idea and I also don't. Being able to detect movement without having to see it is kind of cool but because I have compound eyes that can see in a huge range around me there is very little motion I won't see before the antennae pick it up.

An option that really piques my interest is one that allows the antennae to develop heat sensitivity. If I'm understanding the description right, the antennae will mutate to include a heat source sensitivity, kind of like having thermal vision but for your nose.

I like this idea because it provides a new option that will cover something that was lacking before. I'll be able to detect monsters around corners by the heat they give off, potentially detecting creatures underground or inside nests before they are visible to my eyes. It may even be possible that I could have counted the centipedes inside that centipede mound without ever having to stick my head in it.

Infrared Antennae. I'll choose this!

Well that's niiiIIIIIIIIICCEEEE!!!

I'M ON FIRE!

How is it possible that I continue to forget this stupid itch!

The antennae are the worst, a horrible burning itch drilling right into my head, but the regeneration and pheromone glands inside me are also terrible!

Why dammit, WHY?!

Eventually the nightmare stops and I regain control of myself.

Every. Damn. Time.

Somehow I manage to push the horrible sensation that accompanies every mutation into the back of mind almost immediately after it happens. Is it just that I don't want to remember these terrible experiences?

Quite possibly that is the answer.

With all of the mutating done I now have a single skill point to spend. I'm not too sure on this one, I'm building up more and more skills and they will need upgrading eventually. On the other hand, I was able to see so many useful skills that I could purchase and make good use of the last time I was purchasing skills but ended up investing almost all of my points into magic related skills.

No, I'm determined to spend it, there are several skills that I've been hungry for and I shall resist the urge no longer!

[Exo-skeleton defence, improves the user's ability to utilise their external skeleton to deflect blows and resist damage]

I wanted this skill before in order to assist my desire to tank up but I couldn't afford, choosing to prioritise my magical path at all costs, but now I buy it!

Confirm this purchase Gandalf! Gimme!

When it is all said and done my status now looks like this:

Name: Anthony

Level: 8 (core)

Might: 31

Toughness: 22

Cunning: 25

Will: 18

HP: 50/50

MP: 50/50

Skills: Excavation Level 1; Improved Acid Shot Level 5; Grip Level 4; Crushing Bite Level 7; Advanced Stealth Level 3; Piercing Chomp Level 3; Tunnel sense Level 4; Mana Shaping level 2; Forceful Mana Level 2; External Mana Manipulation Level 1; Mana Sensing Level 1; Core Mechanic Level 1; Exo-Skeleton Defence level 1

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

Species: Mature Ant Worker (Formica)

Skill points: 0

Biomass: 0

I can't help but feel that my foundation is becoming increasingly solid. My goal of upgrading all of my mutations to +5 and stacking as many mutation advancements as possible is slowly coming to fruition. Once I get my regeneration gland to +5 I'll only have two more body parts remaining and I'll have reached perfection!

Now that I'm level eight I'm anticipating that I'll probably be able to evolve at level ten, and with my beyond perfect core I'm ready to do that at any time. Everything is coming up Anthony!

Opening up my small chamber, Tiny and I step out of the darkness and once again into the bright light.

What a nice break we had! I feel refreshed and newly improved! Bursting with vigour and drive!

Tiny has also benefited from our time of sleeping and feasting. His growth continues to accelerate, he's probably double the size he was when he was first born. No longer able to ride comfortably on my back he's going to have to walk and climb as best he can.

Keep up little guy! We don't have all day!

The ape monster seems almost a little petulant as he is forced to run alongside me, using his knuckles to propel himself forward much as a gorilla would.

Up on the ant hill the usual workers are in attendance, watching the forest carefully. Several workers are moving in and out of the nest, heading into the forest to follow the trails or scout for food.

Hopefully they don't run into too much trouble out there, the forest is absolutely crazy at the moment.

Tiny and I advance down into the cool shade of the nest. I notice that the veins of light are continuing to extend themselves down into the tunnel, the thin tendrils at the end moving almost visibly at the very edges.

Deep in the nest there is a frenzy of activity and it isn't hard to see why. Whilst I was sleeping and eating the Queen and workers were busy laying the foundations of the colonies future.

Checking into the brood chamber I can see that the huge number of eggs that were laid after the Berserker invasion have hatched into little larva. The newly hatched monsters fill the brood chamber to the brim! The workers have quickly made use of all the available food we've secured and stuffed the little grubs full.

The poor little things have almost gone spherical! Are they grubs or bowling balls?

I try to resist the temptation to roll them around. I'm worried they'd roll right out of the chamber and fall down the tunnel...

I know we need them to grow quickly but seriously guys.. Show a little restraint!

The larvae can barely move so full are they. The workforce is in attendance however, carefully monitoring each and every grub to ensure they are ok. Judging by the size of their abdomens though these workers all have fairly full social stomachs. I wager that as soon a grub shows any sign of digesting its food the only fate that awaits it is to be packed full once again.

Good luck larvae! Do your best to grow quickly into strong ants!

Most of the larvae that were in here before have either spun their cocoons and become pupae or already completed this phase and graduated into hatchling workers. New brethren for the workforce are always welcome!

Exiting the brood chamber, which in all honesty is looking a little full, I head further into the nest and notice a new tunnel cut into the wall on my left. Curiously, Tiny and I wander down the tunnel in order to find out why this it has appeared.

I was right to think the brood chamber was full, the workers appear to have agreed with me and dug out another one!

After the colony absorbed another big chunk of Biomass the Queen has once again gone to work...

In the dark chamber in front of me there are ten workers tending to a massive clutch of eggs. There must be two or three hundred of them here!

Well, this is what I was hoping for when I brought the colony into that fight. These eggs and larvae in the chamber above represent an incredible opportunity for the colony. If they can mature and hatch the workforce will grow from around two hundred workers to well over eight hundred. That large workforce will be able to jumpstart the growth of the next generation and then the generation after that. It won't be long until this colony is filled with thousands of ants.

Then what could stop us?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 66: The Heat Factor

Any records from the time of Rending are unreliable at best and complete fantasy at worst. The Magio-scholars from the tower of Rannaeth have spent decades pouring over the old documents, attempting to piece together a cohesive picture of the state of the world at that time.

Their findings are frequently controversial and often disputed but I myself tend to believe that the views they have published are reasonable conjectures based on the evidence. The first, generally agreed principle is that the ambient mana level on the surface of Pangera rose greatly, more than doubling immediately before the crises struck.

The rapid advancement and reliance on magical techniques exploded in this time, a brief period that the scholars refer to as a 'golden age'.

They also postulate that at this time the Dungeon was already fully formed underground something that other scholars hotly dispute. The logic appears to be sound however. It is known that gargantuan, mighty monsters emerged from beneath the surface shortly after the cataclysm began and there are no known records of such monsters spawning ever since. If they hadn't been battling and evolving in the Dungeon for many years, perhaps even hundreds of years, then where did they come from?

Excerpt from "The origins of the great beasts, a historical treatise" by Oliander.

Dreams of the upcoming ant conquest will have to wait for a while though, there is a massive amount of work to be done before then.

With Tiny by my side I pause to consider what my next move should be. I have a few options for my next course of action and I should consider carefully before I simply run off and engage in something without thinking it through.

The war turned out ok for the colony this time but even so, there are the deaths of tens of workers resting on my head and it could have been much worse. Even I didn't know that the forceful mana ball would be able to one shot the Titan-Croc and if it hadn't the entire battlefield may have become a sea of flame, barbequing dozens more workers.

I should carefully consider my options this time to avoid making such errors. I certainly don't want to get belted on the head by the Queen again!

The tunnels leading further downwards that connect to the Queen's chamber concern me. The Berserkers were able to invade through those tunnels and caused major problems, if I hadn't been able to intervene the colony would have suffered far worse than it did. I'm a bit scared to go down there though. If tough monsters like the berserkers are running away from down there, I'm not really prepared to go and scout it out by myself.

I think after I've successfully evolved I'll be a little more confident to explore those deeper areas, hopefully my stats will receive a sizeable boost that might enable me to be a bit more survivable against whatever threats lie below.

I'll just have to hope that the Queen and the rest of the workforce can fend off any threats from down there long enough for me to reach the required level.

The next option is to continue the colony growth plan and start fights, using pheromones to bring the workers into the battle. This strategy revolves around feeding large amounts of experience into the workers to increase the overall strength of the workforce.

I'm concerned though. With the area above being so dense with monsters it will be almost impossible to start an isolated fight in which I can accurately judge the odds in advance. The war was a perfect example of this. If I try to bring the colony to fight something it is almost certain that more and more monsters will show up, drawn by the noise and the promise of food.

This is too risky, I'll have to abandon this option.

So what should I do?

Do you have any answers Tiny?

The little ape looks up at me, absent-mindedly scratching at his leg. Those large eyes of his are completely vacant, appearing almost devoid of thought. There is trust in those eyes, confidence in my ability to lead him to food, but a stunning lack of original thought.

You are trusty companion Tiny, even if you are dumb as a brick.

Let's attack this problem from another viewpoint. What are the roles that workers perform in the colony? Take care of the brood? Not really my style, there are plenty of workers for that. Defend the nest? I'm the best fighter in the colony for sure but I don't want to just stand around and wait for something to happen.

Scout?

The scout has the role of ranging far from the nest and locating food, identifying threats and bringing information back to the colony.

Surely a cool, powerful and incredibly well built ant such as myself is perfect for a role like this? I'll be able to proactively protect the colony and support the workers if I find them in trouble.

Not to mention I'll have a bit of autonomy in terms of hunting. Rather than starting a massive fight I can instead pick and choose my hunting targets.

To be honest, I also really want to evolve as quickly as possible. My oversized core might not be as agonising as it was before, but it still hurts! Like a persistent tooth ache the pain is constant and is always grating on my mind.

I want it to go away!

Ok! My mind is made up! Tiny and I will form the advanced scouting team of the colony and venture forth into the open space brave great danger, explore the unknown and hunt our prey, for the good of the colony!

Before we leave I drop down into the Queen's chamber to check things out and predictably she's sleeping, probably exhausted by her participation in the battle followed by egg laying.

Not to worry.

Onwards Tiny!

With my ape companion in tow we climb up the tunnel towards the ant hill and open space above. It takes Tiny much longer to climb now that he can't ride on my back. I don't mind too much, it's nice to see the little free loader doing some work for a change.

During my time in the nest I've been trying to adjust to my new antennae advancement.

It's been more difficult than I thought to understand the information my antennae are passing to me. I mean, if you compare it to my human body, the only way a human detects heat is through their skin. As an ant I have a carapace so my capacity to sense temperature has been fairly poor.

Now my antennae are acting like little heat sensors, showing me sources of heat in my mind that my eyes can't even detect. For example, I can 'feel' the heat given off by a worker even before I see them. This is particularly disorientating when that worker is around a corner or in a separate chamber.

All I need is a bit of time. I'm confident that with a bit more experience I'll be able to react quickly to the information my new sense is telling me.

Eventually Tiny manages to make his way to the top of the ant hill, looking rather tired after the journey. Ha! No more slacking for you monkey boy!

The usual group of workers are milling around the hill on defensive duty, moving this way and that as they eyeball the surrounding terrain for threats.

There are a few trails of workers moving into the woods but I don't join them, instead heading in a different direction.

I head to the area the battle against the rabbits and centipedes occurred at and I move in the direction that the centipedes joined the fight from. The huge number of crawlies that joined in on that fight and how quickly they did it suggests to me that there is a sizeable centipede mound somewhere around here.

I don't really want to attack the nest itself but I also want to know if there is a large collection of monsters that close to the colony.

Once again the forest is completely alive with noise, monsters everywhere I turn, battling and hunting each other constantly.

My new senses are flooding my mind with information and it is difficult for me to interpret it all quickly. There are heat sources everywhere! Small monsters up in the trees, packs of them roaming together on the hunt.

It takes all my stealth and cunning to navigate my way around with running into a fight I don't want to take. I feel that I'm strong to fight most of the monsters I find but I can't tell what else might pop out of the woodwork and bop me on the head.

Hang on...

What's this?

I'm detecting something a little odd with my heat detection.

Concentrating hard I crouch and move towards cover. This heat signature feels a little different than the monsters I'd detected before...

It seems to be coming from behind that tree.

I'm still a little confused by this heat sense so I'll play this slow.

Creeping forward one foot at a time I try to minimise any noise. Something is telling me I need to be careful right now.

I give Tiny a look and try to motion him to stay quiet. The little ape looks at me blankly with his wide eyes and I quickly give up.

Just... Stay quiet would you!

I'm trying to circle around this tree at a slight distance, working the angle so I can get a peek at what my heat detection is there.

As I slowly make my way around I manage to get a slight view of whatever it is that has caught my attention.

I think that's A hand?

Is this a human?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 67: These guys are seriously annoying

This is definitely a human here behind this tree!

What the heck is this human doing here?

I have to admit a chill strikes my heart when I realise that a human is this close to me. It seems bizarre since I myself was a human not too long ago. In this life, however, humans have been nothing but trouble!

Inching around slightly I can see that this is one of those black clothed soldiers I'd seen before. They chased me out of the upper cavern, chased me out of the tunnels and now they show up again!

What the heck is your problem guys?!

To be honest, if I wasn't such a friendly ant I'd be starting to take it personally! I don't recall doing anything, except being a monster, that would cause them to pursue and hate on me to this extent!

My heart grows even colder, entering serious winter territory, when I realise just how close we are to the ant hill. Have they spotted it yet?

I highly doubt that the workers or the Queen would be able to stand up to the humans. Having been one myself it isn't hard for me to imagine the kind of strength that an organised human society would be able to muster in a place like this. I'm sure the system has been studied endlessly, all sorts of skill combos researched, magic systems investigated and engineering feats accomplished.

The colony is still very young! Not many workers have evolved out of the hatchling state yet, not to mention the entire colony population is under one thousand! We are still weak, far too weak to even consider fighting against trained soldiers!

For the first time I actually start to consider having to fight against people, my old kind. If this soldier located the nest and went to report back to the rest of them, what would I do? Just let them go?

Would I really be able to bring myself to kill them? Even to protect the colony?

Gah! I don't know the answer to that! What is with this sudden existential dilemma Gandalf?!

I can't just throw away my seventeen years as a human so quickly! I may be a proud ant worker now but that's only for a month or so!

In any case, I don't know exactly what this human has seen ... it's possible they still have no idea where the nest is. Don't panic Anthony, we might still be ok!

I retreat slightly, doing my best to remain fully concealed. I really don't want to attract any attention to myself right now. Using one of my legs I grab Tiny and hold him still. Thankfully he's smart enough not to protest out loud, although he does look at me reproachfully.

Damn ape! You want to get killed?

Eventually I can make out that a female soldier is crouched behind the tree, surveying the area. She has black leather armour with a few metal plates stitched into it around the shoulders and flanks. Her blonde hair is tied back to ensure it doesn't obstruct her face or view. I can even see her ears... well enough that I can determine she's not an elf at least.

Dammit....

You idiot Anthony! Focus!

I can see that this soldier is equipped for combat, a long bow case is strapped to her back and a shortish looking sword rests in a sheath on her hip.

To be honest this is the best view of a human being I've had since being reborn here in this place. There is a lot I can learn just by checking out the equipment and uniform.

Hardly daring to breathe, Tiny and I sit and wait, concealed in the brush to the human's right side. We are so close, probably only five or six metres away.

After ten minutes or so the soldier rises from her position and begins to make her way through the forest decisively. After a few moments I lead Tiny and we follow at a distance, being careful to minimise sound.

Thankfully there is so much combat going on in the forest these days than it isn't hard to conceal our traces at all.

[Advanced Stealth has reached level four]

Oh!

Ah stealth! My first purchase and most faithful skill. I knew I could rely on you!

Even after all my gains, stealth is still such a valuable purchase. I highly doubt I'll ever be able to evolve to the point where I no longer have to fear anything in this place, is that even possible for an ant? My hope is that the colony can grow strong enough that I can depend on the collective to keep me safe and let me live out my life in this new world as best as I can.

That isn't too much to ask for, is it?

I was never very ambitious as a human and I don't really see that I should change that now that I'm a monster.

After following this soldier through the woods for a while she eventually meets up with another human dressed much the same as she is. The only real difference I can detect is the weapons. Where she has the bow and sword, this chap appears to be armed with a staff of some kind.

Have I seen these two before?

I'm getting a vague sense of déjà-vu. To be honest, before I was able to advance my eyesight it was pretty damn hard to make out the fine details. I wouldn't have been able to identify a person from their features before.

Perhaps I glimpsed these two as they chased me out of the tunnels...

At any rate they are here now, talking softly to one another. As they talk they don't even look at each other, instead they constantly eye the surroundings for danger. Looks like they know how to stay alive in here at least. There are monsters absolutely everywhere right now.

In fact.. My antennae twitch as I pick up a heat signature approaching from my right. Thankfully I've managed to remain hidden and whatever is coming is headed directly at the human duo.

This could be interesting.

From the woods emerges a strange looking creature that I'd never seen before. Huge, massively muscled arms covered in bristling fur are the first things that strike my eyes. Each of those powerful limbs ends in massive hands, each the size of my head. Black, jagged nails extend from the end of each finger.

Atop the monster's broad shoulders rests a massive lion's head, lips drawn back in a dreadful snarl, revealing the long curved fangs within.

The king of the jungle? Except with massive arms and hands? What the heck kind of monster is this?

The beast's eyes are yellow and they behold the humans with a dreadful glee.

You know, in some ways I agree with what you are thinking massive Lion beast. You charge in here, you see these thin, small and weak looking things in front of you, what sort of self-respecting monster would think they are any type of threat?

If you're a dumb monster who was probably born yesterday, what would you know of the power of the human mind? It's ingenuity and endless capacity to invent ways to kill things? You see these things and they look like free Biomass, so of course you try and eat them.

The Lion monster roars hungrily and pounces, ready to strike!

The female soldier frowns and then, so quickly I almost can't even see it, whips her blade from its sheath and braces it in two hands before plunging it forward like lightning. That was so fast if I was physically capable of blinking I might have missed it!

The strike plunges into the Lion's shoulder, biting deep and the monster growls viciously as its blood begins to flow. The attack thwarted, the Lion steps back to prepare another swing, massive hands more like battering rams as it punches out directly.

Before this punch can even connect the male soldier has raised his staff. From the tip emerges a blazing spear of flame that streaks through the air and impales the Lion directly between the eyes, killing it instantly.

Yep. I thought so.

The two humans move toward the corpse in a businesslike manner, the female soldier bracing a foot against the body to pull her sword out and then carving into the monster's chest whilst the male stands guard with his staff raised.

Eventually the digging is rewarded with a core, pulled out of the monster's gory chest and the two quickly move on, not hanging around in case more monsters are attracted by the smell.

Well... Don't mind if I do!

Tiny is already salivating next to me and by the time the humans have moved ten metres away we have already crept over to take a bite.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Leo Ogri, you are awarded one Biomass]

[Basic profile of the Leo Ogri unlocked]

[Leo Ogri: Lion Ogre, This monster is most feared for its massive strength, two overdeveloped arms allow it to cause incredible damage with fists alone. Some Lion Ogres are known to grip crude weapons, such as rocks or branches. They are however, quite dim]

A Lion Ogre eh?... ok. Fine. I'm not even surprised.

Tiny and I spend five minutes feasting, gaining two Biomass before we dash off in the direction the humans went, following the trail.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 68: Drawing a line

It doesn't take long for us to catch up, since the two soldiers are moving cautiously, attempting to avoid the notice of the thronging monsters in the forest.

Every now and again I notice one of them looking up, doubtless keeping an eye out for the gargoyle monsters that nest in the roof. I haven't seen any sign of those things for a while now but I don't doubt they are still up there somewhere.

Fingers crossed that when they do show up they decide to swoop down on someone else.

The two soldiers move with practiced ease through the area, avoiding pitfalls and reading the signs of monsters being nearby.

I'm honestly impressed by their level of knowledge. They seem to know exactly where every monster nearby is without having to actually lay eyes on it. I'm desperately hoping that doesn't include me!

Or Tiny.

The way they move seems to indicate they know exactly where they are in the open space and exactly where it is they want to go. I wonder how they are doing that. Do they recognise the features of the ceiling? Are they able to track their locations based on familiar features of the rock up there?

That makes so much damn sense I'm shocked I never thought of it before. After the thought occurs to me I start to glance up at the ceiling, using my advanced eyesight to pick out obvious features to try and recall later.

After an hour of travel we arrive at what appears to have been the destination the soldiers were heading for.

A large hill rises from the forest floor and in one side a tunnel has been cut, leading down into the hill and downward. At the entrance to the tunnel two more soldiers are standing guard, attempting to appear inconspicuous, not wanting to draw too much monstrous attention.

The two I'd followed solute at the entrance, hands over hearts of some such and then enter the tunnel, their dark uniforms quickly blending into the shadows as they move out of sight.

Dammit!

If only I had mind reading or telepathy or something. How am I supposed to glean information from these people? They must know so much that I couldn't possibly find out on my own! A veritable goldmine of information is sitting right here in front of me and I cannot access it in any way! Gah! This is maddening!

I decide to stay and watch this apparent human camp for a while. I can't think of anything more threatening to the colony than an attack by these damnable soldiers, so in my capacity as a scout it is my duty to observe them until I am satisfied that they pose no threat.

Two hours later, my dedication to the cause has faded somewhat.

The two guards out the front were rotated, replaced by two almost identical guards. The new guards were not the two I'd followed to this location so at least I learned that there are at a minimum six people within this camp.

Tiny is growing completely bored and is having a nap behind me. Thankfully there is enough background noise to wash out his gentle snoring.

I spend my time observing the humans and seeing what I can learn from them by picking up on the details.

Their boots are fairly distinctive, made of stiff looking leather and dyed black the boots are laced from the heel to half way to the knee. The breastplate appears to be made of some kind of stiff leather, once again dyed black and stitched with some sort of gold embroidery. I think there is an insignia on the armour but I can't quite make it out.

The arms borne by each soldier appear to be slightly different. When I'd arrived, the first two guards had both worn a long sword on their hip and had a large shield across their back. The two who replaced them however, were different. One had two short strapped across the back in an X. The second

uncased a crossbow from their back when they came out, slotted a bolt and cranked back on the shaft before taking up his post.

Seems like a bit of an odd army. Almost every individual is armed with a different weapon!

After some thinking I decide that the light armour they wear makes a lot of sense. At first I'd expected that they be loaded up with massive plate armour like a medieval knight but when considering the size of some of the monsters down here, how strong some of them are and how sharp some of their limbs can be... What the heck would a suite of metal armour do? Absolutely squat!

I could probably punch straight through metal armour using a piercing bite. Other than slowing down the person wearing it, I can't imagine that armour will achieve much at all.

Eventually two more soldiers return from the forest, joining up with their fellows and entering the tunnel. Shortly after the whole crew emerges, or at least I imagine it's the whole crew, ten soldiers wearing that same identical armour. They talk to other softly but I can't understand a single word of it. I'm able to hear it well enough that I'm confident they aren't speaking any language I've ever heard before.

Fantastic. This makes the dream of communication ever more distant. Not only can I not vocalise I can't even understand the language!

Several of the soldiers appear to be carrying heavy packs. It seems they are moving out of this hill and heading to another camp sight.

It isn't long before the soldiers group up and start to move. I hesitate. The direction they are travelling is still directly away from the colony.

I'm already an hours travel away from my home nest, do I really want to travel any further than this?

Not to mention, following along after these humans is still exceptionally dangerous. There are ten of them now. I assume they could annihilate Tiny and myself in a heartbeat were we to be found.

Best to play it safe.

I've learned a fair bit of information already. I know where their forward camp is, I know that they are here and I've managed to witness some of their skills in action. That's not insignificant.

I consider trying to head into the tunnel and investigate their little base but in the end I reluctantly dismiss the idea.

There is way too much risk involved. These people look like professional soldiers, not ragtag mercenaries like the last camp I invaded. Also, I wasn't able to witness the defences being setup, like I did before. There could be any number of traps inside that cave and I would have no idea.

I'll back off.

After the humans have departed I start to journey back towards the colony with Tiny. Keeping my eyes on the roof of the cavern I try to follow a few of the landmarks that I remember from my way here and despite getting muddled a few times I manage to get back to the general area.

I need to be extra careful when I'm out scouting now that I know there are human soldiers moving through the cavern. I honestly had thought I was free of those killers. The way they moved through the tunnels, exterminating every monster they found without mercy still sends a shiver down my spine.

Only one thing can be done in order to be safer, become stronger and evolve! If I can evolve and then help grow the colony even further, hopefully we'll be able to live free of human interference.

For now my priority is to hunt and get levels! Just two more levels is all I need!

One Tiny and I have made it back in the general vicinity of the nest I climb up a tree and start trying to scout out possible prey. The forest is completely packed with monsters so any target needs to be chosen carefully. I get more experience from taking on evolved monsters but some of those are a lot stronger than others. I'd rather fight three evolved centipedes at once than have a Titan-Croc get the jump on me.

So I have to be careful and choose my prey wisely.

My core still throbs painfully inside my body. Hopefully it won't be long before I can release all the potential held inside there. I wonder what I'll become?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 69: The evolving situation

The Legionary camp is a hive of activity. Patrols come and go in a steady stream under the watchful eye of the officers. The monster suppression has been difficult on this expedition, preparations for the wave are not going as smoothly as the brass had expected.

Tribune Aurillia was concerned. Her experience and expectations were continually being defied, the situation at hand refused to conform to historical norms.

Every day squads left the outpost and moved into the expanse, exterminating monsters and hunting down spawn locations. Whenever a spawn point was found the Legionaries would trap it, killing the monsters the moment they were formed from the Dungeon.

This was the typical procedure employed by the Legion when preparing for a wave, the goal was to reduce the number of monsters before the wave broke as much as possible. Trapping the spawn points in normal times would drive mercenaries and Dungeon explorers insane, effectively reducing their ability to earn income, but the Legion took no chances when it came to a wave. Every monster they could reliably kill they would.

Something was different this time. For every spawn point they were able to identify and neutralise, another four would pop up the next day. Despite martialling more resources and bringing reinforcements down from the surface they were simply unable to kill monsters quickly enough to meaningfully thin them out.

Even the commander had acted, entering the Forest Expanse on his own and emerging several hours later covered in gore with a small bag full of cores on his belt.

Aurillia chuckled at the memory. Several trainees had asked who was going accompany the commander as he was preparing to leave. The senior Legionaries had just looked at them as if they were insane. If anyone could keep up with him they would be welcome to go.

Emerging from the woods came the ten person strong trainee unit, returning from their scouting assignment. Aurillia knew they'd be sent to do reconnaissance on the far side of the expanse. Locating the ant nest remained a priority of this expedition, despite the unusual circumstances propagating each day.

The weary soldiers marched single file through the gate, shoulders slumped under heavy backpacks, eyes red from little sleep. Their uniform leather were scuffed and stained in several places, indicators of battle and combat.

The tribune approached the squad. When they saw her coming they stopped and snapped out salutes, their discipline bringing a smile to the weathered features of their officer.

"What do you have to report?" Aurillia said.

Trainee Mirryn had been appointed the leader of this particular squad. She stepped forward to give her report.

The trainees were especially nervous around their superiors on this expedition. The centurions, tribune and even the commander himself found every opportunity to find fault with them. Uniform dirty? Go run laps. Poor form when saluting? Two hours in the training yard. Make a mistake in the training yard? Stay in the damn training yard and work until you pass out.

All of their nerves had been frayed right to the edge. It was almost a relief when they'd been sent out as a squad to scout the far side of the expanse. Fighting their way through hordes of monsters and watching their backs every waking moment for several days almost seemed easier than staying with their officers.

Mirryn cleared her throat and reported.

"The squad was able to reach our designated coordinates approximately thirty hours ago. We identified four spawn points in the surrounds and were able to effectively seal them all. A list of monsters identified and defeated has been compiled for your inspection Tribune."

Having said this Mirryn drew a scroll case from her waist bag and presented it to Aurillia, saluting once more as she did so.

The tribune raised an eyebrow as she accepted the case. Clearly the trainees were starting to realise just how exacting the standards would be for them on this delve.

Aurillia opened the case and unrolled the parchment within, casting her eyes quickly over the lists and numbers her experience allowing her to absorb the information in a moment.

"And what of our quarry? Were you able to locate any ants?" she asked as she stowed the parchment in its case once more. The paper would go to the administration auxiliaries, the bean counters who tallied all of this information for reporting to the Legion brass and the Lirian government.

The faces of the squad member immediately twisted upon hearing the Tribunes words. They had failed to find the ants despite all of their searching. What concerned them most was the punishment that awaited them if the tribune decided to view this as another 'failure' on their part.

Mirryn cleared her throat before speaking. "We were unable to locate any sign of ants or the nest itself Tribune. The increased monster activity has made solo scouting extremely difficult, dramatically reducing our scouting range and efficiency" she paused before continuing, "it is still possible that the ants are operating in the area we were sent to search but we failed to locate them, I recommend a team be sent to scout the area again more thoroughly".

Before she was halfway through her reply the faces of her squad members had gone pale. Their minds were spinning with the possible penalties that would be heaped on their heads for not only failing but admitting they'd found it too difficult and recommending another squad go fix their mistakes!

Not that they disagreed with what Mirrynn had said, they'd just hoped it could have been phrased a little more... gently?

Contrary to their imaginations the tribune simply nodded. "Trainee Mirryn, you may dismiss your squad to recuperate and then remain here, I'd like a word".

Somewhat dazed Mirryn turned to the other members and dismissed them. The squad shared relieved smiles as they made their way to the tents reserved for resting. There wasn't much recreation of comfort afforded to a Legionary in the Dungeon but at the very least a hot meal, a cold wash and a good sleep were assured.

Watching the others clap each other on the back as they walked away Mirryn couldn't help but feel a little apprehensive towards her officer. Tribune Aurillia had the reputation of a demon in normal times, in the Dungeon she had proven to be five times as strict.

The older woman didn't speak immediately, gesturing for the younger trainee to walk beside her as she turned and wandered deeper into the camp. As they walked they passed the workshop area of the camp. Here, diligent Legion craftsmen and women worked to process raw materials harvested from monsters. There was little priority given to collecting resources on this expedition, killing the monsters was far more important than harvesting but if a Legionary brought down prey close to the camp then it would be wasteful to let the Dungeon reclaim it all.

Hides were boiled and treated, bones shaved, powdered or heated depending on their properties. The Deep Legion seldom sold anything they collected in the Dungeon, preferring to give their own craftspeople the opportunity to create weapons and armour in-house. Any excess would be stockpiled or transported to a Legion branch in another city, sometimes another country.

The Tribune exchanged a few greeting with the hard working auxiliaries. These men and women would never be full Legionaries but they were deeply valued nonetheless.

As they continued to walk Aurillia eventually began to speak. "Your squad won't be going back out to scout tomorrow" she raised her hand to cut off Mirryn when she saw the other was about to speak, "no, not because of any failure on your part. The commander and I have determined that it is becoming too dangerous in the expanse to send out small squads anymore. You'll be concentrating on clearing monsters closer to the camp".

The younger woman frowned, "with respect, Tribune, we don't need to be coddled".

Aurillia barked out a laugh and turned to the trainee. "Do you feel as though you are being coddled down here?"

Whatever was the opposite of coddling was Mirryn's opinion of what they had experienced.

"No" she said.

The Tribune nodded. "Things aren't normal. We've had a report from the headquarters that conditions deeper in the Dungeon are even worse than what we are experiencing here. We've ordered every available Legionary from the Liria to report here to support the wave defence".

Mirryn was confused. "Tribune, how would the headquarters on the surface know more about conditions in the Dungeon than we would? We are in the Dungeon".

Aurillia eyed the younger woman for a brief moment, long years of experience, pain, loss and triumph moved behind those eyes.

"Do you really think that the Deep Legion has its headquarters on the surface?"

Mirryn could hardly process what that meant. The Liria headquarters was inside the Dungeon somewhere?

"Why would you tell me this now?" she eventually asked.

"It is time for you trainees to learn a few more things. After all, at the conclusion of this expedition you will either be a full Legionary, partial to all of our secrets, or you will be dead".

Chrysalis

Chapter 70: Using the power of the mind

To hunt under these conditions one needs to be cunning. After all, what was it that allowed humanity to rise above their competitors to be the dominant species of Earth? It was their minds! Their ingenuity!

Combined with a tendency to avoid considering the consequences of any particular course of action, this trait, more than any other, propelled humanity to great heights!

So when I am faced with this environment, in which an ant must truly struggle to hunt, to provide for his family with the necessary sustenance to survive, what could I possibly do? Regular hunting is impossible! It seems that more and more monsters are appearing at any given moment, successfully battling a monster one versus one and then being able to consume or transport the Biomass without attracting attention would be rather difficult.

So then.

Time to use the 'ol noodle to solve this problem. Draw on a little bit of that divine spark of intelligence that my previous life has gifted me.

What I have I come up with?

Pitfall traps!

I shall utilise traps, thus combining my two identities in one, the cleverness of a human and the capacity to dig a hole of an ant!

...

I know all right. Sure it's not that clever but it is the best I could come up with.

At a reasonable distance away from the nest, a few hundred metres, I've begun construction of a large pitfall trap. The construction has been more difficult than I initially expected. Whilst there is plenty of dirt, as I dig further down I inevitably find bits of rock. Fortunately the mana infused mandibles prove up to the task and I'm able to break it up after expending a fair bit of effort.

The excavation skill has once again proven its worth and I've already gained a level in it due to my efforts. It's interesting to notice how the excavation skill actually functions. Rather than creating a magical shovel of light that emerges from my face to help me dig (which would be awesome!), instead I almost feel as if my instincts are being guided by a knowledgeable digging master.

When I was trying to find a location to for my pitfall traps certain areas were more appealing to me as suitable to dig and others I felt should be avoided. I honestly don't know how I knew that, I just did. When I'm digging as only an ant can, using the mandibles on my face not only as a shovel but also as a barrow, my instincts whisper to me, don't dig that spot yet, the soil will crumble, tilt your head to this angle, the result will be better.

The overall effect is that mistakes are minimised and efficiency is increased, resulting in a larger area dug in less time. I can only imagine that if the excavation skill becomes maxed out then I'll become some sort of digging god, never making an error and working so fast that vast underground tunnels will be carved out in a single day!

As it stands it takes several hours of hard work before I've been able to dig a large and deep pitfall that I think will be sufficient to hold most monsters, about two metres in diameter and five metres deep, I've been an industrious little ant!

At the bottom of the pitfall I've dug a small tunnel that runs several meters parallel the forest floor. My intention is that within this small offshoot tunnel I'll have a private space to hide and consume prey.

Several times during the construction I was forced to abandon the site and hide in a tree when I detected monsters coming. Given the crazed attitude of all the creatures in the forest lately I knew that would battle do the death the moment they laid eyes on me (I'm so irresistible!) and the resulting kerfuffle would draw in more monsters and my entire trap plan would go to waste!

The hunter must display patience for best results.

Tiny spent the entire time up in the tree. I didn't really trust him to dig and I certainly didn't trust him not to fight when anything showed up. Honestly, he slept most of the time which probably worked out for the best.

After covering the pitfall with a light layer of vegetation as a disguise there is nothing to do but await the juicy prey that will fall directly into my greedy mandibles.

Muahaha!

However, after a while I still haven't caught anything. Plenty of monsters are moving through this area but they've been lucky enough not to step on my trap! Damn monsters, why is all of this good fortune being wasted on you?

I wrack my brains. What could I do to increase the efficacy of the trap?

Bait! I could bait the trap which would help draw the monsters directly to the pitfall. What I could I use as bait?

Tiny coughs abruptly in his sleep, sharply interrupting his gentle snoring and drawing my sharp gaze to his resting form.

Bait... eh?

I won't! Too much could go wrong if were to use Tiny as bait. I refuse to let him die until he's paid me back in full for the core I lost on him!

Although it would be nice to dangle this sleeping loafer from a branch...

I can only be patient and wait for a monster to fall into the trap. Once I have one catch I can save some of the Biomass to use as bait.

This idle time cannot be waisted however! The spirit of the worker pulses within me, demanding that my time be used productively! For the colony!

I range a little distance away from my trap and survey the terrain for a space that will suit my needs. Eventually I find a an appealing patch of earth thirty metres away from my pitfall. If one trap should prove insufficient, then more must be constructed! Don't underestimate the enthusiasm for digging that runs through my ant body!

Much like the first time I dug the trap, a huge part of the effort is spreading the dirt around in a way that looks reasonably natural Creating an enormous mound of dirt directly next to your hole in the ground is not necessarily the greatest way to lure prey, I decided. One's pitfall trap does not require advertising.

After thirty minutes of digging I'm startled out of my reverie by a crashing sound followed by an indignant screech!

What!

I'm so shocked I was frozen there for a moment. I swear when I get to digging it's almost as if I fall into a trance. For some reason it just feels so nice to dig as an ant. As if I'm fulfilling my life calling. Truly, my reason for being as a worker is to dig!

Scuttling over to my original pitfall I can immediately detect that some unfortunate monster has fallen prey to my rather crude and ungraceful trap.

Collecting itself from the wreckage at the bottom of the pit is a rather furious looking blade tailed mouse.

POW!

You'll be even more irritated after becoming acquainted with my restrictive acid!

After blasting the mouse with a solid dose I climb down into the trap and finish it quickly.

[You have gained experience]

Excellent.

The pitfall trap has borne fruit!

Not much fruit to be sure, a small, limp sort of fruit, perhaps a grape.

But fruit nonetheless!

After some consideration I decide not to consume this mouse. When I see Tiny going for it I have to slap him on the head before he can get his hunger under control.

If we can be patient now then by giving up this little bit of Biomass we will reap greater rewards later.

I pick up the body and carry it out of the hole before resetting the brush over the trap. Once this is done I ever so carefully place the remains of the mouse in the center of the brush, stepping as lightly as a dancer so as not to fall into my own trap.

The fact I was able to catch anything at all is something of a relief. I was seriously concerned that all of this digging would achieve nothing except to help on the path of ant zen.

Hopefully now with a proper lure in place the trap will be able to perform better and bring something a little more tangible for Tiny and I to feast on.

With the original pitfall once again running at full capacity I put Tiny back into his tree and move over to the second construction site, at all times using my heat sensitivity and eyesight to ensure I avoid having any monsters come across me as I work.

Once again to perform my true calling and dig!