

## Chrysalis 81

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#### Chapter 81: Flex the mental muscle!

Consciousness slowly returns by drips, a tiny thought falling on top of a little sensation until my mind pools together and I awake.

HOOGEDAH!

Whoa!

For some reason I feel like I was deep under that time! I technically don't actually sleep so fully losing my awareness is becoming more and more strange to me. The sensation of actually 'waking up' is starting to feel unnerving.

The next thing to hit me is...

Ah! Everything feels weird!

My body is larger, my brain is different, I have new organs and my carapace feels strange!

This sensation is really weird Gandalf!

I mean, it was bad the first time but this evolution has been a much larger change overall!

Especially the brain! The feeling of having more brain than before is so strange I can't even properly define it. It's like I can think.... More? I feel as if I'm constantly thinking about the flow of energy in my core (which is almost empty) even when I'm not thinking about it...

So weird.

The other thing is the sharp increase in size! Last time I spend my might on half size, half density so my change in height and length was not quite as pronounced as it is this time. It's hard to estimate clearly but I think my size has increased by about thirty percent? It's a lot!

I take a moment to stretch out my legs and wiggle each of my three body segments, just trying to become accustomed to the new me.

Waking up as a whole new creature is just so strange, I don't think I'll ever get used to it. I can almost feel that I'm leaving my human-self further and further behind with every evolution. I mean, I have an extra brain now for goodness sake!

It's ok, just going to take a little getting used to, nothing to worry about.

I start flicking my antennae around to get my bearings. Seems like I've been sleeping for a little while, but not too much has changed in here. Tiny has woken up but doesn't seem willing to actually bother himself by moving at all. I think he's just waiting for more prey to drop into the traps.

Here and there a few workers are poking about, attracted by the scent of prey that lingers in this place. This is good since they'll be able to assist and call for aid if anything were to fall into the trap.

I'm so excited to try and practice my magic skills. It's a shame that my core has basically been emptied over the course of my evolution, so I won't be able to do much, but I just have to check it out and see how effective it is.

Eagerly I sink my mind deep into my core.

So fast?!

Almost as if I was already there my mind flashes into the core, the trailing wisps of magical energy floating and billowing like smoke.

I tease some of energy out, grasping it in my thoughts, then directing it out of my core and into my body.

The sensation is so strange. Compared to before the strain is greatly reduced!

Before, moving the mana was like lifting a super heavy rope, which I then had to drag about to put it where I wanted it to go. Mana shaping was even more difficult, not only did I have to lift this stupidly heavy rope, I also had to try and make designs and patterns on the floor with it, and if I made a mistake the whole thing would get knocked out of order.

Now I feel like the weight of the rope has been reduced. Actually that isn't even it. I feel as if the rope weighs the same but someone else is helping to carry it, so I can mostly focus on moving it rather than lifting it.

What makes the feeling doubly strange is that the person helping me lift the burden is also me, just a different part of my mind.

It's.... Odd.

But the effect is everything I was hoping for! Without the sheer, mandible gritting difficulty of moving the mana I can instead devote my mind much more clearly to the task of shaping and directing the energy as I wish.

So much better!

This is going to make my magic skills practice dozens of times simpler!

Excited, I activate my mana sensing ability and once more I'm pleased to discover just how much quicker and easier it is to activate.

Immediately my mental senses extend, reaching out into the tunnels around me. I can quickly detect the core I had saved and stored away in the tunnel wall, and it also appears as if there is another one nearby....

Tiny?

That cheeky little chimp has a core already?! I though his core was consumed when he was recreated... Did it grow back? Or did he already gain enough experience to condense one?

I guess it doesn't matter. For now the core is small, not containing much energy at all. I'm going to have to help him charge that thing up so he can evolve with a little more pizazz!

Finally, I exert my mind on the external mana in the air around me. Now this, is still very difficult. My new sub-brain is still able to lend a hand here but shifting external mana is far more difficult than shifting internal mana. Thankfully it isn't as draining as before so I'll still be able to practice it.

My priorities will be on raising mana shaping and mana detection for the moment. Forceful mana has proven to be effective but the efficiency is terrible. I can practice mana shaping for a long time using the same amount of mana firing one forceful mana ball will take up.

When taking into account the fact that my mana regeneration will actually be slower now than it was before whenever my Gravitational energy gland is empty, like it is now. I'm so excited to see what I can do when that little thing is packed full of energy and ready to go!

I can feel it now inside me, a slow drip of mana is being diverted from my core and into the new body part where some process is being undertaken to transform it, changing it into the new energy type.

Now there is still something I need to experiment with that I haven't really had a chance to do yet. The core mechanic skill. I feel like it will do something critically important but I'm just not sure what.

I have a vague feeling in my mind, scattered thoughts that tickle away at the edges of my perception, thanks to the ideas planted in my head when I purchased the skill and they hint at some amazing possibilities. With my second evolution successfully concluded I think it's time to divert a little attention to exploring this skill.

I crawl along the now more cramped tunnels and use my now larger mandibles to lever the core out of the dirt. Once I have it I move back toward Tiny and away from the workers. I'm a little concerned they might try and grab it, returning it to the Queen before I get a chance to check it out myself.

The Queen has enough cores for the moment thanks guys! This one is mine!

When I finally drop the core onto the ground near Tiny the bat faced ape monster looks curiously at the little spherical crystal on the ground. For a moment I think he's going to snatch it up but before I can even prepare to slap him on the head he has already grown tired of it and rolled back over.

Odd... I thought he want this to reinforce his own core... Seems like he's not too interested. You'll max out that core Tiny, even if I have to ram monster cores down your throat!

Just not yet.

Turning my attention back to the core I slowly bring both of my antennae into contact with it before activating the Core Mechanic skill.

Immediately a wealth of information blooms in my thoughts. I can sense all sorts of things about the monster the core came from, the Death Rabbit. More importantly I can sense the ... instructions of the monster, the DNA. It's almost as if within this core is the design and instructions for the Death Rabbit and I can read them all!

Not only that. I can change them!

I can redesign this creature using the core mechanic skill!

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### **Chapter 82: Mechanic in training**

There is so much information contained within this core. It's hard to describe exactly how my mind perceives it. I feel as if there is a massive filing cabinet full of data, numbers and values under my antennae, but I can't open all of the drawers.

I can sense that there are things I don't have access to, things beneath the surface that my current level of skill won't allow me to influence, but this is a big development! Using this skill, it would possible to custom design your own monsters! Tweaking every body part and stat, potentially even their behaviour!

Eagerly I give it a try. I'll do something simple to start with... I'll take the instructions regarding the statistics and I'll shift them slightly, swapping points from might to toughness. Simple.

How hard can this be? Let's try it!

HHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHRRRRRRUNNNNNNGGGGAAAFLOOEY!!!

Are you kidding me!?

As soon as I attempt to exert my mind and change the instructions I can feel powerful resistance against my will. The information recorded in the core does NOT want to change. Only by a supreme effort of mind was I able to shift it ever so slightly and then grip the change tight in my mind, refusing to let it return back to what it was before.

After holding my change in place for a few seconds it gradually settled and became stable, the new normal for this monster core.

Holy munching mandibles that was difficult!

To be honest, if I handed upgraded my will and cunning I'm not even sure that I would have been able to do it at all. Clearly the path of core manipulation is just as draining as that of magic, requiring extremely potent mental resources in order to use these skills effectively.

I see a tremendous amount of potential in this skill. I'm not exactly sure what I want to do with it, but levelling it up and hopefully upgrading it at level five will reveal more secrets and uses for me. Besides, it would be a waste not to try and make use of my new mental faculties. If I have the juice, I should put it to use!

Heh.

CRASH!

Oh hello! It seems some prey has decided to drop in! Dashing towards the source of the noise I see that there are several workers already ahead of me, rushing towards the scent of prey. The hatchling workers look even smaller to me now after my size increase, little adorable things that can scuttle about under my legs.

To think I was one of them not that long ago, desperately trying to scrape xp and Biomass for myself out of the hostile caves by myself.

Not to worry little guys! Together we shall overcome!

The prey turns out to be just another large centipede which is quickly covered in acid and carved up for transport. More and more workers appear once the message gets out and there is a solid crowd of them chomping on the Biomass before long. I manage to snag a chunk and give it to Tiny before returning to the rabbit core and burying it in the wall again. I want to see if I can keep making changes to the same core in order to grind out Xp for the skill.

No sooner have I finished burying the core when I am disturbed by yet another crashing sound. Another trap has been triggered!

This particular prey is sensationally unlucky, falling into the pitfall at a time when the traps are swarming with workers, many of them working over the centipede and others just milling about, attracted by the pheromone trails left behind by the traffic.

Rushing over I can see that our new guest is a wolf-dragon, writhing and rolling at the bottom of the pit, attempting to release itself from all of the vines and branches. I wince as many of them are snapped by the creature's struggle. I'm going to have to replace all of those you mutt!

Behold the fury of the insect!

Workers are already launching acid and are preparing to swarm the beast, I simply join in the tide and land a few pleasing chomps before the monster is put out of its misery. For some reason the traps seem quite popular at the moment. Before the ants can start their messy work of transporting the Biomass I quickly activate mana detection skill to see if there is a core in the body. Sadly not.

I manage to secure another slice of Biomass for Tiny and sneak a few mouthfuls myself. I don't gain any points from it but it's enough to abate my hunger a little.

Tiny fed, I crawl up my pitfall traps and start to reset them, covering over the opening with layers of branches vines and vegetation until they blend fairly well with the forest floor.

I manage to pick up on something almost as soon as I crawl out of the dirt and into the open. There is a freaking ton of monsters about. Like, a lot.

The sounds of prowling beasts are everywhere around me, their low growls rumbling through the air and the snarling, furious impacts of battle can be heard in almost every direction. Where the hell are all of these guys coming from?!

Several times I have to pause my work and descend into my pitfalls and out of sight when groups of monsters or particularly large individuals pass through. With so many enemies in the area I feel it's even more important that the colony keep a low profile. Even if they are enormous for ants and even if there are hundreds of them, the colony does not have the strength to fight off a never ending horde of much larger and stronger beasts.

The pitfall trap plan is working well for the moment, no need to change course.

In fact, the pitfall trap is working even better than I'd anticipated. With a steady stream of workers scabbling around the trap network, attracted by the calls to battle and food trails, I'm not really needed to help them win the individual battles against their surprised and incapacitated victims.

With the traps set I can trust that the workers will be able to handle the situation on their own. The only problem I can imagine is if the workers start to climb out of the pitfalls and explore the forest above, potentially attracting monsters that will start a loud fight.

To try and prevent this from happening I do several laps around the upper edge of every pitfall, laying a thick pheromone message of "dangerous! Don't come here!".

Claws crossed the workers will comprehend the message and won't climb out of the pitfalls. I can't really think of anything else I can do, hopefully the workers will be able to take care of the prey that drops into the network whenever I'm absent.

When I finished my work on the traps I've managed to regenerate a bit of mana which I immediately put to use practicing my shaping skills. The difference in difficulty to before is like night and day, putting a smile on my ant dial even as I continue to draw the mana out of my core and bend it to my will.

[Mana Shaping has reached level 3].

Yes! Already the sub brain is paying dividends!

As an added bonus I'm not even particularly tired after emptying my core for practice. What a refreshing feeling!

I find Tiny sleeping after he finishing off his snack and I rudely poke him awake with one foot. C'mon you ape! Let's go exploring!

I've been cooped up in the trap network for a while now, I want to head up to the top of the ant hill and see what is happening in the forest up there.

Eventually Tiny grudgingly complies with my repeated prodding and we head towards the nest and then up the tunnel to the ant hill. My little ape friend is getting less and less little with every passing meal. The tunnel is going to get a bit cramped for him soon! I might have to make a few modifications in order to ensure my ape companion can fit...

After a bit of climbing we emerge out of the top of the ant hill and survey the forest around us. Time to go scouting!

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### **Chapter 83: The ants new move**

Ever since I arrived in this strange underground forest it has been bustling with activity, monsters appearing from all over the place, coming out of goodness knows where and fighting constantly.

But now ... something seems a bit ... off.

As Tiny and I emerge from within the nest to the top of the anthill we are greeted with a sheer wall of sound. The cacophony from the surrounding trees and giant mushrooms is piercing. Howling roars, filled with endless bloodlust and thirst for battle echo from the ceiling and the distant walls over and over again.

The forest, has lost its chill.

I think we can officially call it, there is absolutely nothing calm about this forest in the present moment! Is everyone having a bad hair day? Wake up on the wrong side of the ... cave?

Even as Tiny and I stand and stare from the top of the hill, elevated above the tree line I notice a few things have changed from the colony perspective.

I don't notice any trails of ants leading off into the forest right now. Having a quick sniff around I notice the scent paths have dissipated as well. It seems that conditions out in the woods have been too hot for the workers to handle so they've retreated back into the nest. Even the ever present guard detail is positioned much higher up the mound than before, retreating from the trees edging up to the base of the ant hill.

For whatever reason, the place is going completely gonzo.

Every time I come up here I think the monsters have reached peak crazy town but it seems there is always further to go!

Tiny doesn't seem to care, his somewhat glassy eyed stare darts from sound to sound, almost as if he's calculating the nearest fight he can hurl himself into. If you start running off into the forest Tiny, I swear on the facial follicles of the bearded one I will drag you back into the nest by your head!

Almost as if he can feel my simmering rage the bat faced ape slowly settles onto his heels, adopting a waiting posture.

Damn right!

I'm determined to scout out the surrounding terrain. If the humans have returned or there are creatures massing against the nest, I want to know about it! I can't be gone for long however. The fact that the workers have effectively abandoned food gathering operations up here means the colony is even more reliant on the trap network than I thought. Without me to undertake the tedious work of resetting the pitfalls that food source will quickly dry up.

I'll give myself a few hours, see what I can see and then return.

Onward Tiny! Let us move out!

With my ape companion in tow I cautiously begin to make my way into the forest, ensuring Tiny stays behind me at all times so I can scout the way.

The stealth skill must show its incredible strength now!

Luckily it does. As we slowly make our way through the forest we are frequently held up by battling monsters of all kinds. Some types I'd seen before but others were entirely new. Possibly the most fearsome was a silver panther looking creature. With each swipe of its paws blades of air would fly forward, slashing through everything they touched.

No thanks!

When I saw what was going on, Tiny and I backed up slowly and then skedaddled out of there.

After half an hour of careful stalking I finally come across something I'd been wanting to find for a long time.

In the center of a small clearing in the forest is an ugly looking mound with several holes punched in the side, each about fifty centimetres in diameter.

The mound itself is three metres high and I suspect the space inside extends down in the ground.

This here, is a centipede mound!

Probably the source of those damn crawlies that barged into the fight with the rabbits. We aren't far from the nest here in this location, if possible I don't want to leave this mound undisturbed.

How can I deal with it though? Only myself and my ape companion are here, I'm not convinced that we can take on every centipede inside that mound, there could be as many as fifty in there, slithering over each other in a hideous tangle of legs.

Yuck!

I settle Tiny a little distance away from the mound and slowly creep forward, antennae pointing directly forward.

My heat detection is picking up a whole mess of sources inside the mound. No doubt about it, this pile of dirt is jam packed full of claw centipedes.

Out of curiosity I briefly engage my mana detection skill and what I see is quiet surprising!

From within my mind I can sense the eddy and flow of magic as it constantly shifts in the space around me. To this sense, dirt and rock are meaningless and the movement of the mana within the mound is clear to see.

Two small beads of light pulse with energy inside, two monster cores!

Something else though...

Deep in the base of the mound, several metres below ground, the mana there is dense. Rather than wisps of smoke the energy is moving in potent ropes, twisting and rotating like a miniature storm.

What the heck is down there!?

I seriously want to know.... I want to know so bad Gandalf!

The only way to look is to somehow deal with this entire mound of centipedes...

I think it's time... time to break out the big guns!

Cautiously, I retreat back towards the tree where Tiny is waiting, about fifteen metres away from the base of the mound. Scanning the surroundings I can tell that I have a moment of peace in which to do my work without being interrupted, but to be sure, Tiny and I ascend into the tree and blend with the foliage.

Gripping tightly to a branch with my claws I begin to employ my most potent move.



Reaching inside of myself I can sense the Gravitational Mana gland and the mysterious energy held within it. Slowly, and carefully, I begin to draw out that power, bringing it towards my throat where I start to condense it, forming a small ball of furious gravitational force.

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### **Chapter 84: The gravity of the situation**

Even after nearly a day my gravitational energy gland is still not full. With my sub-brain offering a heightened awareness of all things core related I can tell that there has been a steady drip of mana flowing out of my core and into the new gland.

The conversion rate seems to be very slow, the gland is only thirty percent full after slowly charging since my evolution. Even with my core as enhanced as it is, it has been unable to provide enough mana to fill up the gland.

I'm starting to think that gravitational energy is actually super hard to make. At my current rate it would take several days for the gland to be fully charged from empty. I don't know if that would be the case for every type of energy. I suspect that if I had chosen fire or one of the other elemental selections then the process of converting mana to the particular energy type would not nearly be so slow.

It's possible other types of energy are even more demanding, time and space are potentially just as difficult. However the slow rate of charge actually reinforces my confidence that this was a good choice. If it was easy to do then I would have just waited until I could have done it manually myself, there would be no need to invest a precious body upgrade to achieve this result. Since Gravity magic appears to be so difficult then the choosing to shortcut the process of converting raw mana into gravity energy is well worth it!

With my sub-brain helping reduce the strain I continue to draw out the energy from my new gland and pack it tightly into a tiny ball that sits in my throat. The energy flows like immaterial water, hundreds of small streams leaving the gland and twisting through my body before they are caught by the rapidly growing ball.

Thanks to the reduced effort I'm able to keep a better eye on my surroundings during the process. Concealed high in my tree and remaining still my stealth skill is able to properly display its full potential, I'm not concerned that I'll be detected. Tiny however, is becoming increasingly difficult to hide. The ape is getting larger with every meal, he currently looms over me even after my evolution. He's achieved roughly half of his full grown size at this point. On the one hand I'm glad that he is getting stronger, on the other hand we want to hide more than we want to fight right now!

He's doing his best, I'll give him that. In my nearly 360 degrees of vision I can see him behind me, curled into a ball, resting on the intersection of the branch and trunk. It looks like he has snapped a leafy branch off and is holding it in front of his body to try and conceal his muscular, gorilla like frame.

The idea itself isn't bad but he's chosen such a tiny branch that he is barely covered at all. Overall the effect reminds me a person trying to cover their privates with a fig leaf.

Still, it appears as if he put some thought into it, which is a win?

From the mound a centipede sticks its nose out of a hole and quickly peeks about before retreating out of sight. I think these creatures are also finding it difficult to hunt in the current forest. Where once upon a time roving gangs of five centipedes were enough to threaten most things, the number of larger and more threatening beasts is constantly growing. One of those Lion Ogres would thrash a dozen unevolved centipedes without an issue.

My guess is the centipedes in this mound are clustering together and leaping on any prey that approaches too close to their nest using their full numbers to suppress the foe.

Which means that the number of the little crawlers inside the mound is extremely high.

Excellent.

As more mana pours into the force ball a qualitative change occurs. I can already tell that the gravitational energy doesn't quite feel the same as normal, raw mana. The colour is certainly different. Normal mana is an intense, bright blue but this energy is a deep purple. In my mental awareness I can see the ball of dense power growing darker as it becomes more compact.

Then, with an almost audible sound the force ball ... changes. From a small, tightly packed energy cloud it suddenly shrinks and congeals itself into a perfectly spherical, rapidly rotating ball. The colour has become so deep as to be almost black. As soon as the change happens the pressure on my mind to control the process has doubled! The energy in my gland roars out in a constant stream, almost against my will, as it gets pulled into the sphere faster and faster.

Soon the ball appears almost like a spiral galaxy in my mind's eye, the flowing mana caught in the irresistible pull of gravity as it circles around the sphere in tighter circles before finally merging with it. With each passing moment the sphere grows imperceptibly larger and the pull on my mana becomes more powerful!

What the heck is this?!

Have I made a mana black hole or what?! I have to frantically focus all of the mental energy I can summon from both of my brains in order to maintain even a semblance of control over the energy. If I lost concentration for even a second I'm not sure what would happen as all of the mana packed into the sphere would slip out of my control!

[Forceful Mana has reached level 3]

Not now dammit! Claws crossed this skill improves my control and not the speed that the mana is compressed!

When the last faint trails of gravitational energy have been drawn out of my gland I can feel the almost unstoppable pull begin to affect the mana inside my core. Not good!

If I don't release this damn thing it's going to drain me completely dry of mana, even if I don't want it to.

I open my mouth wide.

The centipede mound is perfectly still before me.

The dense ball of mana, so deep is the purple now it appears to a fathomless black, gradually becomes still.

I bring all my will to bear on the sphere, forcing with every ounce of mental strength. This is far more difficult than the normal force mana ball. I feel like I'm shifting a mountain with my bare hands!

Slowly, minutely, the sphere begins to move. With every moment I continue to exert my mind it accelerates out of my throat and then out of my mouth.

**BAM!**

Like a dam breaking, once the momentum has risen from a trickle to a stream it suddenly explodes into a torrent.

As soon as the gravity sphere leaves my mouth a high pitched shrieking sound shatters the silence. The sphere blasts forward, slowly rotating all the while. An unfathomable pulling force can be felt, ripping leaves out of the tree I'm standing in as it streaks away.

In response to the sudden cacophony of sound, centipedes begin to pour out of the mound, claws thrashing in the air as they rush to meet the threat.

It's too late for them.

Even before the sphere impacts against the nest, several centipedes are caught in the inexorable pull. Though they attempt to resist the monsters are ripped from the ground and drawn towards the sphere. Once they come into direct contact with it they are ripped apart.

[You have slain ...]

[You have slain ...]

Ignoring the voice of Gandalf I stare wide eyed as the sphere finally thuds into the mound.

At first nothing.

Then the sphere flickers and expands rapidly! In a millisecond it has grown to be a swirling vortex of death at least three metres in diameter. Everything close to the edges is pulled in by the unfathomable force and summarily destroyed.

After a second the sphere flickers again and then vanishes. The awful shrieking sound finally disappears.

In the mound a large spherical chunk has been cleanly carved out, exposing the inside of the nest where the unsightly remains of dozens of centipedes can be seen.

[You have slain ...]

[You have slain ...]

[You have slain ...]

As the voice of Gandalf rains like a chorus in my ears I can only behold the destruction wrought by my new ultimate attack in awe.

I shall call it... the Gravity Bomb!

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### **Chapter 85: Voluntary beating**

The effect of the gravity bomb is far beyond my expectations. That was only forty percent of the gland being charged! What would one hundred percent look like? I shudder to imagine. To be honest I'm not even sure if I would be able to control that much energy. The gravity bomb I just fired had almost escaped my grasp, even after my upgraded mental capacity.

Just goes to show how difficult magic is to perform in this world, even with my heavy investment to upgrade my mental capacity it isn't necessarily going to be enough to take me all the way to the end of the magic road. In future evolutions I may need to further invest in expanding my sub-brain and increasing my will stat.

For now the results are certainly good enough.

[You have gained experience]

[You have gained experience]

The voice of Gandalf continues to echo in chorus in my mind dozens of times, announcing the same message.

[You have reached level 2]

Even after smashing all of those of claw centipedes I only gained enough experience for one level. The penalty for defeating creatures a whole two evolutions below me is being displayed.

In the aftermath of the gravity bomb there is an eerie silence for a moment. Tiny and I begin to descend the tree in order to survey the damage more closely. As grow closer to the mound several centipedes begin to crawl out from deep within their nest, clearly protected from the blast by their position below the ground level.

These guys are seriously mad, claws snatching at the air and mandibles viciously chomping in a clear display of their rage. Tiny and I are quite delighted to see them and happily hurl ourselves upon the foes, ready to do battle.

I'm especially glad to see these centipedes survive as they are perfect for training a new skill I've wanted to level up for some time.

My Exo-skeleton defense skill!

This particular purchase was part of my effort to tank up, buffing my defense to the point I wouldn't have to fear little beasties like these guys, but I haven't had a good opportunity to test it and gain experience in it yet.

This handy skill doesn't actually improve my carapace in any physical way, what it does do is give me insights and instincts to help make best use out of my external skeleton. I can feel the skill at work in my mind as I close in on the claw centipedes and deliberately allow them to strike towards my body. Seeing

the angle of the attack I almost subconsciously shift the position of my body to present a greater slope to the enemy, blunting the impact and reducing the surface the clawed beastie can grab hold of.

Gweheheheh. Behold my skillful maneuvers!

Ouch!

Another claw centipede has approached from the side and bitten me! Damn thing!

Clearly my skills need improving....

In this way I allow several of the skittering monsters to approach me and attack whilst I stand there and take it like an ant! I try to react as fast as I can, adjusting my position with all the speed and precision I can in order to reduce any damage taken.

To be honest, very little damage has actually been taken. My diamond carapace and improved toughness is showing itself to be more than capable of blunting the attacks of these monsters, my double, core boosted evolutions are displaying their effects now! These yet to evolve centipedes are simply no threat to me!

[Exo-skeleton defense has reached level 2]

Haha! The perfect way to improve ones' defensive skills, tanking blows from weak enemies! This is the ultimate wisdom of humanity on display you foolish centipedes!

Four of the ugly monsters have surrounded me now, battering me on all sides as I continue to make small adjustments in my stance and posture.

[Exo-skeleton defense has reached level 3]

Bwahahaha!

Wait, Tiny nooo!

Having finished off his own opponents my ape companion has gleefully rushed over, impressive fists crackling with blue electricity and in only a few short moments he has pounded the centipedes around me into paste.

As I stand stunned and staring, Tiny turns his bat face towards me, beaming with pride.

... Well done buddy. Well done.

Tiny flaps his little bat ears and leaps into eating scooping up handfuls of monster and cramming it into his face.

... gross.

Ok fine then. I start to hunt around the mound, curiously prodding here and there to see what I can find. After searching around the outside of the mound I manage to find a small, tennis ball sized lump which I cannot really describe. When I try and pick it up I find that it is seriously heavy!

Is this the compressed remains of the gravity bomb?! Did it really manage to squish all of that dirt and Biomass into this little ball?!

That is a truly terrifying level of compression Gandalf!

It's like having a car crusher launched from my mouth!

It's almost a shame that I can't really eat this ball, it would appear to be a rather disgusting cocktail, three parts dirt, one part crushed centipede. There is probably a couple of points of Biomass mashed into here, it's a shame to see them go to waste but a stomach full of dirt wasn't really what I had in mind for a snack...

Tiny will probably eat it.

Now where were those cores?

I detected two monster cores when I scanned the mound as well as that strange convergence of energy at the deepest recesses of this nest. I'm very keen to discover just what on Pangera that was.

Quickly activating magic detection it seems as if one of the cores has simply vanished, perhaps crushed by the gravity bomb... Whilst the second is deep in the mound, close to that strange energy I had sensed.

Climbing over the edge of the mound I get my first glimpse of the inside of the centipedes home. It appears as if the outer layer of the mound covers a large hollow space on the inside, a space that extends several meters underground. These mounds contain even more space than I'd assumed! No wonder so many centipedes can fit in one of these things!

Right down the bottom of the mound the open space converges again into a narrow hole that extends deeper still. Right in the bottom I can see an extremely bright source of concentrated mana. The mana is so thick I can visibly see it swirling in place, leaking out of the dirt and hovering like smoke in the air.

What the heck is this?!

I can also see a centipede attempting to hide itself by curling its body together beneath the mana. This centipede appears to have a slight blue tinge to its carapace, and is slightly smaller than the normal claw centipede. This must be an evolved specimen!

Attempting to hide eh? Perhaps you were smart enough to realise you couldn't win in a fight against something that could obliterate the nest in one hit? Thought your only chance to survive was to conceal yourself down here eh?

Tough luck buddy! Nobody slips past this ant!

Before the monster can discover it has been found I turn to present the commercial harbour to the foe and blast it with acid!

POW!

Immediately a horrified screech can be heard and the monster immediately writhes and attempts to charge out of its hidey hole towards me in one last desperate charge.

CHOMP!

[You have slain level 3 Nobiles iuuenes scolopendra]

One snap of the mandibles is enough to fatally wound my smaller opponent. Weak! This is an evolved monster?

Better grab a bite.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Nobiles iuuenes scolopendra, you are awarded one Biomass]

[Basic profile of the Nobiles iuuenes scolopendra unlocked]

[Nobiles iuuenes scolopendra: Noble centipede young, This evolution of the claw centipede is weaker than the base monster in terms of raw fighting strength but instead gains intelligence and the ability to coordinate its more primitive brethren]

Interesting! So this evolution of the centipede is like a leader caste? It appears as if the centipedes who successfully evolve into the adult claw centipede have to leave the nest of their kind, they could hardly fit after all, whereas this evolution stays in the mound and helps coordinate their fellow kind.

Also, young? That word leads me to believe there are quite a few evolutions ahead of this noble centipede, increasing its cunning and becoming a more capable leader?

Interesting...

I quickly rummage through the Biomass until I manage to locate the monster core which I quickly absorb, taking my maximum mana up to 52.

It'll be a long road to 100...

I then start to consume the food whilst watching the bizarre mana phenomenon below me. What on earth is going on down there?

By the time I finish my meal, gaining another two Biomass for my trouble I get an answer.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 86: Still much to learn**

As I ate the mana cloud beneath me grew more intense, radiating a blinding glow that forced me to turn my head away to avert my eyes.

Curse my lack of eyelids! Sometimes an entity just has to blink!

There is a bright flash and then the intensity of the light fades, allowing me to turn back and observe what the heck just took place.

The mana cloud is still there, lazily swirling as the glowing energy leeches out of the walls, but there is also a centipede! A brand new claw centipede uncurls itself and upon seeing me staring down at it, immediately opens its claws and charges!

CHOMP!

[You have defeated level 1 claw centipede]

[You have gained experience]

That was one short life...

Holy bushiness of the grey one! This is a spawn point?!

I hadn't had confirmation of this point yet, I had no idea how all of these monsters were being created. I hadn't seen any monsters procreating, giving birth or any such thing, but that didn't mean that it didn't or couldn't happen. Here though I have proof! Evidence! Monsters are spawned from concentrated mana points in the ground, possibly also in caves!

But why? And how?! Is the creation mana I saw in the menu? If so, who is doing the creating? Is this simply a natural phenomenon in this world, a by-product of mana? It seems ridiculous to suggest that in any place the strange energy form that is mana exists, monsters will begin to spontaneously pop out of the ground!

Just what is going on in this place?

This doesn't explain the behaviour of the centipedes however, it makes so much sense. Of course the centipedes would construct a mound around a spawn point, reinforcements would literally pop out of thin air and begin to work with the rest of them.

Perhaps in each mound a noble can also be found? Is it the noble centipede that gathers its followers together, creating the mound around a spawn point? Or do the centipedes perform this action themselves?

Interesting nonetheless.

Of course, the other aspect of this discovery is what it could mean for the colony...

A spawn point is essentially a creature manufacturing location. Looking down the mana cloud is already beginning to recover its intensity, growing brighter with each passing second. It is entirely possible this location will spit out a new centipede every hour! Free food for the colony! An endless supply of weak individual monsters to plump up those larvae and swell our numbers!

The only problem is.. How to connect it to the nest without drawing too much attention. We aren't too far from the ant hill here, it should be possible, if tedious to dig a tunnel that will connect this location to the nest. Such an endeavor would probably take a full day of digging, even with the excavation skill.

Once connected how will I manage this location? I would probably need to put down a pheromone trail to bring workers here so they are in position the moment the centipede spawns.

It doesn't seem worth it to create such a long tunnel and divert the workforce just for one centipede an hour... but securing such a safe and reliable food supply is also important!

With a sinking feeling I gradually realize what I should do.

It makes a lot of sense to connect this spawn point to the colony underground, so the tunnel will be constructed. To make the investment of workers worth the time and effort, I should also create another pitfall network here, so that a number of workers could remain in this location and still be efficient in food gathering.



This will increase the amount of work I need to do in terms of trap resetting but once a day should still be sufficient for both networks.

The only problem I have, is this is going to be a whole lotta digging...

Time to embrace the zen of ants! Dig Anthony! Dig with your very soul!

In the end it takes me almost two days of non-stop work.

Tiny amuses himself by immediately smashing the spawned centipedes and consuming the Biomass, then napping until the next one spawns, roughly an hour later. I'm starting to notice a few changes to my ape companion, his hands seem larger, his fur thicker and even his eyes appear to be sharper than before. I can't be certain but I think he might be starting to spend the Biomass he is gaining. Perhaps he couldn't before since he wasn't sufficiently grown?

In any case, if he is getting stronger then it's all for the best.

I lost myself to the timeless mantra of the ant, digging, carrying dirt and rock to the surface, only to return and dig again. I'm once again grateful for my improved stats since I was able to power through the work better than I could before.

I was also able to level the excavation skill another two times, raising it to level 6.

Through sheer minded, mandible grippingly bloody mindedness I complete this project.

Five new pitfall traps, fully completed, covered and baited with fresh centipede await their first guests. I took the time to lay down my warning message to try and keep the workers from climbing out of the traps before laying another trail, a 'food this way' message, back to the colony.

After connecting the main tunnel I visited the first network to see how things were getting on. Four of the traps needed to be reset, which was pleasing to see. Judging by the number of workers scurrying about they'd been quite successful at grabbing food from this location and were keen for more.

I re-lay the food trail a few times until I manage to lure a couple of workers from the ant hill shaft across to the new trap network. When they get there I manage to shoo Tiny away from the spawn point long enough for the new workers to find a freshly created claw centipede and quickly dispatch it, rushing back to the colony with the Biomass and sure laying down more pheromones to recruit further workers to this location.

Excellent.

I hold down the fort for a little while until the number of ants in this network has risen to a suitable level. I while away the time by practicing my mana shaping and taking care of the one Croca-Beast who dropped into a pitfall.

Once again I fed the Biomass to Tiny and let the colony take another portion. The Croca, despite still being fearsome beasts, are unevolved after all. If I were to eat them I'd end up with a full stomach and little else. Rather than waste so many points of Biomass, let Tiny and colony gain the full benefit.

Finally, as the number of workers increases I feel comfortable enough to take a well-deserved nap. Which is to say torpor.

HAGA!

After shaking myself awake it's pleasing to see that the second network has become reasonably populated with workers, enough that I feel comfortable leaving the area to them and moving on. After one last sweep to reset the traps at both networks I kick tiny awake and we are once again ready to depart and explore!

Hopefully the colony is able to benefit fully from all of this work I've done!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 87: Tunnel solution**

With the colony as well provided for as I can manage for the time being, Tiny and I once again venture out from beneath the surface and into the forest, resuming our role as scouts.

I really wish I could find out why the forest has been so much more active than when I first arrived here. Is this a permanent increase in monsters or will it start to die down after a while? Because it is getting increasingly crazy up here.

When my fuzzy companion and I start to make our way through the forest we immediately encounter another Bear Tyrant battling furiously against a Lion Ogre. The two massive monsters slash and bite at each other, every blow carrying their immense weight and force behind it.

The Lion Ogre leaps forward and attempts to bite with its impressive fangs, trying to rip a huge chunk out of the indomitable bear. However, the part lion monsters is shocked to find just how tough the hide of that bear can be.

Growling like a rumbling volcano the Tyrant bear shrugs off the Lion ogre with a toss of its head before drawing back one paw for a colossal strike. I can see the small puncture wounds on the bear's back closing over, even as it strikes savagely against its foe.

As impressive as this fight between these monsters is, are you guys really sure you want to be slugging it out in this place?

Sure enough, drawn by the roar of combat the scent of Biomass more monstrous beasts begin to show their faces. First a small pack of Dragon-Wolf cubs, then a Titan-Croc thunders into the scene, followed by a horde of blade tailed mice.

Tiny is practically clawing at the ground, desperate to throw himself into what I can only describe as a monstrous blender of death. Only my indomitable stare and a few threatening snaps of the mandibles manage to prevent him from embracing his inner lemming.

At about this point I decide to NOPE the heck out of there. There is no way that melee stops growing anytime soon! If I thought I could get away with it I'd love to try and nip up a tree, charge a truly massive gravity bomb and drop it on the lot of them. After two days of solid digging the gravitational energy gland is about eighty percent full, twice what I had available to annihilate the centipede nest!

In the end I decide to err on the side of caution. Some of these monsters may have been able to detect me as I charged up such a powerful magic, and if I were to be attacked with all of that energy stuck in my throat who knows what could happen?

With an increasing cacophony of sound rising in the forest, Tiny and I retreat and find another path. The scene does bring into the focus the biggest problem I have hunting out here on the surface. Any sort of fight is going to quickly escalate into a similar picture rapidly in this forest. Even moving through the forest undetected has elevated in difficulty once again, testing my stealth to the limit.

Eventually, I've had enough.

Enough!

I'm so tired of bumping into monsters I could fight and win but having to let that Biomass and Xp slip out of my mandibles!

There has to be a better way to scope out the situation than this!

Grudgingly, I start to shepherd Tiny to towards the edge of the forest, where the trees and overgrown mushrooms give way to the sheer, craggy walls that support the colossal ceiling to this comically large underground space.

It takes two hours of careful treading, during which I level up stealth once more, before we manage to reach the edge of the forest and take shelter amongst the stone outcroppings at the base of the wall.

Tiny despondently scratches at the rocks as I ponder our next move, I don't doubt he still regrets having to abandon his plan to submit himself to mortal danger in the forest for little to no reason. You may be an increasingly strong lightning ape with a bat face, but you are thick as several bricks stacked on one another, aren't you buddy?

This open space has become too deadly for safe travel, too dangerous for safe hunting and generally a massive pain in my ant backside!

Actually... That might be the answer.

The open forest has become a complete no go zone, an area probably filled with monster spawn points, pumping out fresh Biomass 24/7 like a franchise fast food joint. The rate of monster appearance and the general level and evolution seems to be constantly be climbing! If the forest is out, let's try and explore a few tunnels then!

I know that there are a number of tunnels that connect to the edges of this massive place, I arrived through one such tunnel after all! There are also caves and small monster habitats that have been carved into the outer wall here. All of these places are probably much safer for me to conduct my investigations and hunting!

This could work!

Excited, I rouse Tiny with a quick poke and we begin to clamber over the rocks as we follow the edge of the forest around the wall. I don't want to get too far from the anthill so we move clockwise, a path that will take us close to the hill from our current position.

We still come across the occasional monster but they generally wander out of the woods, take a look around and then return back into the forest when they can't find anything.

It's during one of those moments, as Tiny and I scurry behind a few rocks waiting for a strange panther like creature to get bored and leave that the voice of Gandalf once again perturbs my musings.

[Advanced Stealth has reached level five].

Oh ho! After all of my sneaking about through the forest of death I finally get another level in stealth! Excellent!

Seriously though, this skill is hard to raise! Perhaps I need to be more consciously hiding from a particular target for the skill to gain proper experience? I don't know. The level has raised, this can only be a good thing.

After ten more minutes of searching we finally discover a tunnel entrance part way up the wall. From the outside the tunnel appears to be slightly narrow, but I think Tiny will still fit ok, if a little squeezed.

It isn't hard for me to skitter up to the opening but my ape companion has to make a more difficult climb before he can enter. Not in the open spaces now Tiny! Welcome back to the tunnels, ant country!

Once inside, I almost feel relieved to be back into the narrow, stony confines of a wild, unexplored tunnel again. The walls of the tunnel are brightly illuminated by the scrolling veins of light that have become so familiar to me now. In fact, the light is pulsing more rapidly than ever before, the tunnel is so well lit it almost feels like daytime in here.

Curiously I activate my mana detection skill and sure enough I get a strong response from the walls, providing the final proof that these twining vines are in fact full of mana, almost like veins, transporting mana through the walls and throughout this entire underground realm. The realization is quite strange, it almost feels as if I'm inside a giant organism, the tunnels forming the arteries that move the blood like mana throughout a strange body.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 88: Once more to battle!**

Muahaha!

Here in the tunnels my supreme senses are once again able to display their full dominance! Enhanced compound eyes! Heat detecting antennae! Mana detection! All of these things combine to ensure nothing can sneak up on me in here.

In fact, it will be I who will do the sneaking!

So long as Tiny stays a reasonable distance behind.

According to the Tunnel Map this cave seems to be winding slightly downward and curving to the left. There are various twists and turns but that seems to be the overall trend. After being in the forest, where mayhem seems to reign at all times at the moment, entering these quiet tunnels is a shocking difference. Being able to hear the faint echoes of my legs skittering or Tiny's hands gripping on the rocks has me jumping at shadows!

What a sec!

My antennae start furiously wiggling in the air as I attempt to confirm the faint sensation I just detected. Yes! A heat signature has whispered against my antennae, something is approaching, not far away at all!

Turning quickly, I hustle Tiny into a crevice against the wall of the tunnel and wait, hoping we haven't been discovered. I want to be able to get the jump on these monsters, whatever they may be! This ant is hungry for battle! Mainly for the Xp and Biomass but also to battle!

This may just be another aspect of my adjusting attitude after being reborn in this world but the thrill and excitement of fighting for your own food, the contest to see which lifeform is worthy to go on, growing stronger on the remains of the other...

It's just really fulfilling... somehow?

I tense myself as the heat readings draw closer. I think I'm picking up multiple heat sources actually... or perhaps one large one? I'm sensing multiple sources, each very similar. Perhaps multiple monsters of the same type?

I'm still not used to my heat detection sense dammit!

A moment later they come into sight. There are three of them, climbing upside down on the roof. The first impression I get is, these guys didn't skip leg day. Each of them has four seriously long legs, similar to a spider's legs, that extend far below their heads before reaching a joint and returning to grip the ceiling. Suspended in the middle of these limbs is their main body, similar to a leech they resemble a tube with a hideous fanged mouth capping one end. Two clawed hands extend from the center of their.... Torso.

I'm not currently seeing any eyes on these things... can they see at all?

Just as the trio of ... spider leeches... is about to pass over my head I slowly turn and reposition myself to display the business district in all of its glory. Thankfully my subtle movement isn't spotted and the tree monsters pass over Tiny and I without twitching.

POW!

Receive the acid of justice!

The spider leech bringing up the rear is doused in restrictive acid before it has a chance to respond, the sticky acid immediately congeals and burns away at its soft body, steam begins rising from it.

My victim unleashes a horrifying yowl that penetrates my ears instantly. Holy heck! It sounds like one hundred cats just got trod on their tail! What is this ungodly noise Gandalf!?

All three monsters turn towards me with dizzying speed and before I can release my second acid blast the world goes black!

What the heck happened! I can't see a damned thing!

My antennae continue to wave frantically and I'm relieved to find I can still detect the body heat of our three opponents, as well as Tiny next to me. Gritting my mandibles I activate mana sensing as I dodge to one side.

No sooner had I leapt to the left than I feel a sharp wind rush past followed by the crunching sound of something piercing into stone. Yikes!

Unsurprisingly, each of these monsters has a core, lighting them up like a Christmas tree. Although it's distracting and difficult to keep the skill active for a long time, I'm going to leave it on for the time being. Combined with my heat detection it'll allow me to locate the enemy at the very least!

Tiny started bellowing in rage as soon as the lights went out, frustrated he can't strike at his enemy in the darkness. Electricity immediately begins to crackle around his body, twisting and writhing down his arms like deadly serpents, but he has no idea what to do with it and continues to shout and beat his chest, daring the enemy to show themselves to him.

I refuse to slow down and continue to dodge here and there, anticipating a strike at any moment. My sense are telling me that the three spider leeches are still attached to roof, roughly where they were when I last saw them, which leads to believe they have some method of attacking from range, I can't sit still!

Sure enough, as I continue to erratically leap from place to place I hear the occasional crunch as some projectile smashes in the rock and dirt around my feet.

This is dangerous!

Turning suddenly I rush with all my strength towards and then up the wall. Three versus one they'll certainly win the ranged battle, so I'm going to join them on the ceiling! Frankly it's my favorite place to fight!

[mana sensing has reached level 2]

I can feel my sub-brain burning out, maintaining the detection skill requires a lot of concentration and I'm not really helping to carry the load with my main mind, since I'm focusing on the fight. Hold on for a bit longer little brain!

Whatever they've done to block my eyesight is still in effect, the entire tunnel has become completely dark, not a whisper of light is reaching my eyes, even from the walls under my very feet. I can't imagine anything natural would be able to produce such an effect, it must be a magical phenomenon of some kind!

Now I'm even more keen to take a bite out of these creatures. Anything with a core advanced enough to cast spells must have evolved several times, surely! Give me that Biomass!

As I skitter up the tunnel wall in a zigzagging pattern dodging their projectiles as best I can, Tiny has finally had enough. I can almost feel the rage burning in his bat eyes as he opens his maw wide and unleashes a piercing supersonic scream!

As the waves of sound wash over me I manage to resist the mind numbing effect but the spiders don't appear to have been so lucky, I can feel their heat signature flinch and the mana in their bodies appears disrupted for a moment before it recovers.

A moment is all I need! With the speed of a leopard ... ant, I rush onto the ceiling and dash forward to engage in upside down combat!

Approaching from the monster's left I weave in between its long legs and clamp down with a mighty crunch!

How to describe the feeling of biting down a spider legged leech monster's tube like body?

...

Disgusting.

Seriously disgusting.

My mandibles snap shut with a horrible squelching sound, like feet stuck in deep mud, before the monster basically... pops, showering my face with indescribable substances.

I mean... YUCK!

Dammit Gandalf!

[you have slain level 16 tenebris serpere]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 3]

Muahaha!

I may be covered in goop, but worth it!

As the now lifeless body of the monster loses its grip and falls to the floor I am already advancing on the second spider leech, mandibles open wide and ready to deliver my justice.

Sensing my approach I can feel the monster quiver and leap off the ceiling, seeking to put some distance between us. I can see the flow of mana flare in the creatures core for a moment and I immediately scabble to dodge, just as another sharp impact threads between my legs, narrowly missing.

What the heck is that spell!?

The spider leech may have been pleased with its strategy for a moment but after it lands and attacks me it is soon set upon by a truly irritated Tiny, who was clearly able to hear the monster land. Swinging wildly with his electric fists my ape companion soon manages to connect with his invisible foe and splatters them in a single punch.

Meanwhile I commit to the final target, running a random pattern to throw off the projectiles I close quickly, charging my infused mandibles to end it quickly!

SNAP!

The monster manages to narrowly avoid my strike, jerking back its body at the last moment, but I still manage to seize of the legs.

CRUNCH!

Showing no mercy I sever the leg, closing my ears to the almost demonic yowling of the beast as I plunge forward to deliver a crushing bite!

POP!

[You have defeated level 14 tenebris serpere]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 4]

UGH! DISGUSTING!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 89: Splendid Chap**

Flush with the glow of a hard won victory, Tiny and I are unusually not looking forward to the next reward, the Biomass.

Unfortunately, whatever was blocking our sight ended with the defeat of the last monster, clearing our vision to take in a truly wonderful scene.

The monsters practically exploded when bitten and the remains are scattered over the tunnel floor in a truly unpleasant image. Something this abstract would have to be a Picasso? The spattered goop certainly leaves a strong impression.

Sharing an unwilling look with Tiny we both begin to pick over the tunnel floor reluctantly, looking for something that looks like edible Biomass.

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

[Basic profile of the Tenebris Serpere unlocked]

[Tenebris Serpere: Dark Crawler, Produced in the Monster Forges of the Troglodyte engineering guilds, these creatures are tailor made for reconnaissance and stealth missions, deploying an arsenal of shadow magic for offensive and defensive purposes]

Uh...

WhatyousayGandalf?

What am I reading here? Produced? Monster Forges? Troglodyte Guilds?

What the heck was all o that?!

So these, truly unpleasant to eat creatures were created? By... Troglodytes?

I've never heard of a Troglodyte. What is that?

Well. Focusing back on this fight, the Xp from these creatures was perfectly acceptable. Two whole levels! Once for each! Not to mention the three cores that were able to secure as a result of this battle! Such rewards are almost unprecedented!

Surely this cannot be an omen of something bad about to happen!

...



Ok, nothing terrible so far.

I won't count it out yet.

After splitting the Biomass with Tiny I gain a further four points, leaving my total on nine. Enough to take my legs from +2 to +4 and enhance my Gravity gland to +1 with one point spare.

I quickly confirm those upgrades with Gandalf while I distract myself from the unpleasant itch by rounding up the monster cores we've gained. Three small, round gem-like stones sit on the dirt in front of us. Apparently these monsters were engineered or created outright by a kind of people called the Troglodytes?

I wonder if there is anything special about these cores?

Extending my antennae to touch one of the cores, I activate the core mechanic skill and begin to study the information contained inside. There is still much that I can't see in there, but what I can see is quite shocking. These monsters have almost no toughness at all, and very little might, the energy is instead diverted into Cunning, to make them more intelligent and towards magical proficiency, including a shadow magic gland.

These are probably the first monsters I've seen with such tanked physical stats in favour of mental and magical prowess. It makes sense if you consider them as designed monsters, to compensate for their physical weakness they were equipped with their darkness cloud spell and whatever projectile they were firing.

Interesting.

Out of curiosity I try and shift the values a little, just divert a touch of energy over to toughness and I find that it is impossible. When I attempt to make the change I feel as if I'm lifting a mountain with my fingers, there is no way that is going to happen Gandalf! No way at all!

Although it was difficult when I made a change to the undead rabbit core, it was nowhere near this hard! Perhaps the more a core has been engineered and changed the harder it becomes to make additional changes? I can test this theory by working on the rabbit core again when I get back to the nest...

Well, since I can't practice on these cores, I may as well absorb them!

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

Reinforce that sucka!

I take in two of the cores which increase my Mp by three points each, which is interesting. For the final core I push it towards Tiny and try to get him to absorb it.

When he sees I've pushed the core towards him he stares blankly at it for a moment before pushing it back to me.

...

Thinking he didn't understand what I wanted I use my mandibles to push it right up to him and then step back, watching him.

He looks at the core.

He looks at me.

He sits down.

He looks back to the core.

Then he reaches out with one hand, picks up the core and throws it back at me.

...

You damned cheeky ape! That hit me right in the face!

Losing my temper, I pick up the core in my mandibles and rush at him. He seems stunned to see my charge but I don't give him a chance to escape and start beating him over the head with the core.

Whack! Bash!

Absorb the stupid core you moron! Don't give me any of your cheek!

After hitting him probably ten times I notice that I'm only hitting him with my mandibles now and the core is gone. Stepping back Tiny is looking at me with a reproachful expression, clearly not happy with my violent treatment. I gift you a core and this is how you react?! I had to beat you up before you would even accept it!

Hopefully you'll remember this lesson next time I pass you a core!

If my thoughts are correct then Tiny has only evolved once, from those small apes to his larger gorilla form. If he's going to follow me around then he needs to be as strong as possible, so it's worth it to invest cores to ensure that his evolution provides the largest gains possible.

With the rewards distributed I start to think about whether I should investigate further into this tunnel or retreat for the time being when I feel something strange from the tunnel in front of us.

What the heck is this...

My antennae start to wave vaguely in the air in front of me as I try to understand the feeling I'm getting.

I think this is....

Air pressure?

Like.. A wind? From the tunnel?

How does that make sense.... You would only get wind underground if.. Something ... large.... Was pushing the air.... As it.. Rushed....down...the...tunnel...

....

Suddenly my heat senses begin to detect a massive heat signature approaching, fast. Not just fast, Olympic sprinter fast!

By the shining beard of the wizardly one, get the heck out of here Tiny!!!!

I grab my ape follower on the arm and start sprinting back towards the forest but I already know it's too late. Turning my head slightly as I run I can see a looming shadow growing in the tunnel behind, filling the empty space with impenetrable shadow.

Almost unwillingly I activate my Mana Sense and my mind is immediately rocked with a blinding light radiating off a truly massive monster core!

I quickly shut off my mana sense but before I do I vaguely pick up on a strange concentration of mana positioned just above the core.

I don't have any time to think about it though!

Knowing I can't run I dive into the scant cover provided by a fold in the rock and Tiny leaps in after me, fairly crushing me with growing bulk.

Sigh. This must be a comical sight, a giant and a gorilla trying to hide behind a bit of rock that is almost large enough to fit a medium sized dog behind...

As the approaching darkness grows ever closer a terrifying sense of foreboding grows inside me. There is something especially scary when you know there is a giant monster in front of you but you can't even see it!

Whatever it is, it slows down as it approaches and the impenetrable darkness gradually fades away, revealing the beast one feature at a time.

It's a massive worm, it's huge, segmented mouth fills the tunnel from top to bottom, blocking my view completely. The outer skin of the worm appears to be thickly armoured, I can hear it grinding against the rock as the monster moves.

Is this it Gandalf? Worm food? After all of this time?

I don't want to go out like this!

An irascible voice erupts in my mind.

[What in the BLAZES do you chaps think you are doing here?!]

.....

Uhhhhh...

Was that the worm?

[No it isn't the worm you BLIGHTER! Humph! No respect these days, that's the trouble with the Dungeon nowadays, no RESPECT at all!]

As the gruff voice continues to echo in my mind the gigantic worm gradually... stretches and thins itself out to reveal a smaller creature riding on its back.

This new monster is like nothing I've seen before. Eyeless, earless, with a large bulging forehead that tapers down to a wide, toothy mouth. The leathery looking skin is a splotchy red colour and wraps around a fairly scraggly, unimpressive looking frame. Thin, stick like arms and legs emerge from a torso so thin the ribs are showing.

[Are you QUITE finished you CRETIN?!] rages the voice in my mind.

Oh! Uh! Sorry!?

...

You wouldn't happen to be an ... uh... Troglodyte would you?

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 90: Conversation with a mind**

[Troglodyte?! Where in the BLAZES did you get that thought?!]

This guy is so touchy! Judging from the 'sound' his voice makes in my mind I definitely consider him to be male, he sounds like a British general from the 1800's.

Oh.. Uh... I took a look at the ... Dark Crawler core and it said they were engineered by... Troglodytes... so I assumed...

[BOSH and POPPYCOCK! Only the BLASTED system in this Dungeon refers to my great people as "cave dwellers"! We refer to ourselves as the Sophos and have done since before this SMARMY Dungeon existed!]

Uh... poppycock?

What is a Dungeon anyway?

[... You are inside the Dungeon you BLITHERING simpleton! You're smart enough to talk to me but have no idea where you are?!]

I'm... not local? Sir?

I have no idea how to talk to this guy. He doesn't have eyes I can focus on, I feel rude staring at his wrinkly forehead.

[What do you mean not local? You're here aren't you?! I can't imagine a BLASTED thing like you could get out of the Dungeon at all! Those DUNDERHEADED surface dwellers lack the sophistication and senses of us Sophos! If they'd seen you they'd think you were any old monster and squashed you flat I dare say!]

Despite his voice frequently rising to a mighty roar, filled with energy and outrage, his body never moves, not even a twitch. The juxtaposition of voice to frame is completely bewildering, I'm finding it hard to focus on all of the incredible information he's passing me!

Please... Sir! I haven't had a chance to ask anyone as... knowledgeable as yourself about this... Dungeon! If I have caused offense by eating your crawlers I am very sorry! I thought they were just monsters and attacked them.

[Just monsters? BALDERDASH! I laboured many hours in the monster forge to produce those beasts! How am I to complete my reconnaissance of the forest expanse without them? HMPH! If you weren't so unique I'd have already fed you to Crinitus here!]

You can tell I'm not a normal monster?

[Of course! What do you take me for? Some primping, pink, puffy HUMAN? My people are renowned over Pangera for our unsurpassed mental magic. UNSURPASSED I SAY!]

AHH! Yes! Clearly unsurpassed!

My bootlicking seems to mollify him a little, though it is hard to tell since he basically has no face. I try not to think such thoughts too loudly lest he pick up on them and feed me to his worm.

[Hurrumph! I could detect the movement of your thoughts long before I came upon you here. Clearly not the mind of a monster spawned from this WALLY of a Dungeon! What say you, ant?! How did you come to be?!]

Uhhhhh.

How can I explain this... I... died? On another world? And then I ... uh.. Woke up here in an ant body... ?

...

...

[By the MAGNIFICENT MINDS OF THE MIGHTY SOPHOS! You were reborn here you say?!]

Shocked by the sheer volume of the response I can barely think a reply. I think I'm getting a headache.

.. Yes!?

[I see!]

A moment of silence follows as my brusque new associate absorbs this news.

[According to the recorded wisdom of my people you are not the first we have encountered in these circumstances].

Really?! Holy moly! You mean there have been more people like me that were reborn in the .. Dungeon ... as monsters?

[Yes].

...

Are they still around? What happened to them?

Another pause.

[Most were driven rather insane, or at least they had been when they encountered us. Others were killed either by the Dungeon or hunted by surface dwellers].

For once he gets through a full statement without shouting, perhaps he understand how that statement would make me feel.

Insane? Driven mad or dead?

[You don't seem particularly insane]

Uh.. No?

[Interesting. You don't find your new environs to be ... difficult?]

I .. Guess so? I mean... I was pretty used to being on my own with nobody to talk to... and it kind of feels nice to be out and about doing things... Lots of excitement and action... You know?

[... You were a human previously as I understand it from your thoughts, you don't find it strange to be a monstrous ant?]

...

It did take a bit of getting used to, I guess? I don't really think I had that much time to worry about it really, I was too concerned about staying alive and then I was too busy trying to level up and evolve, then I found the colony and looking after them has been fun... I suppose I already had a human life and it was ok to be something new the next time around?

...

More silence. I wish this guy would move or something! I can't even tell if he's breathing!

...

[Well that is GOSH DARNED IMPRESSIVE I SAY! A good STIFF UPPER LIP, that's the stuff! You won't survive long in the Dungeon being SOFT!]

Holy Gandalf! He got his pep back in a hurry!

[You know, I do seem to recall word that one of your kind had survived and gone deep into the Dungeon. Whether or not they had come from the same place as you before they were reborn, I dare not say. The old records detail many powerful monsters who survived countless battles and descended deep beneath the surface. To my people they are known as Ancients.]

Ancients eh? Seriously though, just how deep does this Dungeon go? We must be nearly a kilometre down where we are, it surely doesn't get much deeper than this, right?

...

[BWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA. Oh I SAY! What a jape! Where you a joker in your last life also? HAHA! I SAY INDEED!]

... I'm wrong then am I?

I can almost hear him mentally wiping a tear from his eye as he replies.

[We are INDEED a kilometre under the surface here, but common knowledge amongst my people puts the radius of Pangera at slightly over 10,000 kilometres. As far as we know the Dungeon extends all the way to the center].

... Right.

Why are things so stupidly dangerous already then! Not even 1% into the stupid thing?!

[Well because of the wave of course!]

Wave?!

...

[My PARDON old BEAN! I shouldn't forget that you know nothing of this place! Have you not noticed that the number of monsters and the density of mana has been increasing over these last weeks?]

I have!

[INDEED! Soon a phenomenon known on this world as a 'wave' will occur. Simply put the Dungeon will start to spit out massive numbers of monsters, pretty much constantly for a period of time, usually between one day to a week].

This is a bit alarming!

Isn't it already spitting out massive numbers? And where will they come from?!

[HAHA! This is just a DRIZZLE before the STORM my boy! When the wave breaks you can expect the spawn rate to go up at least ten times! TEN TIMES I SAY! The other BLASTED thing about a wave is that the BLIGHTERS will pop right out of the walls! Don't even need a spawn point!]

Out of the walls?! By the bristling bushy beard of big G!

All around me the pulsing mana lines that curl throughout the tunnel in their ever splitting intricate scrollwork appear incredibly threatening. Monsters will start ripping straight out of the walls?!

Wait.

Haven't these mana veins been extending into the.... Nest?!

The colony!

[Oh yes! This wave promises to be RATHER UNPRECEDENTED! We've not had a wave build this high for AGES. I myself was sent to estimate the strength by scouting the forest. You wouldn't happen to have any intelligence for me on the spawn rate OLD SPICE?!]

My mind whirls in confusion and panic but I manage to formulate a reply.

Uh.. I found a ... spawn point for claw centipedes, it produced a new centipede every hour, that I saw....

Uh.. Sir.

[OH I SAY! That is bad news INDEED, I think this wave promises to be a BLIGHTED DISASTER!]

His response startles me.

Is it that unusual?

[Those hideous things would usually spawn at half that rate leading to a wave! If we were to assume that the wave will be double the size of a normal one that would already be disastrous. When did you measure the speed of this spawn point?!]

He seems very intent with this question.

... Yesterday?

[Hurrumph! Bad news indeed! INDEED I SAY! I think you may find the rate has increased even further over the last day. These things will accelerate faster the closer we get].

A thought occurs to me.

Is it really ok for you to be sharing this information with strange monster? Even if I am ... somewhat unique?

[We Sophos are pacifists for the most part. Against the Dungeon we will show NO QUARTER, but to other intelligent life we like to foster positive relations. We have dwelt underground on Pangera for thousands of years before the Dungeon extended out of the depths and here we still remain].

He actually moves his body and gestures down at the fearsome worm beneath him.

[We have adapted ourselves to survive in this place, these OLD DOGS learned a few new tricks I SAY! However, our fundamental way of life has not changed. Should you find your way to my people they will welcome you so long as you do not harm us].

I hardly expected to hear this kind of talk from him considering the manner of his arrival but he has certainly been very helpful.

Thank you sir! Do you have a name? In case I see you again?

[WELL SAID LAD! My name is Formosus Bellus Pulcher, I was given this cognomen due to my incredible handsome form, as you can no doubt testify!]

I can detect no sarcasm at all in his voice....