

## Chrysalis 91

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#### Chapter 91: Breaking

Well then ... Formo... Could you tell me more about the Ancient you mentioned?

[Oh yes! Ha! Now let me consult my people a moment]

... You can still talk to them?

He doesn't respond. After a moment's thought I activate my Mana Sensing and look more closely at this strange but friendly fellow Dungeon dweller.

The blazingly powerful core of the monster he is sitting on is hugely distracting. This worm has a core that is easily twice the size of the Queen's! If not larger! I shudder to think just how strong this thing is. Thankfully Formo turned out to be so peaceful!

Ignoring the blazing sun that is the worm I take a good look at this Sophos.

The first thing I notice is that he has no core. I suppose this means he isn't born from the Dungeon and is instead a natural creature of this world. Regardless of not having a core he is clearly able to control mana extremely well. The mana around his body swirls and flows constantly. If I focus heavily I can see a faint, shining bridge of mana, shaped like a braided rope, connecting my mind and his. Is this how we can communicate? Is this Mind magic?

The energy is clearly not of the normal type, rather than a blue it is a shimmering golden colour. If I focus closely I can see another bridge leaving Formo that vanishes into the far distance. He really must be communicating with his people goodness knows how far away! Incredible!

I desperately try to examine the connection he has constructed to my mind. If I learn how to do this I'll be able to communicate telepathically! Even without having to invest in a magical energy gland.

Looking as closely as I can the little I can see leaves me in awe. The construction of this bridge is breathtaking, each thread twisted precisely in a pattern that supports and extends, allowing two minds to interact. My control is far away from being able to achieve something on this level.

[Ahem! Yes! As I was saying. According to the records we encountered an intelligent monster who claimed to have been reborn into this world seventy years ago. After many years of struggling to was able to evolve enough that she could push into the deeper Dungeon and we hadn't heard from her since. Her name was Sarah as we understand it].

That sounds like a name from Earth! Is it possible another person like me is still alive here in the Dungeon? Somewhere deep?

I'd love to try and find them but I don't think I'm strong enough to survive that far down and explore. Apparently I'm not even 1% of the way to the middle! I have to admit that news has been a blow to my ego. I thought I was finally becoming strong! It seems there is a long way to go.

Hang on.

...

Something has changed. There is a different feeling in the air and I can't quite work out what it is.

Temperature?

...

No. My heat senses aren't noticing anything strange. What the heck could it be?

[Oh bother].

For the first time my new Sophos friend seems to have completely lost his vigour. He sounds ... worried?

What is it Formo? What's happening?

[Look at the walls lad].

Confused, I turn towards the tunnel walls and look closely at them. I can't quite see anything new? I'm not sure. The pulsing veins of mana are still there, the same as they ever were. Wait.

WAIT.

They seem a little... dimmer?

Quickly activating my mana sensing I stare hard at the walls. Yes! The mana level is slowly dropping! The difference is incredibly faint, almost imperceptible but it is absolutely dropping!

Isn't this a good thing Formo?! We want it to go down and slow the spawn rate, right?

The Sophos has actually begun to move his physical body, reaching down to pat his fearsome worm mount and stir it to alertness.

[No lad. Think of the waters of your own world, Anthony. When a giant wave comes to the shore, the water will first retreat, yes?]

How the heck did you learn my name Formo?

[With our minds connected for so long it is natural I can glean many things. It is very difficult to keep secrets amongst my people. The mana is acting much like the water in your world. It will retreat and dim to almost nothing before crashing back with irresistible force].

So.. So that means?

[The wave is coming lad. One day, maybe two].

Holy moly!

I need to get the heck out of here! I have to save the colony!

[What you choose to do now is up to you my boy, take your pet and find a safe place. I hope you both will survive the coming disaster].

Wait... pet?

[Yes. Your pet, lad. Right there].

He actually troubles himself to point at Tiny after I continue to stare at him blankly.

Tiny is a pet? How is he a pet?

I reconstituted him from a core, does that make him my pet?

[Of course it BLOODY does! Do you think monsters in this Dungeon are always so loyal to others? When you reconstituted him from a core he became attached to you. In this world we call them pets! Have you not taken any of the pet management skills from the BLASTED system?]

Pet skills? I think I might have seen some there... I didn't think they applied to me!

[How you have survived this long is DARNED mystery, a MYSTERY I SAY! Raising, controlling and engineering pet monsters is how we Sophos have survived to this day! We are the best in world at it lad, WITHOUT COMPARE I SAY! Raise young... Tiny ... well and he will protect you!]

The giant worm has roused itself now, it's cavernous mouth writhing and flexing as it slowly begins to turn around, digging itself into the rock wall of the tunnel.

[I must return to my people now lad. They must be warned of the scale of this disaster. I fear this wave will be greater than anything seen in a thousand years! We Sophos will not be caught unawares!]

Ok! I'd better get back to my the colony. They have no chance of survival without my help.

[Right you are YOUNG CHAP. I say you go AND GIVE THE DUNGEON JOLLY WHAT FOR! Do your best to survive and we may meet again!]

With that the worm once again expands its head, hiding the shrivelled form of Formo from view. Accelerating with each passing moment the worm burrows directly into the wall, shredding through the rock and dirt as if it were paper.

Just how long is this freakin' worm?!

Tiny and I watch in amazement as the scaly, rocky form of the worm continues to move past us in a seemingly never ending, ever accelerating blur.

Finally it tapers and disappears, leaving Tiny and myself staring at an empty tunnel with a brand new to hole in the side.

A moment later I shake myself out of it.

I don't have a second to lose I SAY!

Dammit! I've picked up his thinking habits!

I need to get the hell out of here! Only a day, two at the most before an endless horde of monsters starts leaping out the walls and ripping into the colony! The brood! Those poor helpless larvae will get shredded to bits!

I don't have enough time! I have to get stronger, have to save the colony.

I have no idea how I'm going to do it!

Turning around, Tiny and I sprint back towards the forest. Even as I run I start trying to practice my mana shaping, desperate to do anything that might improve my chances of survival and allow me to help the colony make it through the upcoming struggle.

I have the Gravity Magic gland, and that's awesome, but other than the Gravity Bomb, with all of its flaws, I don't have a method to use it!

My best chance of getting stronger in the short term is to try and find a way to apply the gravitational energy in a battle that doesn't require me to hide and charge it up for multiple minutes!

It is ridiculously difficult to do anything at the same time as manipulating mana but I'm going to do my best!

Arr nuts! I tripped!

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#### **Chapter 92: Prelude to the second war**

Tiny and I continue to retreat back towards the nest as fast as we can. As we run I continuously attempt to draw out and shape mana, frequently stuffing it up and tangling my legs as we run.

This is so damn difficult Gandalf! How did you perform so much magic on the back of the horse?!

I'm not sure if this will help anyone in anyway but I'm feeling desperate to get stronger. With only a day or two left until impending Armageddon I want to improve at something!

The entire conversation I had with Formo keeps running through my mind. So much new information to drop on a person! I feel like it'll take ages for me to be able to come through of all the gems my chatty new friend dropped in our brief exchange.

Tiny and I make it back to the open space of the forest without incident, although I do trip a few times.

Even with my sub-brain assisting to draw the mana out of my core and direct it, to actually manage that process, seize the prepared mana before shaping it into the one of the many patterns that the skill inserted knowledge is telling me to use is exceedingly difficult.

However, I must practice!

Back to the nest Tiny! With all speed!

The forest is just as chaotic as it was when we left it a few hours ago, but we don't waste time trying to sneak through now. As we encounter creatures we simply continue running straight past them, leaving a trail of bewildered and confused beasts in our wake.

However, some give chase, bellowing out their challenge as they crash through the brush, snapping branches and crushing the undergrowth beneath their feet.

If I'd not been distracted with mana shaping I might have anticipated this, but there is no stopping now...

Stop chasing us you idiots! There's a thousand other monsters you could fight, why don't you just leave us alone? Can't you see we aren't interested? Nobody likes a desperate monster!

It's no use however.

With their blood up, every monster is seeing red pretty much constantly right now and it isn't long before the one or two creatures tailing along behind us have attracted the attention of other nearby monsters.

Gradually more beasts emerge from the trees, chasing the tails of the monsters who are chasing Tiny and myself.

Of course, the increased ruckus only manages to draw yet more monsters out from between the trees and giant mushrooms. Soon a conga line of Bears, chimps, giant rabbits centipedes and other monsters I'd not yet seen has formed behind us.

Are you serious Gandalf!?

How stupid are you monsters?! I don't have time for this!

By the time we reach the ant hill there must be more than a hundred monsters that I can see behind us, all hurtling forward, ignoring the cavalcade of ravenous beasts behind, solely focused on the target in front of them.

I'm actually speechless.

Just how dumb can these beasts get?

All I wanted to do was get back quickly!

[Mana shaping has reached level 4]

Not now dammit!

As Tiny and I begin our sprint up the ant hill the guards take a look and the train of monsters behind us and immediately prepare to fight, one of them ducks into the nest, clearly going to summon reinforcements to deal with the threat.

Dang!

These guys couldn't just run away for once?

I'd been hoping we could just duck into the nest and leave these stupid monsters to battle it out amongst themselves whilst I tried to devise a save the colony from the deadly wave plan.

Alas, it is not to be.

Clacking my mandibles in irritation I turn to face the oncoming beast conga once I reach the top of the hill. Tiny, tired of running and eager for battle, takes his cue from me and gleefully turns to fight, electricity already beginning to spark off his body.

After all the effort I went through to avoid this very situation, one run through the forest and here we are. A massive brawl right on top of the ant hill!

As I turn I can see the full train of monsters, suddenly stop as the creature in front of them stops.

There is a pause.

The beast immediately in front of me is a heavily mutated Wolf-Dragon. Any monster that can survive in the forest these days is going to amass levels and Biomass at a pretty furious rate after all.

The monster paws at the ground, baring its teeth in a menacing snarl, its powerful tail swinging and curling behind it.

Look you stupid monster, you chased along behind me and brought this enormous trail of villains here to threaten my nest? Do you know who I am? Do you know what I do here?

I guess I only have one question left for you Wolf...

Do you want to dance?

Perhaps sensing my change in my mood Tiny hoots in delight and starts beating his chest with his fists. Those fists and that chest are still getting larger by the day. I would estimate Tiny has achieved half of his previous size and he is certainly growing stronger. Judging by his bristling fur and thick, meaty fists I'm starting to suspect he has already achieved a mutation advancement or two...

Unable to contain himself anymore, the ape bounds forward and with one swing of his arm delivers a stunning uppercut to the chin of the Dragon-Wolf. The poor beast is shattered by the blow and cartwheels backwards, smacking directly into the monster behind it.

One punch?!

I never saw you doing push ups Tiny?! You certainly never went for a run? Where did this strength come from?

Like a starting gun, Tiny's aggression seems to have been the signal to all of the attending combatants to begin the festivities.

With a mighty roar the second major battle to be conducted next to this ant hill has begun!

Filled with rage I begin to channel my mana into my infused mandibles and then, almost as an after-thought, I try to channel mana from my gravitational energy gland instead of my core.

To my surprise, it instantly works, the deep purple energy flowing out from my body and along those familiar lines through my head, pouring into my mandibles and dyeing them with the energies' colour.

Holy moly! Gravity mandibles?! What the heck do these do?

As the mana continues to build up I vaguely feel as if I could reach out with it, as if it wanted to take hold of something, with more mana flooding into the mandibles every moment the feeling only grows stronger.

I start to charge towards the melee and spot my target, an adult centipede is slipping towards the frontlines of the battle from the flank, already raising its tail for a sneaky poison attack.

You never lose your cheap tactics, do you centipedes?

Without entirely knowing how, I extending the gravitational energy from my mandibles towards the centipede and like a rope it twists through the air with blinding speed, almost as if I'd fired a grappling hook through the air.

A strange sensation of latching on reverbs through the coil of mana and into my mandibles, and gain, without really knowing how, I pull on the rope.

With spectacular effect.

As if kicked by an invisible giant the centipede is suddenly yanked into the air directly towards me! The movement seems to defy all the laws of physics as I manage to pull this far heavier creature towards me without actually moving a muscle!

I doubt the poor centipede has absolutely no clue what is going on as it is very suddenly airborne, flying in a straight line towards the waiting jaws of a particularly menacing ant

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#### **Chapter 93: The second war of the hill**

The adult centipede hurled towards me as if pulled by an invisible string.

Haha! Behold the power of gravity mandibles!

After my evolution these larger centipedes don't look nearly as threatening to me, I could defeat them easily before and now that I'm so much larger than I was I hold no fear of them at all.

CRUNCH!

I great the arriving monster with a fearsome snap of my jaws, directly severing the creature in two!

[You have defeated level 6 Adult Claw Centipede]

[You have gained experience]

This is amazing! The power of gravity eh?

With my first foe defeated I turn my eye to the progress of the battle.

What had begun as a long line of monsters battling each other has quickly squashed into a broad, circular grand melee, with monsters hurling themselves into battle with each other as far as my eyes can see. The constant noise from all of this fighting is only serving to attract more creatures and so with each passing moment the fight extends further into the forest and grows yet more louder.

Tiny is already in the thick of it, smashing out devastating electrical punches with reckless abandon, the joy of battle sparking in his bat eyes. I hope he doesn't get carried away.

As a matter of fact, it would do for a master to be outperformed by his own pet!

Just as Tiny is about to join battle against a fearsome looking antlered monster I reach out to it with my gravitational energy and latch on, yanking it towards me and right out from under the confused apes nose.

Haha! Take that you ape!

The monster is a little quicker to react than I would have expected however, lowering its many pointed antlers towards me and bellowing with fury at having been summarily pulled through the air.

Yikes!

Quickly jumping out of the way I totally forgot that what the beast was being pulled towards was none other than myself!

Idiot!

CRASH!

Luckily the sudden change in direction was enough to throw the point of impact off and the antlered creature smashing in the ant hill beneath my feet. Even so my legs get clipped and I'm sent spinning madly into the dirt.

Shaking my head I get my feet under me and prepare to do battle with this new beast. My opponent looks similar to buck, or at least, what I imagine a buck would look like if it had been on a steady diet of steroids and its antlers were made of glittering steel.

This beast is absolutely bulging with muscle! What sort of gym junkie of a deer are you?! You need to be more mindful of your health, deer! Those supplements aren't legal!

Staggering to its feet the poor monster is still looking a little the worse of wear after the sudden journey it was forced to undertake. I won't miss this chance! Dashing forward I don't give the beast the time to gain its bearings and chomp down on one of its legs with my mandibles!

Crushing Bite!

The deer howls in agony as my mandibles squeeze down on the leg, tearing muscle and splintering the bone.

Monsters in this Dungeon don't go down without a fight though! Before I can release my grip and bite again the deer has swung its head, smashing into me with those fearsome metallic horns.

Crash!

The impact staggers me but my carapace holds up under the pressure and isn't punctured by the sharp tips of the antlers.

Thanks for giving me your neck!

Chomp!

[You have slain level 9 rapit cervum]

[You have gained experience]

Haha! Now I'm getting into the swing of it.

Just to satisfy my curiosity I quickly lean down and take a quick bite out of the creature I just defeated.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Rapit Cervum; you are awarded one Biomass]



[Basic profile of the Rapit Cervum unlocked]

[Rapit Cervum: Bulky Deer, this impressively muscled monster is incredibly strong and specialises in offense, being somewhat vulnerable. It's metallic element antlers are a deadly weapon].

Bulky deer?! Even Gandalf thinks this creature is overly ripped!

As I turn to identify my next target the first of the colonies reinforcements has begun to appear. Too fast you guys! Why don't you stay down in the nest and let me deal with things for a while?

It's no use however, at first in a trickle that quickly swells to a flood, more and more ants begin pouring out of the top of the ant hill. As soon as they spy the sprawling melee, these workers don't hesitate to leap into battle, charging forward without pause or thought for personal safety!

Streaks of acid begin flying into the air as more and more workers emerge, presenting the business district to their foes and letting fly! In mere moments, almost all of the combatants close to the ant hill have become drenched in acid as yet more ants pour out of the nets.

And then more.

And then more!?

Holy heck? How many of us are there now?!

When I last checked there were several hundred workers and hundred more brood waiting to hatch, the new workers who had been born after the first big battle next to the ant hill. Judging by the sheer number of hatchling workers emerging from the top of the nest some of these must have completed their pupal stage recently!

There must be five hundred monstrous ants here!

Several workers seize on the Biomass I've already secured by yanking it towards me and start dissecting it for transport to the nest.

Seeing the hordes of workers pouring out of the ant hill so close to me a sudden thought strikes me. Rather than the workers running out into the battle and risking their lives, what if I brought the battle to them?!

No sooner has the thought occurred to me than I have reached out and latched onto the fearsome Lion Ogre, rampaging through smaller foes at the foot of the hill.

Come on up, big guy!

Once again the monster is yanked towards me as if fired out of a cannon. By shifting my position at the last moment I make sure that the poor beast slams into the side of the ant hill without crushing me to death.

When the dust settles, a dazed and angry Lion Ogre is slowly starting to pick itself up, not realising that it is currently surrounded by hundreds of monstrous ants.

In an instant, the monster is completely covered in hatchling workers, biting furiously and spraying acid and close range.

Vale Lion Ogre, your sacrifice shall not be in vain!

Checking on my gland I can see that my infused mandibles are draining the gravitational energy gland at a fairly rapid pace, each use is fairly mana intensive. If I can pluck a few more monsters out for the colony to take care of that would help the situation greatly.

Even as the Lion Ogre is enduring its final moments I'm already searching my next target.

Aha!

A Croca-Beast!

YOINK!

After casting out my hook, the unsuspecting monster is pulled towards me at speed, slamming into the ant hill as I dodge to one side at the last moment.

Once again the monster is completely covered in workers before it even manages to make sense of the situation.

Hopefully I can do this for a bit longer and keep the most of the ants out of the main battle as long as possible!

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#### **Chapter 94: The colony erupts**

The Croca-Beast doesn't last much longer than the Lion Ogre, with the sheer number of ants swarming over the top of the hill, any individual monster is going to get chomped apart without any chance to retaliate.

I almost feel sorry for these guys, covered in much smaller monsters that bite them and spray acid on them from point blank range. The Croca-Beast had six hatchling workers pulling on just one leg, ensuring it couldn't move, before I looked away.

It's a tough Dungeon! Don't look at me like that Croca-Beast!

Clearly I don't feel too badly for the monster, since I'm already searching for my next target.

There, that Adult Centipede!

YOINK!

Aha! Another ripped deer!

YOINK!

Yet more victims are pulled to the top of the ant hill, only to be summarily devoured by the hungry swarm of hatchlings.

It doesn't take long before I start to see workers transporting the Biomass down into the nest, already industriously dispensing that food throughout the colony. At this point the gravy train is over however. As fun as it's been pulling monsters out of the battle to their immediate doom, the drain on my gravitational magic gland has been severe, I'm already down to twenty percent!

Reluctantly I shut off the infused mandibles and the mana gradually fades out of them. At least the advantage of the gravity gland shows itself in my still fully charged core. If push comes to shove I can still activate my regular infused mandibles to give myself some added cutting power.

Somewhat at a loss for what to do next I turn about to survey the situation.

A scene of chaos meets my eyes.

All around the base of the ant hill a wild free for all is taking place. Larger monsters stand tall amidst a veritable sea of smaller beasts. Titan Crocs, Bear Tyrants, Death Rabbits are all battling against each other whilst around their feet, spark chimps, centipedes, blade tailed rats and others crash into each other like angry waves.

What a catastrophic scene! This is the last thing I wanted to happen leading into the wave! I should be talking to the Queen and trying to work out a strategy to ensure the colony can survive, we don't have time for this stupid free for all!

Glancing quickly at the workers around me I can see that their blood is up. There is Biomass to be had for the colony and by golly they are going to go and get it! I don't think I could possibly dissuade them from doing something so fundamental to their identity.

Thankfully they are at the very least cautious enough to continue launching acid into the crowd of monsters swirling around the base of the hill. With the combatants so thick on the ground it is impossible to miss! Hundreds of individual shots are launched into the sky, literally making it rain acid on the crowded creatures down below.

Holy moly!

With five hundred ants firing their acid out at once, it makes for a fairly impressive sight! Hopefully Tiny managed to avoid getting hit...

Thinking I may as well join in on the action I present my commercial zone towards the enemies and begin to pick out some of the larger targets in the fray to hit.

POW!

Take that Titan-Croc!

POW!

Actually, take a second shot Titan-Croc, I hate you guys!

POW!

Stupid bear! Feel the burn of my acidic law!

Since my evolution my acid gland has expanded its capacity once more, allowing me to fire ten shots at a time. I continue to pick out the largest and most threatening targets in the crowd to inflict my adhesive acid upon, hopefully weakening them for any battle to come.

Even as the acid burns away at dozens of monsters in the melee I'm still concerned for these workers advancing into that maelstrom of battle. Several hundred of these workers were only just hatched! If they die now they won't be able to protect the colony during the true disaster to come!

I'm so annoyed at myself! I tried so hard to avoid bringing harm down on the colony and now, because I was rushing and in a hurry I brought the very disaster I was hoping to avoid at the moment I could least afford to do it!

Dammit Anthony! You've got to fix this somehow!

At this moment I can feel the anthill shudder beneath my feet. The dirt is shifting, as if something in the ground beneath my feet were pushing upwards.

My heart sinks as I think I realise what is about to happen.

Sure enough, from the top of the ant hill emerges two long antennae, followed by a massive ant head. In a familiar scene, the peak of the ant hill collapses as the Queen drags herself out the top and onto the field of battle.

Dammit! Not this again!

What if something happens to her?!

I run up to the Queen, I'm not even sure why, perhaps to try and reason with her so she goes back down into the nest?

"Queen! What are you doing up here?! Shouldn't you go back down into the colony?!" I yell.

It's kind of strange, I actually 'shout' in the sense that I 'speak' loudly with my pheromones due to the sheer amount of noise around us, but it is completely unnecessary since we are actually communicating using smell rather than sound. I could whisper, barely releasing any scent at all and she would still be able to understand me perfectly well.

"The colony is threatened" she replies, "we must defend it".

"Do you need to be here though?!" I plead. If the Queen ends up dead because of this I'll be giving myself a right kicking.

"I will protect my children!" the Queen replies in her deep, matronly voice.

Without any delay she immediately begins to race down the anthill, charging forward with unstoppable momentum. The workers eyes are literally on fire, blazing with a feverish energy so intense it may well scorch their foes to death before any bite is applied.

I can't stop them now...

All around the ant hill the workers are rushing into battle, eagerly, joyfully even. With the Queen by their side I can see that they are implacable. I feel as though I need to keep reminding myself that these are ants, not people. A person would hesitate whereas these workers will gladly die for the colony.

The only way to protect them now is to fight!

If I destroy every monster here then there won't be any left to kill my fellow ants!

Let's do this Anthony!

Chaaaaarge!

I hurtle down the ant hill with such speed I feel I'm in constant danger of tripping with each step. I'm going so fast I pass the Queen and find myself in front of my fellow ants!

In the brawl below I can see Tiny, mighty fists swinging, hooting in Triumph as he moves from opponent to opponent, destroying his enemies with electrified punches.

As the combatants at the base of the hill grow rapidly larger in my sight I begin infusing my mandibles with mana from my core, causing them to glow brighter and brighter.

Closer! Faster!

Out of the melee I pick one target, a mighty Bear Tyrant, mottled green streaks through his fur glowing with fierce energy as the wounds and cuts in his body regenerate at a tremendous pace.

I rush closer! Closer!

Mandibles wide, here we go!

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#### **Chapter 95: Anthony's fight**

This is it. To save as many members of the colony as possible I have no choice but to fight!

Come on then Bear! Let's see how you go!

Pushing off all six legs I leap high onto the bear's back. These stupid Earth Bear Tyrants are a pain in the neck to kill with their innate toughness and regeneration, but I was able to kill one before I evolved so I'm sure as heck going to kill one now!

Mandibles fiercely glowing I crunch down on the bear's back!

Piercing Chomp!

The mana charged mandibles, powered by every ounce of strength I can summon from the musculature of my face dig deep into the bear's hide.

ROAR!

Enraged by this sudden strike the Earth Bear Tyrant twists its massive body, trying to see what creature has dared to strike at it in such a manner.

It's me, fool!

Piercing Chomp!

[Piercing Chomp has reached level 5]

Unrelenting, I draw out yet more mana into my mandibles and chomp down again, by jaws biting ever deeper into the bear's indomitable hide.

The bear is seriously angry now, not to mention in severe pain. My second piercing chomp has penetrated deeper through the bear's defence, making it more vulnerable. In response, green energy flashes through the monster's hide and I can see the wound I've caused visibly closing before my eyes, even as the bear reaches back to try and claw me from his back.

Not happening Yogi!

Focusing my will, I draw out more mana from my core, forcing it into my mandibles until they hurt.

Crushing bite!

This time I target the wound I've already created with my crushing bite. At first my mandibles thunk into the fur before slowly at first, then with increasing speed I tear through the muscle and start to crush the bone.

Ha! Take that!

My victim bellows in pain and throws its body to one side, rolling onto its back in an attempt to throw me off or crush me.

I'm too quick for that! Leaping high I launch myself from my perch, landing on the ground nearby. As soon as my foe has regained its feet I charge in again fearlessly. You won't get the time to regenerate bear! You're mine!

Surrender your Biomass to me.

My mandibles are aching from the sheer amount of mana I've forced into them but I don't stop the flow, instead it ever increases. Unseen by my opponent I run towards a back leg and fiercely bite down, crushing the muscle in my vice-like mandibles.

The bear staggers, the wound crippling its rear leg!

It turns to face me, bringing terrifying teeth and claws to bare but I'm already gone, circling around it with my greater mobility and jumping onto its back once more!

Crushing Bite!

Before the wound I'd previously caused can heal over I bite again! Tearing open the gash once more and ripping into the muscle and bone once more.

Again!

Crushing Bite!

This time my mandibles shred even deeper into the bear, dealing critical damage. The bear slumps to the ground beneath me and I bite down once again to finish it off.

[you have slain level 8 Earth Bear Tyrant]

[You have gained experience]

Having defeated the bear I slow the flow of mana from my core, I don't want to exhaust it so early in the battle and such a high amount of mana is unnecessary for most foes. Of all the creatures I've met only these damn bears have been able to display such a tough defense!

Who is next?!

The maelstrom of battle surrounds me on all sides, my compound eyes giving me a near 360 degree view of the chaos.

Isolated duels and mass battles are occurring all around the ant hill, and now the wave of ants has crashed into the fight. Hundreds of workers, biting furiously and tearing at every limb they can get to. The acid rain still falls from above, splashing over every monster, seemingly regardless of friend or foe.

The damage is starting to pile up, many monsters are looking the worse for wear just from the sheer volume of acid being projected by so many ants.

Come on Anthony! This battle has just begun!

I turn to a monster who has its back to me and charge, mandibles wide!

[You have slain level 2 Infant Garralosh]

[you have gained experience]

[You have slain level 9 Decaying Death Rabbit]

[you have gained experience]

[Crushing Bite has reached level 8]

Gah! Those death rabbits still taste disgusting!

Surrounding the Death Rabbit is a horde of the smaller Blood Tooth Rabbits and having defeated their evolved defender I descend on them like thunder. Every snap of my jaws sends another rabbit to the beyond.

They pepper me with bites, extended fangs screeching against my diamond carapace.

[Exo-Skeleton defence has reached level 4]

[you have slain level 3 Blood Toothed Rabbit]

[You have slain level 2...

[You have slain level 3..

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

When I can see no more rabbits around me try to find another large monster to target. They are the greatest threat to the workers, the more I can take out the better!

Looming out of the battlefield I can see a Titan-Croc currently duking it out with a massive Dog-Snake. The terrible snake is absolutely massive, probably an evolved version of the smaller kind I'd seen earlier.

It's snarling, wolf like head darts here and there, snapping with bone crunching force at the Titan-Croc, who tries to rip back with its own fearsome crocodile teeth.

The snake's long body coils and whips around as it moves, crushing smaller creatures under its bulk as it moves. The body must be at least twenty metres long! At its thickest the twisting body is almost as thick as I am!

Sorry snake, you've got to go!

Trying to force my way through the battle I have to snap and bite my way towards my target.

This is going to be tough, but I've got to try!

Even as I fight, dodging left and right, lashing out with my mandibles, I begin to draw out the gravitational energy inside, letting it flow from the gravitational energy gland and then compressing it into a tight ball of death.

The Gravity Bomb!

To try and handle this violently fluctuating energy in the midst of a battle is going to be tough but hopefully it doesn't spin out of control and kill me!

I almost can't take a step without running into another monster, each and every one of them is red eyed and ready to battle to the death, the fervour of the fight has seemingly infected them with unstoppable bloodlust.

Moving inexorably forward I get battered and bitten, slashed and belted from all sides. I can't react or respond to every strike, the majority of my focus being dedicated to handling the growing Gravity Bomb in my throat, gaining energy and density with each passing second!

Snapping left and right I bisect a centipede and shear straight through the leg of a Wolf-Dragon before continuing forward. I can't afford to stop for a second, as the Gravity Bomb grows larger, more and more of my attention is required to contain it!

The mass of energy in my throat is starting to rotate faster as it greedily sucks in all the gravitational mana I can provide. Holding nothing back I draw out every drop I have and send it circling into the Gravity Bomb.

Suddenly it undergoes that qualitative change I observed last time, changing from an ultra-dense fog into a seamless sphere, so dark as to be almost black.

Just in time! I can't hold on any longer!

I've reached within twenty metres of my chosen targets. The fearsome Snake has wrapped itself around the Titan Croc, constricting its arms and savagely biting its constrained prey.

Perfect for me!

Feel the wrath of Anthony!

Opening my mouth wide I finally release my grip on the Gravity Bomb and it blasts out of my mouth, filling the air immediately with the piercing wail I hear last time. Even through the din of monstrous



battle the Gravity Bomb cuts with ease, the horrific, high pitched shriek assaulting every monsters senses.

The Dog Snake immediately sees the source of the noise and tries to disengage itself but the Titan Croc, ignorant of the danger, seizing on its opponents sudden attempt at retreat to latch hold with its claws and bite at its foe, locking them both in the path of the bomb!

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 96: Anthony's decision**

The Gravity Bomb howls through the air like an angry demon. The air itself being sucked into it, causing a rushing wind as it blasts through the air.

Trapped in the grip of the Titan Croc, the unfortunate snake frantically twists its body in an attempt to escape the impending threat, but to no avail.

As it impacts against the entwined beasts the Gravity Bomb flickers for an instant, before expanding in a blink. The high pitched shriek emitted by the ball turns immediately into a thundering roar. The two hapless monsters are gradually pulled inside the ball, consumed by it, as other nearby monsters are also caught in its inexorable pull.

Like the maw of an insatiable demon, the black sphere drags its victims in before they complete disappear, crushed within the void.

[You have defeated level 9 Canem Pythonem]

[You have defeated level 11 Growing Maw Garralosh]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 6]

The horrific sight persists for only a few seconds but the impact it has on the battlefield is immense. Nearby monsters, suddenly freed from the gravity that had seized them slump to the ground, their desperate efforts to resist no longer required.

Several of these monsters, stunningly, turn and flee into the forest! Perhaps they were so intimidated or startled by their near death experience the bloodlust was knocked out of them, causing them to flee?

Whatever the reason, the panic proves to be contagious as more monsters begin to flee the field, their fear spreading to others who, intimidated out of their frenzy, turn and retreat into the shelter of the forest.

Yeah you better run!

...

Because my core and gravitational energy are completely exhausted. I'm so damn tired!

Even with so many adversaries quitting the field, the battle still rages on, turning around I can see the workforce continues to be locked in combat with other smaller creatures, here and there a larger monster is being swarmed, covered in over a dozen workers at once and pulled to the ground.

The Queen stands tall above the fray, her antennae flaring brightly with healing mana every now and again as she targets smaller groups of workers for her ministrations. To my relief she hasn't pushed herself to the very frontline, risking becoming separated from the workers, but instead has remained close to enough to help where she is needed, lunging forward to chomp at troublesome enemies before she retreats back slightly to heal the wounded and look for trouble spots.

Whilst she probably could rampage through the monsters here, I'd glad she hasn't. If she were to die then the colony would have no future.

Despite being so drained, so long as the workforce is engaged in battle I will be also. A dedicated ant worker has no time for slacking!

Staggering forward I mechanically enter the battle, chomping left and right at every monster who comes in front of my path.

The more Crushing Bites I dole out the more drained my stamina becomes, my physical exhaustion rising to match that of my mind. I continue to be battered on all sides in the fight, smaller monsters rushing in biting and slashing at me as I doggedly push through their ranks like a car slowly pushing its way through a crowd.

Eventually I'm forced to activate my regeneration gland, largely because one of my legs becomes complete crippled. My diamond carapace is able to deflect most of the harm but enough 1hp hits will eventually mount up into serious damage.

Thankfully the limb regeneration proves up to the task and my leg is mostly reformed within a minute.

My mind grows increasingly dull as the battle rages on, my actions become almost completely mechanical. Step forward, bite, bite, bite, look around for more enemies and then continue the process. I can barely even acknowledge the voice of Gandalf in my head as the battle continues.

[You have slain...]

[Crushing Bite has reached level 9]

[Exo-Skeleton Defence has reached level 5, upgrade available]

Finally there comes a time where I chomp on a monster and then look around, only to find worker ants picking over the Biomass.

All around me a carpet of remains covers the ground, the anthill rising out of the carnage, a tall spire emerging from refuse.

As my tunnel vision slowly expands and I take in the sights, hundreds of workers are still alive, seemingly unwearied, dragging away Biomass, lifting it in their mandibles before making the journey up the hill. Here and there I can see a large body being picked over by ten or more workers, industriously carving up the Biomass.

The field has been surrendered to the ants. The sheer number of us, combined with my own intervention was enough to chase away all but the most suicidal of monsters, leaving the colony as the ultimate victor.

Tiny staggers over to me.

The poor ape is covered in wounds, a broad smile plastered on his bat face.

You dumb ape... I'm glad you're still alive.

Having seen me and made sure that I'm ok my ape friend turns and begins to chow down on Biomass, wolfing it into his face with wild abandon. It's a good thing, the food will help close over those wounds faster. The big guy must have gained a ton of levels in this fight also, I have to make sure his core is ready to evolve.

No rest for the weary!

Shaking myself and using my own antennae to slap my face, I try to wake up my exhausted mind, much like a human slapping themselves on the cheeks. There is extremely important work to do!

I didn't intend to cause this enormous battle on the doorstep of the colony but since it has happened I will not waste the opportunity provided to help the colony survive!

The Biomass can go to the workers and Queen, I don't need much, but the cores I have to have. Tiny needs to evolve and I have to raise the Core Mechanic skill as quickly as possible. Judging by the ridiculous power demonstrated by the Sophos Formo and his rock worm of death, it is possible to modify and raise monsters to be superlatively powerful. If I can get my skill high enough, maybe I can engineer Tiny or the Queen, and improve our chances of living!

I briefly activate my Mana Sensing and cast my awareness about, seeking those little concentrated balls of mana that are cores.

I'm quite pleased by what I see! Plenty of cores around!

In fact, there is a very large one walking right up to me!

Oh, wait.

"Hello, your, uh, majesty!" I stutter, dropping my Mana Sensing and greeting my new Mother as she looms over me.

...

Thwack!

My heads is knocked down as the Queen whacks me across the head with one of her antennae.

Ouch. I deserve that.

"You must learn to be more cautious child" the Queen warns me gently, "you must not endanger your family".

I squirm internally at her words. Family as a concept is ... a little difficult for me to understand. I mean, my family certainly fed me and clothed me most of the time but ... even this experience of being disciplined by my mother is a bit new.

It feels ... nice. I suppose?

"I'm sorry your majes.... Mother. I uh, learned about a great danger and was trying to return and warn the colony".

"Danger? What danger do you speak of?"

"Actually, it's going to happen very soon! I've been told that in one or two days there will be a 'wave' of monsters. Our enemies will appear at incredible rates, coming straight out of the walls! They could appear right inside the colony, right inside the brood chambers!"

As I'm speaking I realise just how crazy this sounds, how crazy this is! I'm talking to a giant ant Queen, who is probably only a few months old. I probably know more about the Dungeon than she does at this point, and what I know came from a single conversation! How is this even going to work?

"Do you believe the colony is threatened?" the Queen's calm, soothing voice breaks into my swirling, tired thoughts.

"I do" I say.

"What should we do, my child?" she asks.

That simple? You believe me just like that?! You'll listen to what I say so quickly?!

Almost as if she can sense the direction of my mind the Queen answers my inner doubts.

"We are family".

...

Ok then.

I guess we are.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 97: The family**

So... I mean.. It's a little odd...

I was a human before after all. I may not have lived what people would call a ... normal life ... but hey, I went to school, a bit, I saw people, I ate human food.

Now I have a giant ant Queen staring down at me and insisting that she and my many siblings are my family now.

...

For some reason I'm surprisingly ok with that.

I had a pet ant colony as a human, I kept them contained and fed them, watched the colony grow and cleaned out their spaces for them. In some ways they were the most constant members of my household, I certainly saw them every day, which wasn't really true of anyone else.

Perhaps that is why I don't really mind being an ant.

If I'm going to be a member of this family then I have to do my best to save them!

I start thinking out loud.

"Ok then, Queen, I don't think we are uh, strong enough to survive the wave. If our nest is invaded from the outside as well as the inside, we could be completely wiped out!"

The Queen looks concerned and taps me with her antennae, urging me to continue.

"I think we need to move the colony! We have to get somewhere ... else. Somewhere safer".

"Do you know where we should go child?"

Err.... No?

We live in the Dungeon, and from what I'm told the entire place is going to become a death zone for up to a week!

I don't even know that the surface will be safe from the impending danger!

...

But ... it may be safer than the Dungeon?

If endless numbers of monsters will be fighting and going crazy through these tunnels, going to the surface might actually be better. Of course that doesn't mean running headlong into the humans, that would be suicide, but with my Tunnel Map I can clearly see where the entrance I first encountered the humans is. If we can find a way to the surface far enough away from a human settlement, we might be able to remain undetected and ride out this disaster!

...

Am I crazy? If I get the colony to relocate to the surface there's definitely a chance that we all get killed by those powerful human soldiers, burnt to death, cut to pieces and slaughtered without mercy.

If we stay down here, will the outcome be any different?

I think we have to take a chance.

The Queen has waited patiently as my thoughts run circles inside my head. My resolution firms as I see her commitment to waiting on my directions.

"We have to dig a new tunnel to the surface!" I declare.

The Queen slowly digests this bombshell, taking time to think them over.

Then she responds.

"What is the 'surface'?" she asks.

...

Of course, how could she possibly know about it?

"We will dig a new tunnel upwards, that bypasses the existing Dungeon passages and if we can dig far enough upwards, we'll be safe!" I say.

Hopefully that is simple enough that she can understand what I'm saying!

The Queen pauses for another moment, her monster intelligence mulling over this suggestion. I wait nervously for her to puzzle out exactly what this means to her.

To my surprise she calmly nods.

"We will do as you suggest child. Where should the family dig?"

Phew! At least the first hurdle has been cleared! If the Queen has agreed to my plan then I might have a chance of getting the workers to cooperate. I'm not exactly sure how the pecking order works in a monstrous ant colony. In a normal ant colony on earth, the Queen doesn't actually 'rule' over the rest of the ants, in fact, she is basically dragged around by the workers, almost an egg laying slave.

Instead, the workers run the colony on a kind of democracy system. For example, if one worker finds a good place to move the nest, they'll lay down a trail and start moving the brood. If other ants find the trail, they will go and check it out and if they agree with the first ants opinion, they will join in, eventually when enough workers have agreed on a course of action, it will happen. It isn't always so smooth of course, sometimes the workers don't agree with each other and you'll have two competing sets of workers each moving the eggs and larvae to two different places!

In this world though, the Queen is intelligent, not a mindless egg laying slave, and she is far from a helpless creature at the mercy of the workers. If anything, she is probably closer to what most humans think an ant Queen is like on earth, in charge, making decisions and actively helping to direct the future of her family.

I'm not sure exactly what she can do to direct the workforce, it's clear that they can understand my pheromone language to some extent, perhaps she can just talk to them.

I shake these thoughts out of my head and address the Queen once more.

"Let's sweep clean this battlefield first, the Biomass is too valuable to the colony for us to abandon it. Once that is done I'll start digging the tunnel, if you can help get the rest of the ... family ... digging, then we can make faster progress. Hopefully we can dig our way clear of the threat in the next two days".

Even in the time since I spoke to Formo, I've already noticed the brightness of the forest has diminished. The mana is continuing to recede, just as the Sophos had predicted. The forest is going to grow even dimmer, perhaps even fading to black, before the wave.

Satisfied with our discussion the Queen gives a few more friendly taps on the head with her antennae before retreating back to the security of the nest, leaving the workers to do what they do best and complete the work required to secure the Biomass the colony demands.

As the Queen ambles away, the workers are doing just that, continued to comb over the battlefield and collect the spoils of war. As more times goes by the number of ants showing visible signs of mutation is increasing, here and there a worker with longer antennae, or stronger looking legs, or larger mandibles can be seen.

This is excellent news! If the workforce becomes stronger then we will have a greater chance to survive.

I proudly watch the workers rushing about, this is my family now and every one of these ants is my sibling. I didn't have any brothers or sisters that I knew of in my last life, going from that to having hundreds is a bit of a shift.

Enough sentiment! I have important work to do!

Flipping my mana sensing back on I glance around and try to identify the location of as many cores as I can. I have to secure all of them! Every one!

Rushing around I immediately commence the messy task of extracting cores from monster remains. I desperately need to rest but the looming danger of the wave requires that I push myself beyond my limits.

When I'm finally done, the haul is definitely worth it.

In these dangerous times, with battle being constant in the forest, many monsters are fighting and levelling up at a rapid pace, so the number of cores to be found in the surviving monsters is higher than what I had experienced before.

When we are talking about a large scale battle in which hundreds of monsters died, we are talking about a good haul of cores!

Over twenty in all!

Not to mention the special prize! I wandered over to what was left of the larger monsters who had been caught in my Gravity Bomb.

A small, ultra-dense ball of Biomass was sitting on the ground, looking more like a model planet than anything else.

I tried to lift it and after nearly breaking my neck I had to give up.

This thing is stupidly dense! It's probably only the size of a tennis ball.

Determined, I try to nibble at it. When I find no success with nibbling I try full on chomping. It's like smashing my teeth on a gobstopper. After a little persistence I am rewarded!

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

[Basic profile of the Canem Pythonem unlocked]

[Canem Pythonem: Dog Python, Evolved from the smaller Dog Snake, the sheer brute strength of this monster should not be underestimated. Capable of constricting its prey to death in a matter of seconds, the speed of this creature, combined with its powerful canine senses, make it a deadly hunter]

This Biomass is so condensed I managed to get a whole point from that little mouthful!

As intriguing as this is, the real prize is lying in the foliage nearby.

That, is a fairly impressive looking core!

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 98: Digging commences**

Gathering the large python core, I'm sure it was from the python, judging by the tail section I found it next to, I bring it to the rest of my hoard which I transport into the colony, burying them with my Death Rabbit core that I had saved in the first trap network.

This is the most precious harvest of this battle. I have great plans for this resources! I have to work quickly though.

Before I can begin that work I make one final trip back to the field, to gather some Biomass for myself and to collect my now fairly spherical ape. Are you made of rubber you stupid gorilla!? How do you fit so much damn food in your stomach?

Tiny appears happy to simply lie on his back, rolling about gently in contentment, his distended belly proudly displayed to the forest canopy.

Really classy Tiny, you really are living your best life.

By this time the industrious workers have done a fairly good job of picking clean the field, but I'm not too worried. I head back to the condensed gobstopper of Biomass forged by my Gravity Bomb.

Standing over it I have to say it doesn't look that impressive, a small ball that doesn't really look like meat or food of any kind. The ball is a kind of orange colour, streaked through with different layers and the occasional splash of other colours. Looking closely, it reminds me a little of the planet Jupiter from images I'd seen in textbooks.

Tentatively I try again to lift it, no success. Most of the Biomass of two giant monsters is packed into this little ball! There must be easily over a ton of material in there, it isn't surprising I can't lift it.

I'll have to eat as much as I can here and now then!

Once again I crouch down and start gnawing the hell out of the thing.

OM NOM NOM NOM NOM.

Yield to me you damn sphere!

OM NOM NOM NOM NOM.

[You have gained one Biomass]

...

This is going to take a while.

I feel like a dog gnawing on a bone...

NOM NOM

...

After a solid twenty minutes of chewing I've managed to gain six more Biomass. The rate at which I was able to extract the food was slowly starting to increase towards the end, apparently chipping away at it was loosening up the Biomass a little. If I had more time I'd be able to get a whole lot more Biomass out of it but I can't afford to hand around.



I just have too much to do!

The food does a lot to reenergise me, helping to close over my smaller wounds and refreshing my mind somewhat. I still need a sleep desperately but it will have to wait a bit longer.

Having eaten I quickly hustle back into the nest and make my way down to the Queens chamber, ants are desperately running about, passing food around, feeding the larvae and presenting Biomass to the Queen.

The only problem is she shows no interest in eating.

I can subtly see that the workers are distressed by this. A small pile of Biomass is growing in the Queens chamber and the workers are wandering back and forth with no real idea on how to proceed if the Queen won't start eating.

When I bustle into the chamber the Queen perks up and pushes through the crowd of workers towards me.

"Are we ready to dig?" she asks, the concern thrumming in her 'voice'.

"Good to go!" I try to reassure her.

I move over towards the slowly dimming walls of the chamber and start to feel out the dirt with my antennae. I'm relying on my Excavation skill to guide my instincts and detect the best place to start digging.

In my Tunnel Map I can see that the entrance where I encountered the humans is roughly two kilometres to the... let's say west. That isn't far enough away to be certain we are clear of human settlement.

I don't know if the entrance I found is in the middle of a thriving city or a cow paddock but since I know that there are humans there we need to surface a good distance away. That means we need to dig not just up, but further away from that entrance.

Eventually I find a patch of wall that feels the most promising to my tingling instincts and start digging. I want to pitch the tunnel upwards about twenty degrees, by the time we reach the surface we should be a long distance away from the entrance I was attacked at.

If we run into an already established tunnel then we'll have to back up, close off a section of tunnel and dig around it, we cannot risk exposing our escape route to the wave.

Even as I dig the glowing blue veins that have penetrated all the way here, to the heart of the colony glow brightly directly in my face. Towards these curling lines of light, to which I once felt such fascination I now only feel dread.

As I begin to remove the dirt the lines fade and vanish on the soil that is no longer connected to the wall, as if it were part of a circuit that had been disconnected. When the mana fades away, the dirt looks perfectly ordinary, as if there had been nothing different about it before.

"We should dig our tunnel here, your majesty!" I turn and say to the Queen.

I use my antennae to indicate the angle we should dig.

"If we dig in this direction we might be able to escape the worst of the wave. Get the workers to dump the dirt in the tunnel leading down from this chamber, if we can block monsters rising from deeper down that would be an added bonus!"

Having said my piece I take the clod of dirt in my mandibles and retreat to the lower tunnel in which we had battled the berserkers. If more monsters like them, or worse, were to attack during the wave we would be in serious trouble.

Even this long, spiralling tunnel has become filled with the mana veins. When the wave breaks, if Formo was correct then this entire tunnel would start to spawn monsters....

If we hadn't been forewarned we would surely be wiped out! If I get a chance I have to make sure I pay the Sophos back for their help...

Returning to the Queen's chamber I'm shocked to see the Queen herself digging away at the wall.

A nervous swarm of workers is bustling around her, even climbing over her in their attempt to render assistance.

I can also hear her gently encouraging the workforce with her soothing voice.

"Come little ones, let's dig a new tunnel here. Dig quickly children".

Although they cannot reply to her the fervour of the workers to respond to her words clearly demonstrates their understanding. The workers are practically vibrating with eagerness and it isn't long before a long chain of ants has been established, feverishly digging away at the wall with the Queens assistance whilst others cart away the dirt and dump it in the tunnel below.

Watching the furious pace the ants are working at my heart eases a little in my chest. Perhaps we might be able to make it after all. They may not be the sharpest tools in the shed but when it comes to work ethic I can't imagine anyone being able to beat a colony of ants.

I have to work just as hard!

I'm so exhausted, my mind feels wrapped in a fog. I can't slow down, there is too much to do and only a little time in which to do it!

I'll leave the digging to the colony for the time being, there are other things I can do to prepare for the upcoming struggle that the others can't.

Emerging back into the first trap network I find Tiny has settled himself down to sleep off his meal happily. This ape has gotten seriously larger lately, it won't be long before he reaches his full size at the pace he is going. Considering the amount of Biomass he packed into himself I today I wouldn't be surprised if he wakes up another foot taller!

Snoring softly, the little bat face seems to peaceful when asleep. It's a little difficult to associate this restful scene with the hooting battle crazed gorilla I'd seen not long ago.

Ah let him sleep. I'll be troubling him quite soon, better he gets rest whilst he can.

Digging away a patch of soft earth I reveal my treasures, the cores I'd saved.

Looking down at the glittering, gem-like spheres my heart slowly begins to burn with anticipation.

If the Sophos can engineer such powerful pets then why can't I?

And if I can, then what could possibly stop us?

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 99: Experiments in mechanics**

My glittering prizes are spread across the tunnel floor, a collection of precious gems ready for my mental ministrations.

Pushing away the fatigue I feel, I shake myself a little, slap my antennae on my face and begin to work.

My antennae stretch forward and touch the first core as I activate my Core Mechanic skill. My mind is immediately flooded with information regarding the creature from which this core came. All of their basic stats and skills are laid out before me in a dazzling mental map. Rather than a solid menu the values and ideas are communicated in pictures or colours.

It's pretty disorienting but I feel I'm gradually starting to get the hang of it.

I prepare myself mentally for a moment and then push with my mind, catching hold of one of the stats and shifting some of its value to another stat. Doing so requires an immense effort, my mandibles are tightly clenched as I feel a pounding headache coming on.

With that done I then wrap my thoughts around the change I made like concrete, holding the values down as it tries to slip away and change back, squirming like an eel in my mental hands.

Stay put dammit!

Eventually the change that I'd made settles and grows still, no longer fighting against me and I can slowly release my grip. My mind feels stiff and in pain, like hands that had been holding something down too tightly for too long.

That was just one small change!

It's insane how difficult this is!

I can only comfort myself with the idea that as I level up the Core Mechanic skill the burden might lessen, allowing me to progress more rapidly.

By the gnarled staff of Gandalf I'm so tired...

Bah! A worker knows no such weariness! Push through Anthony!

I slump forward and bring my antennae to the same core once again, throwing my mind into the strange swirl of information contained inside. Gathering my will I try again to exact the same change I made before, shifting a piece of toughness into might. This time it's even more difficult! The core resists my efforts to change it with even more vigour, stretching my mental resources to their limits!

This would simply be impossible if I weren't a mind ant!

I refuse to fail!

You will be conquered by me you stupid inanimate gemstone!

HHRRRRNNNGGG!!

By supreme effort of will I enforce the change I desire on the core and hold it in place as it writhes against my mental barriers. Eventually, finally, it stops resisting and I collapse to the floor in exhaustion.

[Core Mechanic has reached level 2]

...

Ah.... Ah ha!

t.....triumph!....

Ugh...

Slowly I pick myself up from the floor and collect the core in my mandibles before placing it to one side, next to Tiny.

I select another small sample from my collection of spherical gemstones and place it on the floor before me where it sparkles innocently, totally belying the pain and suffering this innocuous thing will soon inflict on me.

No whining Anthony! The colony needs your skills! Suffer like you love it dammit!

Stretching forward once more I activate the Core Mechanic skill and bring the strength of my will to bare.

...

AGRUPANUFFF!!!!

[Core Mechanic has reached level 4]

.....

.....

VICToryyyyy.....

\*Snore\*

BAH! I'm awake!

I snap out of torpor with a vigorous shake of my body, startled by my unexpected snooze. I managed to get through six more cores, making two adjustments to each before my Core Mechanic reached level four and I effectively passed out from exhaustion.

... That could have been dangerous! How long was out of it?

Glancing around the tunnel I can see that Tiny is still sleeping soundly, a small pile of seven cores placed in the dirt next to him. Relieved to see my ape is still sleeping I turn to the tunnel walls and attempt to

judge how much time I've missed based on the change in brightness from the mana veins that have even managed to push their way into this tunnel network.

The light radiating from those veins is probably half what it was before. Does that mean we are halfway to the start of the wave? Will the mana rush back immediately once the walls are completely dim or will there be some time spend in darkness before the wave breaks?

I'm frustrated, I just don't know enough! If I had just ten more minutes with Formo I could have learned so much more!

No time to cry about spilt Biomass!

Even if I hadn't wanted to rest my mind is feeling much refreshed! I still have a heap of unmodified cores here I need to push through to level 5 and advance the skill!

Determinedly I grasp another core in my mandibles and bring it to a clear patch of tunnel floor before activating the skill and continuing my work.

1st core done!

2nd core done!

3rd core done!

.... Hoo boy! Need a breather.....

4th Core done!

[Core Mechanic has reached level 5, upgrade available]

Thank Gandalf! Holy moly that is tiring! The improving skill level has surely helped but the task of modifying the cores is still intensely draining. It's like trying to hold a cube of water in shape with your hands.

Eagerly I jump into the menu to check out the new skill.

[Core Mechanic -> Core Engineer. This skill allows the user to exercise finer control when making adjustments and reveals a deeper layer of information with the core to be manipulated. Cores may also be fused].

Buuuuuyyyyyy iiiiiitttt!

Gweheheheh!

This is the first step on the long road that the Sophos have walked, manipulating monster cores to create invincible monsters!

Eagerly I grasp another core and activate the Core Engineer skill.

Once again that dizzying rush of information invades my mind, but the knowledge is even more dense this time. Beneath the surface details there is now a deeper layer. As soon as I identify it I let my mind sink down to it, ready to flex my new skills.

Even more details are now accessible here, behaviour, evolution paths and advancement choices, all can be adjusted!

The Core Engineer skill not only allows the user to adjust the stats and skills of a monster but also its evolutionary path!

This must be the secret to how Formo and his kind are able to custom design such fearsome beasts to meet their needs! They can take a base monster and then customise it for the present, as well as shape its evolution well into the future! This helps explain how it takes so long for them to grow their monsters. The Sophos probably begin with a low level monster, possibly one that hasn't evolved in the first place, then begin to shape and direct it over multiple evolutions. They probably have directions and paths that they have worked out over hundreds of years of trial and error, like recipes, allowing them to produce exactly the monster to suit their needs.

Fearsome....

I'm still a long way from that level!

The other side of this skill is just as important. Core fusion? Allowing me to combine cores...

In order to test my thoughts and exercise the hidden instincts the skill has implanted in my mind I take two small cores that I have yet to tamper with and place on antennae on each before activating the skill.

Immediately the dazzling information of two cores is slammed into my mind at the same time, nearly stunning me insensible with the sheer volume of data. Pushing the mental strain to one side I follow the half realised pathways that were forged in my brain as I learnt the skill and begin to draw the two cores together.

They resist each other. Furiously.

Like magnets of opposite poles the two cores fiercely resist my efforts, pushing at each other, trying to shove each other away. In the implacable grip of my will they have no choice however.

In times like this I'm thankful that ants don't sweat because I would be dripping buckets! Through sheer force of mental effort I push the energy contained in each core together and hold it there against the powerful resistive forces.

And hold it.

And hold it!

Gradually the two cores begin to fuse. Slowly at first and then with increasing speed the physical gems grow softer and begin to emit a blinding light as they gradually melt together.

Eventually it is done! The two small cores no longer exist and in their place is a slightly larger one! Tiredly I activate the Core Engineer skill on the new core and shudder at the tangled mess of data I find with their now.

Yuck!

[Core Engineer has reached level 2]

Phew!

It appears that my fusion lacked a bit of elegance and control. The result of combining the two monster cores is not a functional new monster species but a tangled mess of data that contains more energy than either of the two cores held separately but is a horrible mess of a monster!

If I were to actually reconstitute this core then the monster created may not even be able to functionally live and immediately pass away!

Not a pleasant fate....

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 100: Concerning Tiny**

With my Core Mechanics skill successfully advanced and my first test of core fusion complete it is time to move onto the next phase of my preparations!

I have already collected a small pile of cores that I have modified twice next to where my ape friend lies snoring soundly.

Formo indicated to me that there are a number of skills that relate to 'pets', which is the term the Sophos, and perhaps others in this world, use to refer to monsters that have been reconstituted from cores.

I honestly can't remember finding any such skills when I was last browsing the list, but then, I wasn't looking for them. With some skill points up my sleeve I want to take another look and see if I can find something that will help me harness the strength of Tiny to battle the upcoming wave.

Opening the skill menu with a few practiced thoughts I begin flipping through it, looking for anything that touches on the word 'pet'.

Naturally, armed with this new information I manage to find a ton of skills related to pets.

...

Running through the list I can see skills that make it easier to handle a larger number of pets, skills to help raise the pets more quickly... that must be referring the time and Biomass required to grow the monster back to full size, skills that allow you to monitor the pets stats, even a skill to accelerate the levelling speed of your pets.

So many!

No wonder the Sophos were able to utilise their engineering skills to survive so long living in this place with their weak physiques. By engineering such fearsome monsters and then controlling them with all of these skills, they would be a fearsome opponent indeed.

Most of these skills don't seem that appealing to me however. I don't really want a massive army of pets, it seems fairly redundant since I'm already surrounded by hundreds of monsters. Rather than that, a small number of strong pets seems more desirable. Allies that can protect me and the colony until it can better protect itself.

I didn't really mean to take any steps down this 'pet' path, reconstituting Tiny was an accident to begin with, but since I've had him I've found myself growing fond of the big lug. I had to raise him after all, from a little chimp back into the mighty gorilla he has now become.

Since I've got him I'm going to make sure that he becomes the best ape he can be!

Instead, the skill that catches my eye is this one:

[Pet communication: establishes a mental link between pet and master, increasing levels in the skill will improve the clarity of the link and the distance at which it can be utilised].

If I can speak more effectively with Tiny then he will become a lot more helpful, able to receive a few instructions rather than just running off and fighting everything he can see!

Learn this skill!

When I approve the skill point expenditure with Gandalf the now familiar trickling feeling shivers through my mind.

Whilst I'm at it I also check out the advanced version of Exo-Skeleton defence, since that skill has reached level 5 and can now be upgraded.

[Exo-Skeleton Defence - Advanced Exo-Skeleton Defence: Improves the ability to utilise the nature of an external skeleton to fend off physical damage].

I'll take that as well!

With a few skill points spend its time to commit to the next phase.

[Wake up Tiny!]

I try to use our newly established mental link to communicate with my sleeping ape friend.

A small presence in my mind pushes back like a petulant child. I don't think he wants to wake up....

[Wake up you ape! We have some stuff to do!]

Once again that presence in my head seems to roll over and wave me away, the mental equivalent of pulling a pillow over your head.

Going to be like that eh?

Eyes narrow I pick up a core and approach my drowsing companion.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

Get! Up! Get! Up! With each word I smash down the core in my mandibles on his head.

Ignore me will you?!

It isn't long before Tiny has responded to my affectionate request to wake and is sitting against the tunnel wall staring at me reproachfully and rubbing his head.

[Tired]...



A deep, sullen voice echoes in my mind suddenly.

The voice of Tiny! The skill is working well!

[We've got stuff to do buddy. A big day for you in particular!]

Tiny looks at me blankly before his eyelids slowly start to droop down.

BAM!

[Owww!]

[Take this core and use it!]

Impatiently I drop the core in front him. Trying to sleep in front of me again... I mean really!

Tiny looks down at the core and then back to me. I can sense the bubbling confusion in his mind as he ponders over what it is I want him to do.

[Use the core to reinforce your own!]

...

[Core?]

[Yes! Core! That thing there, on the ground!]

[This?]

[Yes!]

[Core?]

[Yes!]

...

[Don't know how....]

ARGH!

Not the first time I lament that Tiny seriously struggles with a limited mental capacity. To put it bluntly, this ape is dumb. Strong, but dumb as a stump.

Last time I had to belt him over the head with the core until he fused with it instinctively.

Looks like I might have to repeat the process!

With an evil glint in my eye I retrieve the core from the ground and slowly approach my nervous ape pet.

[Will you absorb the core, Tiny?]

[Absorb?]

BAM!

[Absorb it dammit!]

BAM!

[Ow!]

BAM!

THWACK!

Ah! Different sound...

Quickly checking my mandibles I see that the core I'd painstakingly modified twice has vanished.

Thank goodness!

A pat Tiny on his sore head with my antennae!

[Good job! You did it!]

[Did ... it?]

[Yes! You absorbed the core! It's gone, see?]

[Ohhhh!]

A light seems to have been lit in those dim eyes as he finally seems to understand what I want him to do.

Great! On to the next!

[Now absorb this one!]

...

[Absorb?]

DAMMIT.

[Make the stone vanish! Reinforce your own core!]

....

He just stares at me blankly.

Sigh.

BAM!

[Absorb the core!]

BAM!

Thwack!

Aha!

Tiny is now sitting with both of his large gorilla hands covering his head. I almost feel sorry for him, my poor simple minded ape buddy, but this is for his own good. He must be getting close to evolving after that last battle, he went on a massive rampage! I have to max out his core as soon as I can.

I grab another of my modified cores. I plan to save the untouched ones so that I can continue to practice on them.

[Ok. Now this one!]

Tiny looks at me through his fingers with deep sadness and trepidation in his eyes.

[Why don't you just take it without me having to hit you with it then!?!]

I pop it on the ground in front of my defensive ape friend.

[pick it up!] I order him.

Being able to communicate with him is so nice! I get the feeling that he might not be enjoying the experience much however.

He reluctantly picks up the core, the gem looks so small in his meaty, gorilla hands. I suspect he must have advanced his hands in some way, they surely look stronger and more powerful than they did before.

With the core resting on his massive palm he looks at me tentatively before concentrating briefly. With a short flash of light the core melts into his body and vanishes.

[Yes! You did it! Well done Tiny!]

I shower him with praise and repeatedly pat him on the head with my antennae until the silly gorilla is wriggling with joy, a broad smile on his bat face.

Dawwwwww.

[Now this one!]

...

I continue to pass Tiny cores until, after the eighth one, he shakes his head, taps himself on the chest and says simply:

[Full].

A wave of excitement rises in my chest. I can practically feel my eyes flashing with evil light as I turn to look at the massive snake core.

Time for dessert!