

## Chrysalis 171

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#### Chapter 171: Laying the foundation

GAAAAAAAH!

The itching continues for a good long while and this time I can actually see my own mandibles changing shape during the process. They being longer, more vicious looking and heavier. To compensate for the increased weight the muscle density in my face is also shifted as part of the mutation, causing even more itching to consume me.

After flailing around on the ground for five minutes the feeling finally fades away and scabble back onto my legs, try to retain my dignified pose before once again hitting up the menu for more mutations.

As much as I hate the feeling, I have to mutate! Mutate or die! I didn't spend those days eating dumb plants because I needed a fibre boost.

Now I have a single body part at +10 and all of the rest at +5. I don't have nearly enough to upgrade everything. To take one body part from +5 to +10 will cost me 40 Biomass and I only have 53 left. That means I'll be able to take one more part to max level and one more to +7.

...

I have to admit... I'm quite disappointed by that. I spent all of that time trying to fill myself with food, eating until I was practically a bouncy ball rolling around on the floor and it only gets me this far!? Two body parts at +10?!?!?

I'm very tempted to go back down into the Dungeon for another few days to pile up more Biomass. I haven't been able to get nearly enough!

A small part of me regrets not eating those humans when I had the chance. I wouldn't be in this position if I hadn't gained all of those levels without eating anything at the same time! Still .... Eating humans is not quite right with me.

Sighing internally I'll just have to power forward as is. The urge to evolve is strong within me. I'll just have to make sure I dedicate a significant chunk of time to bringing my mutations up afterwards. Tiny and I will need to go much deeper and expand our shortcut into the lower reaches.

Perhaps after evolving we'll be able to press into the boundary of the second strata!

The Queen told me how the surface people have roughly divided the Dungeon into layers. The top layer goes about one fifty kilometres down and is called the first strata or the layer of beasts. By far the smallest of the strata and containing the weakest monsters, the first strata is populated mostly by beast type monsters, mutated and powerful versions of animals found on the surface living normally. Lions, tigers, pigs, centipedes and also plant types. Ants are rarely found I was told and mostly right at the edge, between 45 and 50 kilometres down.

The second Strata is much larger and known as the layer of nightmares. The Queen was a little less forthcoming with information about this layer, either because she didn't know it or was trying to hide it.

Apparently this layer extends from 30 kilometres to over 200 down. The Queen wasn't able to tell me exactly how far down it went.

Apparently this layer is filled with strange shadow creatures that defy nature and reality. They can employ bizarre mind bending magic and some of the most powerful species are able to utilise space in strange ways, leaping into their own shadow to strike out of your own.

This meshes with what I saw during the wave. As the mana in the walls intensified the creatures spawned were strange shadow beasts, even Crinis was spawned at that time and she is clearly not a monster based on a normal animal or plant in any way.

When I learned that she was likely to be a strong monster from the second strata I was extremely excited to see what she would be capable of in the future after evolving a few times. She's surely going to be mighty!

About the third strata the Queen couldn't tell me much at all, not even how deep it is. All she could say was that it is called the layer of demons and in this area of the world nobody knows much about it. In older, more established and powerful empires they are able to delve that far but the Queen claimed to have never met anyone who had been there.

I'd be interested to hear what Formo had to say if I can ever get in touch with the Sophos again. Surely those people would have gone super deep in the Dungeon.

Enough thinking! Time for action!

I think I'll upgrade my carapace to +10. Perhaps a bit boring, I get that, but having upgraded my mandibles, the carapace seems to be the next most important choice. With my attack boosted, I next want to buff my defence.

[Do you wish to upgrade Carapace to +10? This will cost 40 Biomass]

Hit me!

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

Gimme dat menu!

Lemme see here. Self-healing carapace is nice, flexi-carapace is dumb, aerodynamic carapace is back I see.

Much like with my mandibles, I'm not after anything too flashy here. My carapace is for defence, to absorb damage and make me an unkillable, unstoppable ant monster. That is all!

Let's look at options that directly increase my defence capabilities.

The self-healing carapace regenerates itself over time. This could be handy since the Diamond carapace is already hard to crack, any damage caused to it closing itself over would be nice for sure.

There are heaps of elemental resistance carapace options but I reject them out of hand. The element specific road has been sealed by me long ago.

Are there any upgrades to Diamond carapace options?

Aha!

Hardened Diamond Carapace. Solidifies the carapace and increases resistance to physical damage.

Reflective Diamond Carapace. Can reflect some magical attacks.

Dark Diamond Carapace. Can increase stealth abilities by absorbing light?! Man that sounds rad as heck!

But to be honest, the hardened Diamond Carapace sings to my heart the loudest. A straight up boost to my defence. I'll take it!

While I'm at it I'll upgrade my eyes to +7, better vision hasn't let me down in the past.

[Do you wish to upgrade Diamond Carapace to +10 and Eyes to +7? This will cost 53 Biomass]

Here it comes.

HIT ME!

.....

OH GOD!

BACK TO FLOOR I GO!

Eyes has always been extremely bad in the itch department, your actual eyeballs changing size is a special sort of unpleasant but combined with the carapace, which obviously extends over my whole body, this is torture.

TORTURE I SAY GANDALF!

GAH!

I wriggle on the floor for another five minutes whilst my pets sit idly on the side. At least Crinis can't see me... Vibrant is actually reaching out with her antennae to poke me every now and again! How rude!

Finally it fades and my Biomass spend for the time being is over.

...

Thanks goodness!

Time to move on to core reinforcement!

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### **Chapter 172: Core, what is it good for?**

As I start to move over to the collection of cores in Tiny's hands I notice something sending a shiny reflection onto the walls of the chamber. What the heck is that? It's looking like a mini disco ball descended in the room!

I almost turn my head to see if there is anything suspended from the roof before remembering I don't have to turn my head to look up anymore. It's only then that I realise the reflection is actually coming from me! More specifically from my carapace. What the heck is going on!

On closer inspection of my usually smooth and glittering Diamond carapace I notice that something has changed in my last mutation. When I selected hardened Diamond carapace I hadn't quite expected this sort of effect.

The small glittering points in my carapace have expanded, growing out over the surface of the carapace slightly. Each little point has only grown a small amount but the cumulative effect is significant. In essence, I now have a small diamond covering at points all over my carapace! I mean, I look fabulous, but just how high is the value of my skeleton going to get if I keep going down this path?!

If I continue to harden the Diamond Carapace in future will I eventually just be completely covered in diamond, a shiny and reflective crystal ant?!

....

That sounds awesome...

I might end up with monster hunters from all over the globe coming to take by extremely valuable business district back to the surface but damn if I won't look good doing it!

Enough, I can worry about this another time, for now I need to focus on the process of evolving. As Vibrant bounces around the room making a pest of herself and my pets patiently wait, I start to focus my mind and activate my engineering skill, one core at a time. After exhausting my will on one core I rest for five minutes before moving onto the next. Truly this is some of the most draining mental exertion I can imagine.

How the Sophos are able to work on a single core for weeks on end I have no idea, I can barely last more than ten minutes on one before my mental energy is flat lining. While I'm at it, I do make sure to try and focus on practicing finer changes rather than brute forcing larger shifts in stats. Maybe taking a leg from here and moving it to there, making the mouth wider, general changes to the monsters physical shape rather than just it's statistics.

This kind of editing takes even more mental energy but I must have experience in this field if my grand project is going to be a reality.

I make sure that I'm not messing with any potentially interesting or powerful cores before I begin my editing process. It wouldn't do to overwrite a potentially promising pet with some garbage after I've put an extra pair of legs on its head.

After several hours I've created a small pile of cores that are ready for consumption! I take a quick break since the next part is even harder.

Stretch it out Anthony, just enjoy the breeze and concentrate man! Who's the worker? YOU the worker!

OK! Let's do this.

After flexing and stretching my ant self out in truly strange and puzzling ways I am sufficiently mentally psyched for the upcoming challenge.

Approaching two small cores on the floor with the utmost seriousness I tap each one with a single antennae and then press together both physically and mentally.

HRRRRRRNNNNNGGGG!

Like pressing two rocks together the cores refuse to budge. To make the impossible possible a sheer dominant force of will is required and I strain with every ounce of my being!

Come on you little bugger! Get in there!

Gradually the two cores begin to blur together, melding and blending their energies in wild and chaotic ways. Actually being able to control the result of this fusion is still a dream within a dream for me, successfully merging the cores is still the best I can do.

Hold on Anthony! You have the power!

I grit my mandibles tightly as I press with my mind forcefully against the cores until the fusion is finally complete.

PHEW!

Holy moly! That's hard!

....

Ok that's one!

....

DAMMIT!

After a rest I throw myself back into the fusion until I finally get the notification.

[Compatible special core detected, do you want to absorb or reconstitute the monster?]

Finally! I'm a broken heap of an ant on the floor but the core is finally finished!

"Vibrant!" I call.

"Hi-hi!" she answers, bouncing into view energetically.

Hanging around while I grind away on skills is mind numbingly boring for the little ant and she's been poking about and literally running up the walls. Crinis is the one to suffer the most as the small worker pokes her, rolls her around and gets the little ball to climb onto her back before they go out adventuring.

She seems absolutely delighted to be called upon.

Despite being so tired, a feeling of selfish glee is washing over me. Yes, be happy whilst you can little worker, once this is done you'll be big enough to no longer hitch free rides on me and strong enough to fight for your own food.

My days of freedom will return!

Muahahahahaaaa!

"Now you've reached maximum level, right?"

"Yup!"

"and your core is maxed out, right?"

"Yup!"

"Excellent! After absorbing this core you'll be ready to evolve into an especially powerful ant!"

The little worker practically vibrates with enthusiasm. "Really?!" she cries.

"Absolutely! The only problem is that it's going to hurt like hell!" I cheer.

....

"Okay!" she bubbles with barely diminished enthusiasm. There really isn't anything that will keep her down for long.

Skittering closer she reaches out to the core and begins the absorption process. Much like when it was Tiny's turn, she becomes increasingly agitated as the process continues, the powerful energy within the core streaming into her body, reinforcing her core and infusing it with the potent energies that will supercharge her evolution.

Almost unconsciously I reach out with an antenna to stroke the suffering little worker and pat her on the head, trying to soothe her. Perhaps she notices or perhaps she gets a better handle on the feeling but she visibly relaxes under my ministrations.

...

I don't really want them to suffer, ok!? This is what's best for them! With more powerful evolutions they'll be able to overcome their fate and carve out their own path in life.

...

As a proud parent this is the best I can do!!!

\*sniff\*

Finally the process is done and Vibrant collapses in relief.

"You can evolve now little one" I say gently.

She nods, exhausted and crawls over to a corner of the chamber where she seems to fall asleep.

I'll be interested to watch her evolution happen, what changes will she undergo?

Tiny watches her go with an odd look on his face.

That's right buddy, you're next!

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**Chapter 173: Well behaved ape**

Tiny's bat face starts to exude more and more anxiety as I watch him intently.

[Tiny]

[....]

[Tiny!]

[..... What?]

[Time to max out that core champ! Get over here]

....

With reluctance painted over every inch of his body, Tiny lumbers to his feet and then resentfully ambles his way towards me from where he had slumped himself against the wall as I worked.

Using an antenna I flick one core at his feet and then stare at him.

He stares back.

....

Slowly I reach down to pick up the core with my mandibles and something flashes within the apes eyes. Was it understanding? Wisdom? Or was it heart rending fear? I shall never know. What I do know is that Tiny reaches down and snatches up the core before I can grasp it in my jaws.

A moment later he shows me the empty palm in which the core had been held.

[Good boy].

He needs to make sure he eats all his food.

With flicks of my antenna I continue to roll him cores I've modified until I run out and have to craft a few more. Every now and again I make sure to check in on Vibrant as she undergoes evolution. I kind of expect to see flashing lights or a glow or something but evolution doesn't seem to work like that here. At least nothing is happening so far, the little worker is still lying flat, seemingly unconscious, without any physical changes taking place.

[Core Engineering has reached level 5]

Nice! Every little bit of help I can get makes a difference!

I continue grinding my way through the cores but I have to take frequent and longer breaks in order to maintain the effort. It won't be long until I can't continue anymore and will need to take a break to rest.

This is massively draining work.

After consuming more cores Tiny finally raises his hand and pushes the last core back to me, indicating that he is full.

Finally!

I'm wrecked. My head is pounding with serious pain. I'll have to take a nap before trying to form the special core, Tiny will have a minor reprieve.

[Take a nap big guy. We'll finish it tomorrow and then you can evolve]

Tiny nods happily, clearly pleased at this turn of events. Ungrateful! No appreciation for how hard I'm working...

I scuttle wearily over to check on Vibrant and see if there have been any major changes during her evolution.

...

Still nothing. Maybe she's still fiddling around in the menus? I can't be sure.

Certainly the first time I evolved I have no idea how much time passed as I fiddled about with the options and scrolled through the lists of options which are certainly extremely wide. I guess this could be taken as confirmation that Vibrant is intelligent enough to trigger the manual evolution.

Something Tiny will possibly never reach.

Grumbling internally about my lovable apes' dim witted ways I slowly drift into torpor.

...

MANAMANA!

I'm up!

Springing awake I flash into action, immediately moving to check on Vibrant. Antennae wiggling this way and that I eagerly check to see if there have been any developments whilst I was resting. What's she got? Wings? Extra head? Doubled in size? Tripled in size?!

...

Nothing?

Resting on the ground, still perfectly still for possibly the first time in her life, Vibrant continues to appear to be resting peacefully.

Why is nothing happening?! She should be getting larger if nothing else! If she wakes up the same size as before I'm going to be super annoyed...

I shuffle over to my barely dented pile of cores.

I literally emptied out the treasury of a kingdom to amass these cores. A small kingdom without a whole lot of wealth but still!

This is going to take us a long way.

If my plans come together then this pile of cores could change the world...

That's enough day dreaming, back to work.

Time to fuse these cores!

Get PUMPED!

I spend five minutes mentally hyping myself like a weightlifter about to perform the gold medal lift at the Olympics. When the correct mindset has been achieved I begin the arduous task of core fusion.

.....



HRRRRRRNNNGGGH!

A while later, once again exhausted and shaking mentally I pick up the intensely sparkling and oversized core in my mandibles and carry it to the sleeping Tiny.

[Get up you slug!]

Prodding him viciously with my legs I shout at him repeatedly but to no effect. He doesn't want to get up. I suspect he knows what may be coming and is trying to avoid it as long as possible.

Perhaps this is a sign of him developing a little wisdom, trying to lay this cunning plan... unfortunately I don't think it will have the result he was hoping for. Does he really think I'm just going to give up and walk away after breaking my mind in half trying to make this core for him?!

Instead, I carefully grasp the precious core in mandibles and climb up onto the wall above the 'slumbering' ape.

Then I raise the core high...

[WAKE]

BAM!

[UP!]

BAM!

.....

BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM! BAM!

I slam the core down on his head savagely! To be honest, after the first two hits he clearly started moving and raising his hands to protect his head. The rest of the hits were simply my display of affection. This is a teaching moment for Tiny and I don't intend to waste this opportunity. I spoil him if anything...

Rubbing his head and giving me a resentful look that I completely ignore as I climb down off the wall and drop the special core in front of him.

Perhaps lured by the potent core that will increase his evolutionary potential and strength or maybe it's the death stare I'm giving him but Tiny finally reaches forward and touches the core lightly, kicking off the absorption.

During the entire process I watch him like a hawk, lest he decide halfway through to bail out on me. I'm not sure what I expect, that he'll suddenly fling the core in my face and leap out of the nest screaming 'freeeedom!' but nothing of the sort occurs. His face twists painfully as the core dramatically increases the pressure inside him but he stoically perseveres to the end.

He'd better, a newborn little worker was able to handle it, it'd be ridiculous if he couldn't manage it himself.

Eventually the core vanishes and Tiny has fully reinforced his core, ready to advance with a new, special evolution.

[Well done Tiny. Go and evolve, you'll wake up stronger than ever before].

The ape nods tiredly and slumps against the wall, quickly closing his eyes and appearing to drift off.

...

As my first pet I'm very attached to Tiny. I know he wants to battle and eat until he's satisfied, without evolving in the best possible way each time I just don't think he'd have the strength to keep doing it. Strong as he is, he's a monster from the first, and weakest, of the layers in the Dungeon. If we face monsters from the depths, just how well would he hold up?

By doing this over and over again, I hope to change his destiny.

....

Speaking of which, it's my turn next...

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#### **Chapter 174: Options abound**

I have to say I'm quite excited to finally be able to evolve again. I know I should wait and pile on the Biomass but I simply can't contain my excitement.

So I'm weak! Sue me!

Everyone has to have a weakness and perhaps this is mine. Rather than shovelling my face full of monsters' sticky insides, as delightful as that sounds, I would rather be taking a brief nap and then waking up a whole new being.

It involves the consumption of less guts, for one thing.

I can't help but get excited for the possible options that may be present to me when I evolve. The mind ant species has been good to me, dramatically increasing my strength and propelling me further along the path of magic. As great as it's been, I feel like I need one more push in order to achieve a proper mastery of magic. If I have an option that will further enhance my mind I'll be hard pressed to turn it down.

Before any of that though, I have to form the special core.

LET'S DO THIS!

.....

GAWD ALMIGHTY!

MAH BRAIN!

[Core Engineering has reached level 6]

Worth!

After all of my effort I'm finally done! In front of me sits a new shiny special core, the announcement from Gandalf still ringing in my ears.

[Compatible special core detected ...]

Yasssss!

This mental torture is finally over! Despite being as mentally fatigued as I am I eagerly begin the absorption process immediately. Not even a microsecond passes before the truly uncomfortable squeezing feeling erupts in my guts.

NOPE!

I remember this feeling! It sucks!

As if my intestine were slowly swelling with gas but there was nowhere for it to go, the tightness swells until it turns into pain. Then it swells some more and turns into even more pain.

Yeeouch!

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to do this immediately after wearing myself down, grinding my own brain against the stone to produce these cores. But it's too late to complain about it now, I'll just have to push through and endure.

Grit those mandibles Anthony, show what an ant you are! Do the workers complain? No! Will you complain? Only sometimes!

Every second only intensified the pain so I try and distract myself in any way possible. The first thing I try to do is look around the room for something to catch my eye, but everyone in the room is sleeping or something like it!

Tiny is openly snoring in front of me. I'm not even sure if he's evolving or decided to take a nap first. Vibrant is still posed, perfectly still, on the floor in the corner, still nothing going on there. Crinis is bobbling in the middle of the room on the floor. I'm not sure exactly when she wobbled over there but I may as well pick her up again.

[Crinis, over here] I stutter, mental teeth still clenched against the pain.

I extend a leg out and Crinis latches on with a few tentacles, swiftly making her own way onto my back where she wiggles a bit and settles into a seemingly comfortable nook between my body segments.

[Any idea how close you are to reaching fully grown?] I ask, desperate for distractions.

[.....] nothing.

Perhaps if I wasn't stuck with the least talkative of my gang this might have gone better.

[You know Crinis, I would be really grateful if you would talk to me a little at the moment] I encourage her.

[... I don't know master] she answers quietly.

I sense that she's a little disappointed that she isn't useful yet. I'm completely not fussed however. I was lugging Tiny around for ages before he was able to be useful. In many ways he still isn't useful...

[Not to worry Crinis, it won't be long and you'll be back to shredding monsters, you'll see]

I can still vividly remember the sight of her mature form ripping monsters apart and eating them whole. I don't think I'll ever forget it actually...

[I hope so master] she replies.

[There now. It's nice to hear you talking a bit little one. You don't have to be so quiet you know?] I urge her.

[...]

[... well, maybe work on it in future. I'll be evolving soon Crinis, so don't worry if there isn't any movement for a bit or I don't respond when you try to talk to me] not that it's likely...

[You'll be evolving master?] the little blob asks.

[Yup! Looking forward to it. Everyone else is evolving at the moment, Tiny and Vibrant have already started, I'll be last]

[oh....] she sounds a bit deflated.

[I promise you Crinis, soon as you're ready we'll get you in the Dungeon and once you're grown, getting you to evolve will be our priority! Not to worry, I have big plans for you!]

[Thank you master] she replies, sounding a little happier.

Who would though a tentacled blob of death would be this sensitive?! It's nice though, so much more respectful than the other two...

DAMN IT HURTS!

....

Finally the core has finished being absorbed and my time has come! The season of triumph!

I can't help but have a good feeling about this evolution. The Mind Ant was the first steps on a brand new path of evolution and the next step will only be more potent, I can feel it already.

Damnit I can't handle this anymore! Feels like my core is cracking!

[Ok then Crinis, I'm going in!]

[Ok master. Enjoy]

Just so polite!

[You have reached maximum level for your current level of evolution]

[Would you like to use the Evolution menu?]

Yes!

My mind immediately is swept into the menu and glittering before me are the new options for my next form. Let's see, let's see!

[Mind Worker (formica). This evolution includes a +10 bonus to Might and a +5 bonus to Cunning. Aura glands related to worker cooperation are discounted for this evolution].

Ok the first option! A normal evolution that gives some bonus stats, and what's this? A discount on aura glands? Hmmmmmm. Interesting. I looked through the aura glands and there are a whole lot that relate to increased coordination or work speed for particular types of allies. Presumably this option will discount these. It's also worth noting that the stat bonuses are quite considerable this time. +15 in total? And +5 to cunning?! I needed a special evolution to get that last time!

This only makes me more eager to see what the special evolutions will give!

[Advanced Soldier (formica). This evolution includes a +10 bonus to Might and a +10 bonus to Toughness. One free health related organ. Defensive carapace upgrades are discounted]

Ok. Dispensing with the Mind Ant path, this normal evolution puts me back on the soldier track, skipping over basic and straight to advanced. The bonuses here are truly juicy, +20 stats? Admittedly they are the 'cheapest' stats in terms of energy, but still...

A free health related organ? That could refer to a number that I've seen, perhaps there are also new options that relate to Hp in some way? Maybe something that increases total Hp or redundant organs like a second heart? Curious. Oooo, the next option is a special evolution!

[Special Evolution: Magic Soldier + 15 bonus to Might, +10 bonus to Toughness,+ 5 bonus to Cunning. One free Health related organ, Defensive carapace upgrades are discounted]

Wowsers! Look at those stat bonuses! Clearly this path is to enable a turn to a more fighty oriented build but still wants to advance magical capacity slightly. I tell you what, that is fair tempting I have to say. If I was satisfied with my magic progress at the point I'd be even more swayed by this. The huge jump in stats alone is tempting!

[Special Evolution: Ant Sage +10 bonus to Cunning, +5 Bonus to Willpower. One free magic affinity gland and an energy conversion gland]

You WHAT?! Another free magic affinity gland PLUS an energy conversion gland!? I can well imagine what that gland is for too, it'll be for increasing the transformation rate of energy from normal MP to specialised MP inside the glands. This is juicy. This is double juicy!

What a massive increase in magical prowess, this might be enough to push me over the top into complete mage skills! I'm salivating, holy moly! The next option will have to be freakin' good to compete with this!

[Special Evolution: Dispersed Mind Ant. +10 bonus to Cunning, +10 bonus to willpower. This evolution includes a free Coordination Cortex and a free Sub-Brain]

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**Chapter 175: Exceed Mortal Kind**

Dispersed Mind Ant? +20 to mental stats AND a free sub-brain? The sub-brain is probably another five Cunning worth of brain matter on its own! With this level of mental boost the things I've been hoping to achieve, mana transformation, working on the cores, all of these could be realised in one fell swoop!

Not to mention this ... Coordination Cortex? I'm intrigued by the possibilities of this name. What is exactly will this new organ do?

The only two options I'm looking at are Ant Sage or Dispersed Mind Ant. These choices will both further enhance my magical and mental strength to the point where I'll be satisfied. These two options will bring my current goals closer!

The Ant Sage will allow me to choose another magical affinity gland and it isn't as if I'm not tempted by this. There are so many options I could choose that would make a real difference to my magical flexibility. I could straight up choose the mind magic gland, or take something else crazy like the space or time gland. Not to mention the gland that'll increase the efficiency of the mana conversion, making my glands even more effective!

Combined with the bottomless gravitational gland it might be enough to almost have infinite gravitational mana! Or close enough to it! With my huge reserves, if I were to add a faster recovery speed, it would take ages for me to actually run out!

I would become a spell slinging powerhouse!

The Dispersed Mind Ant on the other hand... those juicy stats, that extra brain! This is power of a different sort. With a mind that strong, with an extra sub brain on board to help handle the laborious tasks of moving and shaping mana I'll be able to cast in combat even more effectively. If the brains are strong enough then maybe they'll enable me to quickly transform mana during a fight! Even if I could only succeed in the more basic transformations like fire and water, it'll dramatically increase my spell casting options!

And the cortex, I'm not sure exactly what it does but I can only imagine positive things. Let's see what Gandalf has to say about it.

[Coordination Cortex. An organ designed to control and coordinate the efforts of multiple sub brains, increasing their efficiency when handling tasks separately or working together]

Oho! This organ is specifically designed to help manage multiple sub brains?! So that means that I won't even have to direct them with own main mind, further freeing it for other things! Perhaps I wouldn't even have unlocked this evolution if I hadn't crafted myself a Sub-Brain during my last evolution. This is good stuff.

Also key here is the Will upgrade. Will can be considered the force of the mind and it has many effects, like making mana easier to move as well as providing defence against mental attacks, something I suspect will become more prevalent the deeper we go into the Dungeon.

I'm going for it! The Dispersed Mind Ant it is!

Having made that selection I enter the next layer of the evolution menu. My core has more than double the energy of the last evolution to spend and I'm going to cash in! First I check in on my two sub brains and as I suspected the new freebie isn't quite as beefy as the one I crafted myself. I decide to spend a

chunk of energy building them both up and ensuring they are equally capable. I hit the wall numerous times already with what my sub brain could handle so I want it to be a bit more capable.

Now that I have the Coordination Cortex, I'll be able to task both brains with a single job and the cortex will do the heavy lifting of coordinating the efforts, which means I don't need to make the sub brains strong enough to handle the big jobs on their own, just good enough so that they can handle it when they work together.

I end up with spending most of the free +10 Cunning on shaping up the sub brains with the remainder spend on my own mind. I draw on a little of surplus energy to give my main mind a further boost for a total of +13 gained on my Cunning.

The Will increase I similarly spread around my three brains, increasing the capacity of each and spend a little extra pumping the main brain for a total of +12 to will.

Just going this far my mental capacity has received a MASSIVE boost. Cunning has gone from 32 to 45 and Will from 22 to 34!

I still have plenty of energy left!

Like a kid in a candy store I can't help but flick through the options available. There are certainly a ton of new organs and body parts available. I'm tempted by the wings, I mean, REALLY tempted by the wings but as cool as it would be I'm not certain it'll be super useful inside the Dungeon.

Idly I flick through to try and find an option that'll help me adjust my gender but there doesn't seem to be that particular item in the list at this point.

...

Maybe next time...

I have two ways I can go right now. I could spend the remainder of my energy on buffing my physical stats like I did last time or I could try and find an affordable organ I can purchase with the remainder of the energy stored in my core.

There are so many options! I could get an extra set of legs? NOPE. The correct number of legs is clearly six, eight would make me an arachnid and that is simply no go. I don't really need more eyes or anything.

I could get a venom gland added to my bite, or I could get a sting in my business zone to inject venom. There are quite a few ants with stingers that I know of, fire ants probably the most common of those. This is due to ants actually being an evolution of the wasp family.

I think I'll skip the stinger for now, my back zone is clearly dangerous enough already.

The aura glands are still too expensive for me as tasty as they are. Those will have to wait until further down the line.

I think I might take a look at things that might enhance my already potent defence, there has to be some interesting glands or organs that can help me out in this department. For the short term future I will be

using magic as my primary offense, the whole point of choosing this path was achieve that end, so I'm not too concerned about raising my physical offense for the time being.

So let's see what we can see. I already have the healing gland that gives me the burst of healing I want but there are still a ton of other options, such as purchasing secondary hearts and such to increase survivability. Since I'm an invertebrate, with my skeleton on the outside, I don't think the back-up organs are that necessary for me. For a soft, spongy creature those parts are quite vulnerable and may need to be protected but not me.

What I need is something that will increase my outer defence even further. I can purchase a second healing gland but I'll pass on that. Let's see, there has to be something here....

Aha!

This looks tasty!

[Inner Carapace Plating: Designed to support an exo-skeleton from within, this additional set of bone plating will increase the flexibility and thickness of a carapace]

Muahaha!

Nice!

Examining the option more closely it seems less like 'plating' and more like a web of criss crossing carapace wires underneath my outer skeleton. That's probably why it's cheap enough for me to afford!

Rather than use the energy I have remaining on a small stat boost to my physical properties I spend it modifying my Inner Plating to add more wires around my head to marginally increase the defensive boost around my precious brain.

When it's all said and done my final status will look like this:

Name: Anthony

Level: 1 (core)

Might: 41

Toughness: 29

Cunning: 44

Will: 35

HP: 50/50

MP: 110/110

Skills: Excavation Level 7; Improved Acid Shot Level 6; Advanced Grip Level 2; Shattering Bite Level 6; Advanced Stealth Level 5; Splintering Chomp Level 2; Tunnel Map Level 3; Mana Transformation Level 1; Forceful Mana Level 4; External Mana Manipulation Level 2; Mana Sensing Level 5; Core Engineer Level 5; Advanced Exo-Skeleton Defence level 5; Pet Communication Level 2; Dash Level 4;



Mutations: Focused Eyes +7, Infrared Antennae +5, Restrictive Acid +5, Absorption Legs +5, Infused Mandibles +10, Diamond Carapace +5, Limb Regeneration Gland +5, Pheromone Language Gland +5, Deep Gravity Magic Gland +5, Coordination Cortex, Inner Carapace Plating;

Species: Dispersed Mind Ant (Formica)

Skill points: 12

Biomass: 0

Pleased with what I see I confirm my choices and my mind falls instantly down into a deep void filled with black.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 176: Words with the White Wizard**

I always expect to get knocked out when evolving but this feels slightly different. I don't feel like I'm being pulled downward into slumber but quite literally being pulled downward!

I can feel my consciousness being pulled down into my core, dragged away from its home in my ant body in a non-pain free process.

What the heck is going on here!? I was just about to evolve and enjoy my rise to triumph! What the heck is this? Is this some punishment for hitting Tiny too much? He deserved it! I swear!

Did I kill too many humans? Is there god going to take punishment on me for reaping juicy experience from them? Those were bad people! Probably!

To tell you the truth I don't know!

Despite my protestations and desperate flailing with my mind I have absolutely no control. Like a water balloon held in an iron fist my mind can only slosh about as it is inexorable pulled away, into the core, and then down, further down. A tiny thread like tendril has extended from the dark and connected to my core and it's through this thread that I am drawn, dragged even.

Like Alice tumbling down a rabbit hole I can sense myself sinking down a winding path, twisting here, turning there and always spiralling further downward, to the very center.

Of what I have no freakin' clue. As a disembodied mind I don't really have access to a whole lot of sensory options. None, is the precise number now that I think about it. I think Vibrant would die of sheer boredom in this place! Not to mention Tiny, he'd have nothing to fight! Or eat...

Crisis would probably be quite fine though, now that I consider it. She'd miss the sensation of touch obviously but she's used to going without the others...

I continue to babble to myself to on the surface level of my mind mainly to distract from the sheer existential terror I'm experiencing.

I'M FREAKING OUT OVER HERE!

It isn't often your consciousness is quite literally dragged out of your body and pulled to a new location whilst you spin, completely blind and unaware of the process going on? How often could that possibly happen to a person!? It's only the second time I've ever experienced this sensation!

...

The realisation stills my pounding... mental... heart.. For a single second.

Actually... I did go through this whole thing before once didn't I?

I can remember, vaguely, what it felt like when I ... died, I guess? I could feel my mind slipping away from my body, pulled out and dragged through who knows what to who knows where. The hunger and sensation from my old body just faded away then everything went white and then...

[Then you heard a voice which welcomed you to your new world]

Yeah! Then Gandalf spoke to me and everything got started on this crazy antventure...

....

Gandalf!?

[Is that what you call me, young one?]

Well..... Yeah? That is certainly the voice of the Gandalf the Grey and I'll say the same even if you don't let me pass...

[Pass where?]

.... Doesn't matter I suppose. What's going on here exactly O Bearded One? Could I perhaps be returned to my body please?

[Your core has reached the level of density required for me to reach out to you in this way young Anthony. It is kind of ... traditional, that I speak to those like you personally at this point of their new journey]

Uh.... Don't you talk to me almost constantly? Every time I level up and so on?

[Those communications are a little more ... subconscious. For me to reach out to you with my active mind requires a little more... sturdiness on your part. You have reached this point very quickly I must say, you must have adapted to the monstrous life well]

That sturdiness comment is a little disturbing. I reached this point quickly? Compared to what? The other people like me? Just how many people do you drag in here Gandalf? Are you in the habit of abducting people?

...

Can I go away now? Please?

[I reach out to grasp an existence like yours and bring them into this world periodically. It helps... various things]

What do you mean 'like me'? I don't recall there being anything particularly special about me?

[Oh you don't? I have found it takes a certain resilience of mind, a certain .... Insanity, to allow a sentient creature such as a human to survive the transition to life in the Dungeon of this world without... breaking. I try to find souls such as yours, souls that have lived a life of deprivation and suffering. I find they are better equipped to handle the madness, slaughter and solitary life of a monster]

.....

.....

But... I don't particularly see myself as having suffered a horrible life or anything though? It was bit tough sometimes but, everybody hurts, you know?

....

(There is a slight stunned silence between the two of us for a moment)

...

[You starved to death at age fifteen....]

....

Well ... yeah I know that right? But I always thought that was a bit more common than people gave it credit, you know? People starve to death all over the world, many of them younger than me. That's not so bad.

....

(I'm not sure that Gandalf was quite expecting the response he is getting)

[Weren't you also abandoned by your parents?]

...

I wouldn't necessarily say abandoned... They did disappear one morning with all of their clothes and any belongings that were worth anything. Not to mention my relatives immediately stopped answering my calls, leaving me stranded with debtors on the door.... But hey... could have been worse.

[Could have been worse?!]

Sure! ... Could have had my leg cut off.

...

...

[Didn't that happen too?]

Well.... A bit.

[A BIT?!]

Fine! Sheesh! So what!? I still had my pets at least.

[Ah yes, your pet colony of ants. You fed them everything you had, didn't you? Until you starved to death]

Can we stop talking about the death and such? I'm more of a forward looking person...

[Would you describe it as sane for a person to feed a colony of ants above themselves to the point they died from it?]

Not everyone has my sense of responsibility and devotion Gandalf, what can I say?

[That is the reason I reincarnated you as an ant, by the way, I thought it would be a ... comforting form for you]

So it really was pet ants = ant rebirth!? Dammit!

[You don't like it?]

.... It worked out ok in the end but I have to say Gandalf, it was quite a shaky start!

[Yes, many don't make it past the first few days, despite my best efforts]

So .. What happens to those who ... don't make it?

[Death, of course]

....

(Yikes!)

[I hope you can continue to succeed young Anthony, who knows, perhaps I'll see you in person one day]

In person? Like.. You're not a spirit or something? Where the heck are you?

[If you go down far enough, you should find me]

I just might you know! (not in a million years)

[You may not have a choice... Good luck!]

With that I feel my mind once again being manipulated by a power beyond its control, flung back out of wherever the heck I've been and up, up, up through the tendril and slammed back into my core.

Ouch!

From my core I can feel my consciousness once again settle inside its rightful house. Before I can even begin to process the bizarre conversation with He of the floppy hat I sink slowly into sleep as the evolution process takes hold of me properly.

Dangi...

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 177: The Low Rider**

Gradually my mind begins to resurface. It's a strange feeling, seeing as I don't actually get to sleep as an ant but rather going into the stasis like rest of torpor so I'm not actually used to properly blacking out like this.

The memory of what had taken place when I evolved still boils away in my mind. Gandalf? Is he actually down in the Dungeon somewhere? I push away the bad memories of my previous life that had been dragged up during the conversation, I don't waste time focusing on that stuff. I have plenty to be about in the here and now after all! I've got a new family, pets and a brand new Mother to look after, no point stuffing about thinking of things that are long gone.

Sensations bubble up in my awareness until the light comes on in my eyes and then BAM, I'm awake!

HAH!

HOOGABAH!

I'm here! I'm ready! It's actions stations people!

....

Why is my face full of fluff?!

Flexing my legs and body I can feel all of the familiar appendages are in their proper places, six legs, two antennae, the junk in my trunk. All seems good!

The real problem I have is all this damn fuzz in my face! What the heck is going on!

[Tiny!]

[....]

[Tiny is that you?!]

[....]

[Get the hell up Tiny! I need to move about in here!]

[.... Sleepy]

[Go sleep on the surface or something! I can't even see with all this fuzz in my eyes!]

[.... Tired]

[That's the same thing as sleepy! Get the heck out of here you lump!]

I can sense an exasperated sigh over the mental link, as if I'm the one being unreasonable! Just who does this ape think he is? And why the heck is he so damn fluffy now!?

Gradually the fuzz begins to shift and move and I can gradually see a little better. A wall of long white fuzzy hair rolls away from me towards the entrance where I can hear grunting punctuated by frustrated growls.

...

[Do you not fit?!]

[... No]

Dangit! I shouldn't be too surprised since the entrance and chamber was a little squeezey before he evolved. Knowing Tiny and his general species I can only assume that he has gotten even more powerful and large after evolving. If I'd thought ahead properly I would have realised this would happen and made proper preparations.

[You'll have to dig your way out buddy. Try digging straight out that way and you should come out the side of the hill, near the top]

Our chamber is usually dug the closest to the top and off to the side somewhere, out of the way of the rest of the colony so there shouldn't be a problem if he starts digging his way through. Even if the side of the hill collapses it won't take down any chambers others than ours and we can dig out easily enough.

I hear a deep scraping as the ape starts to dig his way out. The only visible evidence I have of that is the shifting white hair pressed into my face.

Eventually he finally breaks through. Grunting happily to himself he hauls himself out into the light and I finally get a good look at his new size as he moves.

He's big! That's a big ape!

He was already large enough to put any earth sized gorilla to shame but he must have increased in size by thirty percent with this evolution! If he were to stand up to his maximum height he'd probably crack ten feet, easy! His thick, powerful arms are covered in long white hairs, the shorter hair on his torso is also mostly white. On closer inspection, he isn't pure snow white like a polar bear, more of a burnished silvery colour.

Is he a silverback now?

[What species are you now Tiny, do you remember?]

Out on the side of the hill now and basking in the sunshine, Tiny turns to look at me and I can see his bat face is now completely black, rather than the dark grey it used to be. His eyes however are a deep glowing red.

[...]

[Your species? What kind of monster are you now? Do you know at all bud?]

He stares at me blankly.

[Did your cunning actually go DOWN?!]

[...]

Holy moly! Just how muscle-brained is this guy going to get as he keeps evolving? If he gets any dumber than this he'll forget how to eat! Looking at his bulky form that practically radiates strength I can only imagine how potent those massive fists have become now. This species clearly prioritises physical strength above all else, even having a brain.

In some ways he makes the perfect pet but I wish he had a bit more going on in the upstairs department. I want him to be able to have independent thoughts and be able to think for himself, rather than rely on me to point him in the right direction and make sure he has what he needs. Ah well. Maybe I can do something about that down the line.

Now that I have a little more space in the chamber, as well as a snazzy new natural lighting I can get a handle on what is going on in the room. Where is Vibrant? She doesn't seem to be over in her corner, so she must have woken up by now.. Where is she?

"Vibrant?" I call.

"Hi-Hi!" I hear her chirpy response.

....

Did that come from...

Using my antennae I feel around on the top of my head and sure enough something is there. Shifting my head position back a little I can clearly see her beady little ant eyes staring back at me. She looks almost exactly the same! Wait!

"Have you evolved, Vibrant?"

"Yup-yup!"

DANG.

"Do you remember what species you chose?" I grate out.

"Of course! Vibrant took one of the special options, just like Senior said! Superior Hatchling Worker!" she declares proudly.

So still a hatchling.

I slump to the ground, defeated. I'm going to have to put up with this helpless little freeloader until she reaches level ten, then craft another special core for her, then maybe she'll become useful after that!

Haaaah.

Oh well. No use crying over spilt.... Something.

I can see that Crinis is still in place, nestled onto my mid-section between the joints where my legs attach to my carapace.

[How are you Crinis? Ready to go and get large?]

[Ready master] she replies, [Was your evolution successful?]

[It was! Some very nice bonuses picked up this time!]

[You don't seem to have changed much that I can tell master] she says, extending a few little tentacles to pat about my carapace, probably checking my size.

[All of the changes took place on the inside this time! And they weren't small either!] I boast, [wait and see what I can do now]

[I look forward to it master]

I can already feel the difference within me. My mind is positively humming with strength, like a sports car sitting in neutral, just revving and ready to go. I can feel my sub-brains sitting idly inside me, each of them are more powerful than the single one I had before and I now have the ability to harness them together, get them to act in concert on a single task.

I can't wait to flex this new mental muscle!

Let's try it!

Mana! Transfoooooooooorm!

Eagerly I direct my new mental rig to attempt the never before achieved mana transformation. This process is so difficult that I honestly have no idea how any human is actually able to achieve it at all, let alone in a fight!

First I need to bring the mana out of my core, directing it into threads that I begin to weave and shape into a mind bending construction that I'm beginning to suspect goes a little beyond the three dimensions I'm familiar with. Intricate whoops and whirls that curve back and in on themselves before fine filigree patterns are weaved on the outside AND on the inside of almost the entire thing!

I get a headache just picturing the stupid thing.

At least... I did.

Muu... muuuha..... Mua!.... MUAHAHAHAHA!!!

YESSSSSS!

Throwing the bulk of the work over to my sub brains I can feel them thrum into life as they take the strain of directing and shaping the mana. The cortex acts like a foreman, directing the efforts of the two brains to ensure they don't overlap and their independent efforts slot together like clockwork.

I can feel the sub brains straining under the load of directing the wispy threads of energy but they are far more capable than the old sub brain was. Not only is their mental strength beefier but they have an upgraded amount of willpower, giving them a bit more grunt.

What this does is free up my main mind to patch up the gaps. Keeping the whole picture on my mind as I leap in and patch up wherever I notice a deviation or a particularly tricky bit that the sub brains can't quite handle on their own.

Gradually, over a few minutes the mind magic transformation construct begins to take shape and excitement rises in my heart. It might actually happen this time!

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 178: Mind at work**

Nearly there!



This construct has defeated me over and over again. To the point that this glittering shape of mana is literally burned into the insides of my eyelids. Except that I don't have eyelids. Not the point!

With every passing second the shape begins to come together, weaved out of threads of light, it shines brilliantly inside my mind.

Finally!

\*crunch\*

AW HECK!

In my eagerness I slip in my control and one of the threads get shunted out of place. Which, of course, causes the entire thing to collapse in on itself and dissipate into nothing....

.....

GAAAAAAAAAH!

Undone by my own eagerness and joy at success! This is the cruel irony of the world at play and not entirely my fault!

Ok it is.

I can almost feel the smouldering resentment from my own sub brains, irritated that I ruined their work. What the heck!? You don't get to be mad at me dammit! I'll make you guys transform mana on your own until you melt into sludge!

That's right! That's who's in charge!

Putting aside this failure I'm still feeling extremely positive. I'd never been that close to succeeded in that notorious transformation before and now I almost nailed it on my first attempt! With diligent practice I'm sure I'll be able to succeed. If I can manage the mind mana transformation then I can surely succeed with the simple ones. It seems this evolution was a wild success!

The next thing I'm keen to try is working on the cores. If I can practice the core engineering skill at a faster rate then I'll be massively pleased!

Rushing over to the cores I roll one out with my mandibles and crack right in.

Core Engineering!

My mind sink down into the little core in front of me and the nebulous energies that contain the information, the mana DNA, of the monster rise in my mind.

Now for the tricky bit.

Bringing the force of my mind to bare and calling upon the reserves that are my sub brains for assistance I begin to force and hold the changes to the information in the core. What I find almost immediately is... it's so much easier! First of all, forcing the change is a breeze with all the power I have humming inside my head, then locking into place is so much easier that I'm able to task my sub brains with that and then move onto the next change immediately!

This is going to increase the speed of my skill training immensely!

Happily I continue to shove around the values in the core, making large stat changes sometimes and then going in and making finer adjustments to the body shape, muscle density, even the brain matter! As usual the process becomes more and more difficult the further away from the original state of the core we get, but with my newfound mental strength I can push it so much further than before, reaping more xp from every core that I start to work on.

I could almost cry, this is everything I wished for! Now my core engineering skills will be able to go to the next level!

Once I hit the wall with the first core I push it to one side and then take a brief rest. If I alternate resting and working I'll be able to work for longer and grind my skills more efficiently, even with my extra brain power this rule will hold true.

After a minute or two I shift over to the next core and then the next. On it goes until the fatigue starts to mount up but I push through until my mind is entering the familiar braindead zone that I spent so much of the last few days in.

[Core Engineering has reached level 8]

Haaaaaaa. Yes!

Two whole levels from grinding today. It took me hours of effort but on the other hand, with my new brain rig I'm able to make more changes to each core, and work for a longer period of time, before I fall flat and run out of energy. This is a huge boost and gaining two levels in one go is evidence of the kind of power my new brain is packing!

Two more and I'll be able to morph it into the next level of the skill I cannot wait!

Literally, I can't.

I know Tiny is hungry and Vibrant is bored, I think she's run off somewhere with Crinis actually., but this is too important to me. My biggest goal and major project is dependent on this skill taking shape.

Determined to see it through I decisively ... take a nap! Need to replenish my mental stores. When I wake up I notice that Tiny has shifted his position and moved somewhere below me. Judging by my senses he got tired of waiting and tunnelled his way down to underneath the Queens chamber so he'd at least have something to eat.

I don't mind that, I'm starving myself actually, but the cores come first!

Cores, cores, cores!

Pleased to notice that my headache is resolved I jump straight back into grinding and the hours while away until my thoughts are sluggish and my head is pounding. The pile of cores I've worked on goes past fifty and almost reaches seventy by the time I finally get the announcement.

[Core Engineering has reached level 10, skill upgrade available]

[Core Engineering -> Core Surgery. This skill guides the user when making finer and detailed changes to core energies, also -> enables the manipulation of the core of living creatures]

Awwwwwww snap!

I knew it! I had a feeling this was coming after my conversation with Formo, after all, how could they create such insanely powerful monsters in one go? Surely they worked on them over a number of evolutions after setting the core up the way they liked it! Here is the proof I was right!

Gweheheheh.

This will enable me to work on the cores of Tiny and Crinis if I want, adjusting their path of evolution as they go! Not to mention the project I've been wanting to do this whole time. It's going to be a lot of work but the future of the colony will never look brighter once I'm done!

That's right. I'm going to work on the Queen! If she agrees then I'll use this skill to make adjustments to her core, not changing her at all, but focusing on her children. If I can make her offspring more intelligent, more like Vibrant, then I'll be able to teach and guide them, turning them into something more than just workers.

Don't get me wrong, my siblings are great ants, loyal and brave, hardworking, basically better than me in almost every aspect. After seeing them cut down in their dozens by the humans as they charged blindly forward though... I decided then that I would have to make a change.

Ants are designed to fight that way, to sacrifice themselves, hurl themselves forward and overwhelm the enemy with sheer numbers, their lives treated as disposable. I don't want my siblings to live like that! Family is important! I want them to be intelligent and clever, surviving the fight and not dying off pointlessly.

With this skill I can make it happen. I'll go into the core and modify the offspring of the Queen until they are like me.. Super ants!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 179: The pain inside**

At this moment, with my head filled with the glorious victory of the new super-ant race, I notice something a little odd.

There is a dull ache coming right from my core.

What the heck is with that? What on Pangera makes your core hurt? Do I have core-itis? Flu of the core? Seasonal Core swelling?

I'm unusually disturbed by this inexplicable pain. Once formed, the core is attached to a monster's life force. If anything were to happen to it I'm not sure how long I'd last!

Focusing intently on this feeling I try to analyse it. When I carefully sense the area around my core the issue becomes clearer, there is more going on than meets the eye. Almost like a lung that is slowly leaking, as time passes my core is slowly draining energy out into the air. Almost as if when my body tries to draw in mana there isn't anything there and then I 'exhale' mana out.

I'm losing mana!

As time passes the loss becomes more noticeable until I was stuck with this pain that I can now feel. It's literally my core gasping for air! I need mana! Whilst the pain is completely debilitating now it's only going to get worse the more energy I leak.

I suddenly realise that this must have been what was inflicting the Queen! Weakened and in pain by the lack of mana she had literally been bleeding her life out into the air until I had finally noticed something was wrong.

I can't help but get a little emotional.

Dammit Mother! Just how self-sacrificing can you be!? Just because I'd said the colony would be safe on the surface you were willing to bleed mana from your core until you died?! Why is it the best Mother I've ever had is a giant ant?

Well now I feel like garbage. Not only because my core is increasingly pained but the guilt of unknowingly causing such suffering to a dear parent. I'll make it up to you Queen! You'll be the mother of the most successful ant colony in the history of the entire .. Wherever we are!

I'm not really sure if this is the same universe as the one I was born in, come to think of it. Something to ask Gandalf if I ever see him again.

Well now that I know about this problem, what am I going to do about it? The fact that it took a few days for the problem to grow this severe means I'm not completely unable to operate on the surface, I'll just have to take frequent trips underground. Actually, is this the reason that Tiny has relocated himself underground? It's possible that his core has also advanced to the point where he can't sustain himself on the surface level of mana.

Sighing to myself I grasp my bag of unworked on cores in my mandibles and make my way down to where Tiny is currently sitting munching on some low level plants that leapt out of the walls and into his waiting hands.

As soon as I descend past the surface level and into the Dungeon proper I can feel a sense of relief. As the light emitted by the mana veins washes over me and my feet begin drinking energy in a steady flow the pain in my core begins to ease. I can feel myself getting a little more energetic and alert as I stop leeching out my life into the air. Feels good!

This incident does really hit home at something that Gandalf said. When he told me I might join him one day he suggested I might have a choice but to go further down. Is this what he meant? Every time I condense my core and evolve I'll have a higher requirement for mana, forcing me to live deeper and deeper in the Dungeon? I guess this explains why the most powerful monsters live closer to the center...

I'm not sure how I feel about this. Obviously evolving is the best thing in the universe I should keep doing it, but then aren't I basically imprisoning myself?

....

It's complicated! Think about it later!

This is my policy and I'll stick to it!

Tiny seems quite relaxed down here, his silvery hair taking on a distinct blue shade in the reflected light of the Dungeon. I pass him the bag and then take some time to hollow out a chamber for us to use, shoving the loose soil further down the tunnel. Once that's done I ask Tiny to keep watch for me and rest a little before resuming my core grinding. I don't want to rush over and start working on the Queen's core straight away with Core Surgery at level 1. If I can push a few more levels out of it then I'll be more confident at being able to achieve my goal.

Back to grinding!

It takes a few more naps and one hundred cores before I finally achieve Core Surgery level 3. By this time my brain feels like a puddle of sludge and my other brains aren't much better. Despite my improved mental power, grinding through so many cores in such a short time has pushed me right up to the wall. This kind of speed would have been completely impossible before my evolution so there is that to celebrate. I have to say though, training this line of skills is a pain in the ass!

Who has one hundred cores lying around, Gandalf?!

All in all I've nearly gone through two hundred cores over the last few days, perfecting my skill at making nuanced changes to monsters and grinding that precious xp to get to this point. How long would it have taken me to amass all of these cores if I hadn't been able to rob the Lirian vault?

Not wanting to waste the opportunity I flick cores at Tiny until he's full up. He's at the same level of evolution as I am so it takes fifty cores for him to top out, then I do the same for myself.

[Your core has reached max capacity for your level of evolution].

Hue hue hue hue.

So soon after evolving and my core is already maxed out. It feels so good! All we need now is the special cores but there is no way I'm going to put up with that pain for an extended time again. I can whip those up right when we are ready to evolve.

Although.... If you give it enough time would you get used to it enough that you could absorb a second one.....

As if reading my thoughts Tiny raises his head and glares at me with his dark red eyes.

....

Never mind!

I don't think I'll be able to raise the skill any higher for the short term, so I take good nap, getting Tiny to defend me from the spawning monsters and making sure he feeds the Biomass to Crinis.

When I wake up I'm fully refreshed. Time to head over to the Queen and try this out!

Zippering up the tunnel, full of beans I push my way through the crowd of workers and come face to face with Mother once again. The giant ant is quite placid at the moment, perhaps enjoying this interlude of relative quiet.

"Hello Mother, how are things?" I enquire.

She reaches forward to tap on my head. "I am well little one. The colony has been safe here, you have done well".

Awww shucks! I'm not used to this sort of praise. If I could blush I would!

"Thanks Mother" I beam, "I'm glad I could help!"

"Of course child. We should always seek to better our family" she says warmly.

"Exactly! That's why I'm here!" I say enthusiastically, "I've gained a skill that will allow me to make all of the ants in the colony stronger!"

The Queen's antennae whip about a little in surprise. "Really child? That's wonderful" she says.

Now for the tricky bit. I hesitate a little at this point. "Thing is, it'll only work on the ants who haven't been born yet, I can't do anything to the family members who are already alive".

The Queen seems confused. "What are you planning on doing?" she asks.

I really have no idea how the monstrous Queen is going to react to the idea of me modifying her core. She is quite intelligent for a monster but her own logic and mine are quite different, as well as our experiences. This Queen is still not even one year old, after all, she can't compare to my own nearly sixteen years of life.

"This is what I can do" I decide to explain it all carefully, "I can perform the skill on your core, while you rest here. Then I can make the young that will be born in the future more powerful, smarter. I'm hoping that by doing this more of them will be able to survive and grow until they can evolve, making the colony stronger"

The Queen wiggles her antennae around for a while as she digests this news. "So you think you will be able to keep more children alive?" she asks.

"Yes" I reply, "Their species won't change and they will still be our family, but they'll be better equipped to survive and live a long life. What do you think?"

This is the magic moment. I've worked so hard to try and make this project a reality but if the Queen says no then I won't question it. The project will die right here. Perhaps it's silly to take the feeling of a monster into account but this giant ant is no ordinary monster to me, this is the best parent and family member I've ever had.

My main motivation for this project isn't even for ant world domination. I just don't want to see my siblings throwing their lives away anymore. I want them to be smart enough to retreat when needed and be able to take care of themselves.

I look the Queen straight in the eye and await her judgement. I tried to be as honest as I could and explain things in a way she could understand. My heart is pounding in my chest as she gazes calmly back at me.

Eventually she speaks.

"Of course child. It is the responsibility of every member of our family to strengthen the whole. If you can achieve this we will all benefit. That is what being part of the colony is about. You can start when you are ready".

Of course, I should never have doubted the Queen's capacity to risk herself for her children.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 180: The day that changed Pangera**

Tentatively, I bring my antennae into contact with the Queen's and then activate the skill.

Core Surgery!

With what I learned during the skill upgrade I know that all I need is to be touching a part of the body on the monster I'll be 'operating' on but with an ant it feels like the antennae are the most appropriate place.

As soon as the skill is activated I feel a massive burst of information as the details of the Queen's core explode in my mind.

Yikes!

The Queen has by far the most complicated and powerful monster core I've seen with the exception of Formo's worm! Frantically I put my sub brains to work processing all of this information before the onslaught of data just straight knocks me out. With my backup dancers doing their part the pressure eases off instantly and I look in awe at the elegance of the Queen's core.

She's actually a very powerful and rare creature isn't she?

I got the impression that ants weren't common in the Dungeon, based on what the Queen told me, usually appearing randomly at the bottom of the first strata or sometimes even lower than that. After all, they have the extremely rare ability to produce their own offspring, rather than waiting for the Dungeon to spawn more of their kind. We ants aren't the only ones in the Dungeon with this ability but we are among the most feared.

Looking at the Queen's core I can finally see how this function works. The Queen actually has a network of glands and organs that work together to perform this job. I had thought I'd just find an 'Egg-laying organ +10' or something in here but it isn't the case. The Queen has three total organs that contribute to producing her offspring.

The way the offspring are produced is also not what I expected. Rather than being made from nothing, as eggs that then need to mature, the Queen actually converts Biomass that she eats into eggs that can then be born. THIS is the reason that the workers bring her almost all of the Biomass that they catch. Biomass points are directly converted into new workers inside the Queen!

In a flash I make another realisation. This is why the Queen's egg producing rate has gone down ever since we came up to the surface! Like me, she has a powerful core and is a higher tier monster. She doesn't get much Biomass from eating surface monsters or weak, lower level creatures. She was born at the lowest reaches of the first Strata, her natural prey are down there! With so little Biomass points being produced, her rate of laying has plummeted.

This also explains the connected organs for egg producing.

Firstly she has an organ attached to her stomach that is designed to drain off Biomass and covert it to some kind of liquid sludge. This is the Biomass Conversion Organ and it looks as if the Queen hasn't upgraded it at all...

I bet she spent almost every bit of Biomass on eggs and healing upgrades...

Sure enough, when I check through all of her organ data she's upgraded her antennae to +5 for healing channelling and upgraded her healing mana gland to +5 to take burst heal upgrade that lets her wave out the energy over an area, perfect for healing a huge army of ants.

She's really too unselfish. This also shows a little lack of wisdom due to her being a young monster. Upgrading the egg production organs is by far the fastest way to grow the colony's power. I'll have to convince her to upgrade all the organs related to producing eggs as quickly as possible, all the way to +10 if we can, but at least to +5.

The second organ in the process is the lifeform recoding organ. If the job of the Conversion Organ is to strip the Biomass of its properties, turning it into a multipurpose goo, then this organ is for reshaping that stuff into the necessary material for ant egg making.

Finally there was the egg production gland itself. This was responsible for taking the reformed goop and making it into ant eggs, essentially encoding ant DNA on the sludge.

This process is going to be more complicated than I thought. I figured I could just go to the 'baby ant' section and whip up some magic but apparently not! I may have to make changes to multiple organs here and rework them slightly.

I think I'll have to work backwards. I'll start at the last step, the egg production organ. Reaching in with the most delicate control my combined minds can muster, I ever so carefully begin to make fine adjustments to the design of the eggs produced by the organ.

I don't have any intention of changing the early life phases of the ants. They'll go from eggs to larvae, as usual. In fact I actually extend the early, development phase of their lives. By increasing their youthful state I gain leeway to develop them into more complex organism at the end of the process. The longer the gestation period the more 'allowance' I get. I don't want to keep the young in larval form for ages but a little longer than they do currently gives me a little wiggle room, I'm looking at adding a lot of complexity to these guys.

The first thing I do is give the hatchling worker a much more complex brain, beefing up the cunning stat considerably. I won't be able to get them to the same level of Cunning that I had when I was reborn as an ant and I'm not aiming too. If I gave them a brain that complicated they'd be larval for a year and the Queen would need so much Biomass to produce a single egg it wouldn't be worth it. Instead I'll give them the intelligence of a young human child which they can build on over the course of their evolutions.

The next thing I do is give them the pheromone language gland at birth. This way I'll be able to communicate and teach them right from the moment they are born. If they can ask questions and talk with each other then they should all advance at a faster pace.



Hmmmm...

These complicated additions are really stressing the system here. I've overdrawn on my budget. To balance out the changes I've made I'm forced to reduce the physical stats of the hatchlings to an even more horrible floor than they already started with. They'll be smaller and weaker than the current workers by a significant margin. It shouldn't matter though. My goal is to raise them up myself until they achieve their first evolution, then I'm hoping they'll be strong enough to take care of the next generation without me.

Next I push my current core engineering skill to the very limit and begin to change the evolutionary paths available to the workers. At the very least I can alter the first few tiers. The inbuilt knowledge that comes with my skill tells me that the system will be able to fill in the rest even if I don't settle it myself. I just have to hope that it can carry on with the foundations I lay in a sensible way.

For the future ant society I'm envisioning I create three basic paths of evolution. The soldier path for those ants dedicated to battle, the support path for those who will be healers, tend to the young and become the future Queens and the artisan path for the ants who will indulge in their love of digging and making stuff. I'm extremely curious to see exactly what sort of things a highly intelligent ant decides to create!

The Soldiers will obviously focus on physical stats and resilience. Their future paths include leaders with auras, tanks and scouts. Each individual can flavour their own path with whatever skills and mutations they like so hopefully this allows enough individuality.

The Support or Worker class will be more intelligent, focus on the work of the colony, caring for the brood and the Queens. Their future paths include Juvenile Queens, Healer ants and Brood tenders.

The Artisans are the caste I'm depending on to take over my core manipulation duties. I don't want to have to form special cores myself for every ant in the colony after all. These guys are highly intelligent and have a strong will but are the weakest physically by far. Their paths include Core Manipulator, Ant Mage and Carver ant. The last one I gifted with exceedingly mobile claws on their front legs, almost like hands. I'm not sure what they'll be able to do with them but perhaps they'll surprise me.

I also manage to put in place special evolutions for each of these paths. I don't think an entire colony of ants will be able to fully reinforce their cores or anything but it doesn't hurt to be prepared.

By now the changes are really starting to push back hard and my mind is hitting the wall. I judge I won't be able to do much more before I can't go any further. I carefully check over my work so far to make sure I haven't made any massive mistakes like shift their antennae into the middle of their eyes or something.

With that task settled I sit back and take in my work, figuratively speaking. Despite the downgrades I've made the rate of egg production for the new ants is still going to be about half of what it was before. I'm ok with this though. If each of the new workers can prove to be twice as effective as the previous then it'll work out just fine.

Next I move onto the secondary organ and make the minute adjustments to ensure that the Bio-Soup being produced contains the extra bits and pieces needed to produce the new juiced up eggs.

By this point my head is on fire. There isn't anything more I can do here even if I wanted to. Hopefully the work I've done here is sufficient to make my dream a reality.

With that I withdraw my mind from the core of the Queen.