

## Chrysalis 191

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#### Chapter 191: Tentative exploration

I leave my pets and Vibrant working on the shortcut tunnel and slowly encroach on the marsh expanse solo. It isn't that I don't think they could fight whatever it is that we find in here it's just that I don't want to attract unwanted attention at this point. So I do something I haven't had to do for a while.

I engage stealth ant mode.

Luckily I'm still relatively small for a monster so remaining unseen is still fairly simple, the plant growth is thick here, reeds and hillocks blocking line of sight in every direction. Slowly and cautiously I creep about, all of my sensing apparatus tuned to their most fine state, twitching at every shift of each tuft of grass.

I'm tense!

Super tense!

With this stupid pressure hanging over my head and flying solo for the first time in a while I'm really feeling the heat. It's also unnerving to be moving through this swampy terrain where there could be monsters under the water or indeed, every plant could also be a monster! Luckily I have my heat detection for the latter, the plant monsters register much higher on that sense due to their peculiar biology than normal plant life, thus I manage to avoid most combat as I navigate around the edges of the terrain.

I try not to stand on the top of the mounds that poke out of the waters lest I present my silhouette to prying eyes, I don't particularly want to have this magnificent form lighting up the eyes of every croc and murder flower in the expanse. So I get the best view I can whilst staying low.

This expanse is freakin' huge. Much bigger than the forest expanse and that one already pushed my understanding of what an underground space could be. The roof is easily twice as high and through the low lying mist and trees I can't quite see the walls as they widen and curve away from our entrance. From what I have seen though I would judge this place to be at least double the size of the forest.

I recall that Formo told me that the radius of Pangera was around 10,000 km, which would make it significantly bigger than Earth, as I recall the radius of earth was 6 ish thousand... so that would mean the volume of Pangera would be..... Like.... Way larger. By.... A lot....

There is tons of space in here is what I'm trying to say. Apparently the expanses get even larger the lower you go, some are truly ridiculous from what I've heard. Perhaps they would even be a similar size to some countries on Earth if we were to compare the floor area, which is crazy to think about. Still, this marsh is easily larger than I expected to find an expanse in the first layer of the Dungeon.

This is either hitting the jackpot or a noose around my neck.

Expanses are the juicy goldmines of the Dungeon from what the Queen told me. Stronger monsters, more cores, mana infused natural resources like wood and stone with properties are all features of the expanses. Great opportunity also brings with it great danger. Expanse' are great points of conflict, not

only between nations of the surface but between monsters down below. The big dogs all want the best territory and from I'm feeling the crocs have moved in and an extremely big dog/croc has set up shop here.

Perhaps the Crocs want to monopolise the Biomass being generated in this area? Maybe they aren't only sending out waves of monsters to terrorise the nearby surface but are also herding the weaker monsters straight into the belly of their parent to fuel the egg laying process....

Bizarre scenes of monsters willingly marching into the open mouth of a gigantic crocodile flit through my head. Surely not... The monsters seem unusually quiet and obedient but surely there's no chance that they would just walk to their deaths is there?

More investigation is needed and before more investigation can happen we need to learn more about the terrain in this expanse.

The wide pools of water everywhere are really frustrating my senses. There is enough hillocks of ground that I can hop from one to the next to move around without getting my feet wet but I can't sense any heat sources under the water and I can't see squat through the murky surface. The result is that I'm constantly on edge as I creep about, my compound eyes giving me superb vision of my surroundings but my mind is also focused on those deceptively placid waters.

The plant type monsters seem to be right at home here. The trees are dense, standing tall on splayed roots that plunge their thousand divided fingers into the waters and mixed between them are more tree-like monsters, their bark exteriors concealing the hungry creature within. The Branchies were a heck of a lot more friendly than these punks. I'll need to hunt down a few examples to sample the Biomass, try to get a clearer picture of what we are dealing with.

Some of the natural trees are absolutely enormous. At regular intervals, usually a few hundred metres from each other these massive trees rise out of the swampy water and spread their branches impossibly wide. Huge fleshy leaves the size of a lounge room spread shade everywhere. From below I can see strange shadows shifting about through the branches and on the foliage so I don't try to climb up at this point. I'll wait until I've managed to scope out a little more info.

Oooo here we go.

Nearby I can see a vibrant flower with several dark green pods on vines hovering around the main trunk of the plant. The flower itself is beautiful, shades of yellow and orange rippling across the petals in a strangely hypnotic pattern, almost as if the colours themselves are moving.... I almost feel a... lull.. Coming over me.... As if... tired....

HACK!!

Not today! Vigorously I shake my body to cast off the lethargy that had started to wash over me due to the influence of that damn plant. This must be some kind of mind affecting ability, perhaps caused by the pattern itself or maybe some spores in the air.

Thank goodness for a high will stat!

Ok.. This flower is going to get it. To learn about the creatures of this expanse I must engage in true diplomacy, monster style. Which of course means killing and eating.

Calling on my sub brains I have them weave the water construct from the mana in my core. I've been practicing with this transformation shape whenever I get the chance, whipping it up and then letting it dissolve so I can whip it up again. Practice makes perfect as they say and the time it takes to form it has been going down steadily. There's still a long time to go before I reach what I would consider mastery but I'm satisfied with my current progress.

Before long a bright and shiny new construct is glimmering inside my head and my brains get to work operating it, feeding in the raw mana in one end and producing the glittering blue energy out the other side. I don't think water mana is going to be super effective against this plant but since I'm practicing it I need to keep using it in order to become familiar with its uses.

[Mana Transformation has reached level 3]

Haha! There we go. Practicing the transformation magic is definitely reaping my the benefits of experience at least. Particularly when I've been using it in combat.

Alright flower. Time to get hosed.

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#### **Chapter 192: Battling the marsh**

Deftly I use my sub brains to weave together two water bolts, leaving one brain to maintain and operate the transformation construct, as I lie patiently in wait like the great hunter that I am. The flower has no way to detect me with my advanced stealth active and my positioning being on point.

[Water magic affinity has reached level 2]

Nice!

I need to keep practicing these spells in order to raise my proficiency as quickly as possible. The power of my current evolution is all in my capacity to utilise magic so I have to grind these skill until I can fling my spells about with practiced ease.

Gradually the bolts take shape and I take careful aim before unleashing them all at once.

POW! POW!

Two tear shaped orbs of water zoom through the air and smash into the flower, hitting the stem and the center of the petals directly. The impacts cannon into the plant type monster and it rocks back and forth on its stem, reeling from the sheer force of the strike.

If I had imagined before that using water magic on a plant was like giving it a gentle sprinkling I have been convinced with this attack. It's more like hurling a block of concrete at it. Unlike fire which causes damage by burning or electricity which zaps organism whilst also burning them, water doesn't seem to have any inherently harmful properties. It's important to remember though that when water is accelerated to sufficient speeds it becomes harder, more difficult to break up.

Rather than thinking of the water bolt as throwing a ball of water, it's more like throwing a ball of metal. The sheer kinetic force is what does the damage rather than any particular property of the mana.

Having been smashed with three water bolts the flower is reeling, it's vines desperately flailing about as it attempts to seek out the source of that vicious strike. The fun has only begun flower, I've got two more bolts on the way right now!

POW! POW!

CRASH!

Once again the two bolts collide with tremendous force, both of them smack against the stem of the flower this time. The impact are nearly simultaneous and the flower is knocked straight to the ground, the fibres of the stem are starting to tear and split where the bolts have struck it. If I were to keep attacking that spot the stem may simply snap, killing the monster directly. I almost feel bad for it. This is a rough way to fight, it's like I'm bludgeoning the thing to death by hurling rocks at it.

However, the flower seems to have gotten a bead on my location from the last strike. As it rights itself with difficulty the four pods surrounding the central flower swivel towards my direction and open, revealing a bizarre, mouth like arrangement on the inside. Just as I'm wondering what the heck is going to happen the mouths open wide and shriek!

YOWCH!

Super high pitched, almost inaudible sound waves batter against my ears from all four of the pods. It's a sonic attack! From a damn plant?! The sound tunnels straight through my ears and begins to rattle my brain. I can feel a wooziness begin to rise in me as the persistent sound waves try to stun my mind into rest.

Having unleashed it's sonic screech the main body of the flower rights itself with difficulty and presents its full glorious petal arrangement towards me. It immediately begins to employ that strangely hypnotic rippling technique, but more potent as the flower puts all of its effort towards lulling my mind.

Across the ground small vines are creeping towards me, hoping to seize the stunned and mesmerized prey and drag it towards the flower for consumption. In your dreams petal face!

POW! POW!

Using my strong Will I'm able to resist even Tiny's ear shattering scream, as if some dumb flower could hope to match that volume or potency, as for the petal dance, if I know it's coming I can steel myself against it long enough to form a few more water bolts!

The two bolts smash into the flower right on the stem and shatter the plant fibres there completely, breaking the stem and toppling the flower onto the ground. Take that!

[You have slain level 14 Fascinatio folium flos]

[You have gained experience]

Ha!

Defeating a plant with water is an odd feeling...

Too bad for this flower that my strengths matched up very well against its own. With my potent mental defences it isn't easy to hypnotize me, Tiny might be caught handily but not this ant!

Keeping low and trying not to attract any more attention than I need to I creep over and start eating the flower, keeping an eye on my surroundings as I do.

[You have consumed a new source of Biomass: Fascinatio folium flos, you are awarded one Biomass]

[Basic Profile of the Fascinatio folium flos unlocked]

[Fascinatio folium flos, Bewitching petal flower. This plant type monster uses a combination of powerful mental attacks to lull its opponent into a stupor, allowing it to use its relatively weak physical body to consume the prey. This monster is weak defensively and can be overcome with surprise but be careful of its sonic scream].

Yeah no doubt. Why are these profiles so full of information that would be immensely useful if known before fighting the creature but only be gained afterwards....

I gain another three Biomass from the plant before moving on to continue my exploration. I have thirteen points of Biomass now so it'll be worth stopping to mutate something when I get a chance.

I continue to poke about here and there, engaging the odd plant monster in combat to learn about their tendencies and practice my water magic skills. I end up gaining another level in water magic affinity and five more Biomass before I retreat from the marsh. More and more potent Croca-Beast variants are appearing nearby so I decide to get out of dodge and regroup with my gang, still hard at work on the tunnel shortcut.

["How are we folks? Enjoying the wonderful process of tunnel digging?"] I greet them.

[....]

[... yes master]

Nothing from Tiny and somewhat reluctant reply from Crinis.

"Yup-yup! Having a great time, Senior!" a very enthusiastic response from Vibrant!

"Right?! Digging is the best!"

"For sure! I just love the feel of dirt in my mandibles!"

Truly, only ant kind can fully appreciate the joy of tunnel digging. My own people understand me best! As I return to digging I decide to spend the Biomass I've accrued. The marsh is dangerous and I can't afford to hold off on building up any advantage that I can.

Firstly I decide to spend fourteen Biomass upgrading my Coordination Cortex to +5 so I can choose a mutation advancement. I'm reliant on my magic for offense in a way I haven't been before so I want to get every edge I can in this department.

Once again the menu appears in my mind with a plethora of juicy options to select from!

Let me see, let me see!

Ooooo. There's a lot here as usual! I can give my cortex an affinity to boost the efficiency when using a specific mana type... I rule that option out of hand. General strength is the name of the game! What else have we got...

I take my time to browse as my body stays busy shovelling dirt with my mandibles and eventually I settle on two fairly normal but in my opinion excellent choices.

[Harnessed coordination cortex. Improves efficiency when the cortex is coordinating multiple brains to work on a single task]

[Divergent Coordination Cortex. Improves efficiency when the cortex is coordinating multiple brains to work on individual tasks]

....

So do I want the brains to be more powerful when they are working together or when they are doing their own thing? Of course, there is always the option of coming back to the other upgrade at +10 so it's possible I could eventually choose both but which do I want right now?

Using both Sub brains to work together on one big job is handy for sure and something that could surely be useful to have boosted. On the other hand letting each brain cast its own spell is also great and makes my attacking options a lot more open.

I'll go for the Divergent.

There is still the possibility in the future that I'll be able to include more Sub-Brains and hook them up to the cortex so having each of them be more capable on their own will give me a better result I think.

[Do you wish to confirm this selection? This will cost 14 Biomass]

Go for it!

....

SNATCHIFLATCH!

MAH BRAINS!

THEY ITCHHHHHHHH!!!!

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### **Chapter 193: The next wave**

It takes a while for the vicious itch to fade. The coordination cortex is like an octopus that sits between my sub brains and the main mind so as it mutates and changes my entire brain zone lights up with itching. It's intolerable!

But finally gone!

The process finishes and I find my pet monsters looking at me funny. Look! Just because you lot can take the sensation of mutating like its nothing doesn't mean I can! I'm sensitive!

...maybe.

At any rate, keep digging!

It takes only a few hours of vigorous work to finally connect the new section of the shortcut to the old, meaning the travel time from the surface down to the marsh will be as short as an hour if there aren't monsters spawning in there or an hour and half if there are. It's a crude tunnel that zig-zags back and forth on a fairly steep grade, barely large enough to squeeze Tiny through. When he evolves again we are going to have to put in a lot of work expanding all of these passages for the big lug. To celebrate this momentous achievement, I've decided that we'll all pitch in and collect a feast for ourselves and then another feast that we can take up to the Queen.

I place Crinis on defence duty at the shortcut entrance to make sure nothing sneaks out of the expanse and then Tiny, Vibrant and myself start roaming the tunnels looking for Biomass. Crinis isn't really built to be an offensive hunter, at least not yet, so placing her in position where she can deploy her tentacles thinly like a spiders web to detect intruders and snatch them up is the best use of her talents. Tiny and I are more than capable of dealing with the monsters that spawn out of the walls here.

Sadly we don't find many. Since the monsters are drawn by that mysterious pressure to run into the marsh expanse upon spawning they can't build their numbers and get caught up fighting each other in the tunnels. Besides from a few stragglers and slow moving plant types the pickins' are pretty darn slim.

[Master! Return to my location I think something is happening] Crinis suddenly speaks in my mind.

[We are on the way Crinis. What's going on?] I mean... something could be happening but how the heck would she know? If a fireworks display was going on around her she'd have no idea.

[I can feel vibrations in the tunnel floor, and they keep getting stronger. I think something is approaching] she explains.

Ohhhhh. Makes a lot of sense really. She does have quite a responsive sense of touch, she kind of has to since it's the only sense that she has... She'll have to wait until evolution before she'll be able to take advantage to some of the changes I made to her core.

With Vibrant resting on my head and Tiny lumbering behind we make our way back at full speed to the entrance of our shortcut tunnel where Crinis had been posted on guard duty. Just in time too.

Although Crinis was unable to tell what was causing the vibrations I could see perfectly well what was happening. Another horde of monsters was piling out of the marsh expanse and into the tunnel, hurtling in our direction as quickly as their beastly limbs could carry them!

["It's another mob of monsters guys! Action stations! Prepare to dive! Crinis, engage feast mode!"] I holler frantically at my group.

The horde is nearly upon us, only a few metres away at this point but Crinis wastes no time! Immediately she retracts the thin sensing tendrils she had laid out and reforms her tentacles into the thick, monster crushing engines of destruction we need them to be. Her main body swells up to its full beach ball size, splitting open to reveal her hungering maw.

Tiny is no slower to prepare for action. In his case he simply pushes past me and flings himself at the crowd of monsters, howling with glee! He doesn't say much but I get the feeling the big guy has not enjoyed feeling so subdued by the pressure emanating from the center of the expanse, he's not the kind

of monster who wants to shy away from a fight, he wants to get in there and punch faces, especially with strong enemies.

The feeling of being reluctant to run forward and challenge something has been a strange new sensation for this normally suicidal ape. I'd welcomed the change, personally I think not wanting to fling yourself at some mysterious boss monster is just downright sensible but Tiny isn't built that way.

Now he has a chance to work his frustrations out on a massive horde of foes and he is going to take it!

Before the charging mass of monsters has even reached Crinis, Tiny bowls into them with his formidable mass, sending monsters flying, slamming into the walls and ceiling.

[Crisis! Move towards the expanse and engage! Tiny ran past you to fight so you need to shift up the tunnel!]

[Oh!.. Uh.. Understood master!]

Hearing my orders Crinis uses her tentacles to propel herself forward and soon those grasping limbs come into contact with the edges of the horde that are already starting to wrap around Tiny and attack his vulnerable back. Those monsters rather suddenly find themselves wrapped up themselves as their bodies are rent by Crinis' and then tossed into the limitless darkness of her maw.

[... just a reminder not to eat them all Crisis... we need enough for all of us and the Queen] I decide to say.

[S.. Sorry master! I forgot myself!] she stammers.

[I mean it's fine to eat, just don't go nuts] I relent.

[Ok!]

It shouldn't need to be said but boy can she eat a lot... I wish I had that stomach. I kind of dismissed all stomach upgrades in the evolution menu out of hand but I'm really starting to see the value in them. If I can hold more food or process it more efficiently then my Biomass deficiency should be taken care of, or at least alleviated somewhat. Something to consider for next time...

Right now I need to deal with these monsters!

With Tiny smashing his way through fists first, lightning sparking off him in increasingly intense waves and Crinis starting to wind up her threshing machine I decide to hang back and offer support.

I still have my water mana transformation construct active so I start feeding it double time and weaving together a spell.

The water cannon!

With my potent main mind on the job it doesn't take long to get it up and running and suddenly a massive torrent of water blasts out from just above my head, cannoning into the monsters on Tiny's left and knocking them off their feet.

Haha! Time for some crowd control!



I scuttle up the wall and move closer to unleash the full fury of my water cannon on the densely packed monsters. The sheer pressure of the water smacking into the monsters doesn't do a whole lot of damage but it sure knocks them around a lot! From up here I can fire upon the monsters just in front of Tiny without hitting the big lug so I sweep the spell across the crowd, sending monsters flying into their neighbours from the impact.

Gweheheh!

With my assistance keeping the enemies from swarming him Tiny is able to unleash his strength to the fullest, lashing out with massive sweeps of his gigantic fists and pulverising monsters with every swing. At one point he unleashes a furious uppercut that slams a monster straight into the roof! Holy heck!

Not willing to be outdone I flip control of my hose over to a sub brain and task the other with maintaining and feeding the construct so I can concentrate on more spells. First thing I do is form a few gravity spears and throw them into the pack at various points to further destabilise the monsters, making life easier for my two pets. I also realise something rather nasty about that particular technique as several monsters are caught in the overlap between spear effects and find themselves being pulled hard in opposite directions...

It wasn't pretty.

I mean, the force wasn't enough to pull the monsters directly in half or anything but they sure didn't look like they enjoyed the experience.

I could probably form a Gravity Bomb and lob it into the thick of the pack, the monsters are still streaming out of the expanse and packing the tunnel, I'll be shocked if there isn't another thousand of them, but I want to keep as much Biomass as possible. This is a gift racing straight into our stomachs and I refuse to let it go!

At this point another curious synergy is becoming apparent. Tiny's fists are completely sparking with electricity by this point and his body is starting to zap nearby monsters, such is the charge he's built up. Due to my excellent deployment of my super soaker the monsters around him are also drenched in water....

ZAP! ZAP! ZAP!

Electricity begins to arc and crackle throughout the saturated monsters with every swing of Tiny's fists! The electricity discharging into the monsters bodies and then leaping to the next. With every swing of his fists Tiny is damaging five or six monsters and he starts to cut them down even faster than before!

Nice! Maintain that hose! I'd like to say I planned this but I really didn't! If anyone asks me though.... I'll smile mysteriously and act smug..... Gweheheheh.

My feet are continuing to soak up mana from the floor at a furious rate, feeding my core which in turn continues to feed the water mana. Finally this upgrade is able to show its true might!

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**Chapter 194: A tasty fea**s

After continuing to hose down the foes and let Tiny's fists smack them with electricity the idea finally occurs to me to widen the damage out even further. I take over the hose with my main mind and start spraying as wide a field of monsters as possible. It doesn't matter if I knock them down it only matters if they get soaked!

[Crisis! Move forward and support Tiny for a minute]

[Yes master!]

My faithful death blob wriggles a little closer to her fellow pet and extends her tentacles around his sides to snatch up and smash the monsters who try and swarm around the giant ape whilst my hose is no longer providing the same level of crowd control.

It takes me a little while to thoroughly drench the monsters in the tunnel and I can't quite reach the ones at the back as they pile in from the Marsh expanse. It'll have to do.

[Crisis, back off again and Tiny, you unleash your lightning!]

Crisis responds quickly and retracts her tentacles as I turn the water cannon back onto the monsters surrounding Tiny whilst the ape.... Keeps swinging his fists.

[Tiny! Shoot the lightning!]

[..... ?]

[The lightning! Shoot the lightning from your hands!]

[..... Am]

ARRRGGGH! You dumb ape!

[Not like this the one where you shoot the electricity in a big bolt! You've done it before!]

[..... When?]

I swear I'll use core surgery to give you a brain again, think dammit!

As if feeling my animosity drilling into the back of his head, Tiny pauses for a moment before responding to me.

[Oh.. Like this?]

A huge amount of electricity bursts out of his body and crackles across his fur in jagged arcs that flood towards his right hand. As the charge builds up the hand glows brighter and brighter, dozens of electric bolts sparking off it every second. With a roar Tiny thrusts the hand forward and bright arc of electricity blasts out of his hand and covers the saturated monsters in electrical energy, frying them instantly!

The entire tunnel lights up as Tiny passes his hand across the crowd of monsters, controlling the arcing bolt of electrical energy and letting every monster have a taste. The apes body continues to release unbelievable amounts of energy that slithers down his arm like countless electric snakes before blasting out of his hand.

Sensational!

[That's the one Tiny! Good stuff!] I praise him.

At my words Crinis retracts her tentacles even further and shrinks a little.... Is she sulking? Surely not...

[Crisis you'll need to step up in a moment, Tiny can't maintain it much longer]

[ok!] she responds, sounding full of life.

Must have been my imagination...

The monsters that had been exposed to my watery torrent of death have long been fried and the fresh ones from behind are pressing forward blindly, packing into the tunnel. Tiny has been able to maintain his lightning arc for a good thirty seconds before it suddenly fizzles out and he runs out of juice.

[Back up Tiny and catch your breath, let Crisis past you]

Reluctantly the ape acquiesces to my orders and falls back, allowing Crisis to slither past him to the front line where she can fully display her talents in reaping the chaff. Tiny would happily continue fighting but he can't refuse my order. He would win, of that I've no doubt but I don't to see the big guy getting hurt for no reason.

I'm too soft!

Sorry Tiny! Perhaps one day you'll be able to indulge your suicidal impulses and punch your way into an early grave, but it isn't this day.

With an almost tangible feeling of delight Crisis has returned to her crunching best and tentacles fly in all directions, knocking down monsters, grabbing others and shredding them before flinging them into the walls or into packs of monsters, scattering them like bowling pins.

Tiny is reduced to supporting, smashing down monsters that try and surround Crisis or break past her to run deeper into the tunnel. In the interest of training my water magic further I once again pass the water cannon to my sub brains and use my main mind to throw down some water bolts to train faster.

My efforts are rewarded before the end of the battle by the soothing tones of Gandalf ringing in my mind.

[Mana Transformation has reached level 4]

[Water mana affinity has reached level 4]

Yass!

This what I wanted to hear!

I do notice that using the mana transformation to power two spells at once, particularly a consistently draining one like the water cannon, is really putting a strain on the system. Especially so when I'm using one sub brain to hold the construct in place as well as feed the mana into it.

My sub brains are proving to be massively capable and they've increased my spell casting flexibility to a huge degree. However I'm still finding that more sub brains may be necessary in the future. I mean, I've got the coordination cortex already, the more brains I plug into it the better efficiency I'll get.

I'll shelve this for future consideration.

It takes another ten minutes to finish off the monster horde and I manage to snag two levels by ditching water bolts on monsters from above and then charging in to mob up the dregs with my mandibles. I must have been close to level four already but grabbing another two levels is certainly nice. More skill points in the bank for my upcoming spending spree!

Once we are done we stand in the wreckage of nearly one thousand monsters, so many that they are clogging up the tunnel nearly to the roof in places. This is madness! What are all these newly born monsters doing? If they're following orders for some reason, what is that purpose?

Why am I thinking about this when I could be eating instead?

OM NOM NOM.

The four of us chow down to the limits of our respective stomachs, I myself manage to crunch in and fill every stomach to bursting, netting myself fifteen points of Biomass. I really do need to investigate this stomach situation, because Crinis must have gotten double what I did if the disappearing act she pulled on that food was anything to go by. The worst part is that once she's finished she once again attempts to break my back by shrinking herself down and taking her customary position.

Gah... I need to work on my legs...

After resting briefly we start hauling the food up the shortcut to the surface. We can't take it all between the four of us but over a few hours we make a number of trips and manage to pile up a respectable haul that I mark with pheromones before we tread our weary way back to the nest. I'll need to check in with the humans at some point... ugh.

Before then I'm going to check in on the Queen. I'm interested to see if Mother has been properly upgrading herself or stocking up on Biomass to lay eggs...

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### **Chapter 195: Surface Situation**

The Queen was in her chamber much the same as she had been over a day ago, covered in workers and resting peacefully. She hasn't had any reason to go out and fight lately so I hope she's enjoying a period of relaxation.

Considering the measly supply of Biomass that the workers have been extracting from the surface there hasn't even been much laying to do. I'm not sure if Queen ants can get bored but perhaps she might be feeling that things have become a little dull?

[Bored?] she responds when I ask her, sounding for all the world like she didn't even understand the word, [why would I be bored?]

[Well, there isn't much to do at the moment?]

[Foolish child] she chides me, [the colony is not under threat and you have provided food and a great hope for our family. I am content, as we should all be]

How is this giant ant monster always so positive?! Such a good mother!

Before I can get too emotional I need to focus on the present.

[So you've received the Biomass we sent up?]

[Yes. The children have been working as hard as they can. They found it and brought it to me]

[awesome]

I stare hard at the Queen for a moment, trying to judge whether she's upgraded herself as we discussed. Rather than accuse my own my own mother of lying, which would be rather tactless, I try a different angle.

[Is it ok if I check on your core? There may be more that I can do to improve our chances]

[of course child]

She answers without hesitation. I seriously doubt that she's even capable of doubting her own children. I wonder if all the ant Queens are like this?

Bringing my antennae forward I activate the core surgery skill and spin my mind up into overdrive to handle the flood of information that nearly knocks me off my six feet. Okok. Here we go then. Ah, this is the bit I'm looking for!

Trying to arrange all of the details in my mind I find the information I want and check in on the Queen's mutation advancements. Oh ho! I would not have been surprised if she had neglected my advice in order to produce more young. I believe that she considers producing young as her primary responsibility and the best way to serve the family as a whole, so it's only natural that she would prioritise it over everything else, but in a pleasant shock she has constrained herself!

In front of me I can plainly see the upgrades to the three egg production organs than she has selected:

[Efficient Biomass Deconstruction Organ +5, increases the efficiency of the organ to produce more deconstructed Biomass per point of Biomass spent]

[Smooth Biomass Recoding Gland +5, the recoding process utilises less deconstructed mass to encode the same material, increasing efficiency]

[Boosting Egg production Gland +5, Gives a bonus +2 to all stats for each egg produced]

Fantastic!

The first two upgrades were exactly the sort of thing I spoke to the Queen about. After studying the organs carefully, I estimate that these two advancements will synergise together to boost the egg production by 10%! Possibly more!

That might not sound like much, but it isn't as if the Queen will be producing ten eggs per year once the colony gets rolling. My dream scenario would have the Queen producing about a million ants a year, so an extra 10% would represent an increase of 100,000 workers. Not a small number at all.

The thing that really grabs my attention is the +2 to all stats in the egg production gland. +2 might not seem like much but it's enough to make my mind boggle! That's a huge deal! The ants will be so weak that +2 to their physical stats is going to be significant enough but +2 to the mental stats is fantastic!

If we were to think of the Croca beasts and how much Biomass would be needed to create one as opposed to a hatchling worker, I would guess that for each Croca Beast that was hatched would be able to make eight worker ants, perhaps more. An extra two stats on one Croca won't make that much difference but for eight workers? The difference is huge!

In fact... I can make use of this...

Knowing that every worker is going to be getting this boost from the Queen I make a few minor adjustments, bending my mind to its limits to enforce them. I trim down on the workers a little, basically shaving one point from each stat and giving clear paths for the bonus stats to slide into.

The end result of this trade-off is that the ants will be produced more cheaply than before but still be a little stronger in the end. Win-win! However there is a chance we can go further.

Withdrawing my mind from the Queen's core I immediately congratulate her on the wise choices she made.

[Those mutation advancements are fantastic! The two efficiency upgrades will mean more workers and the +2 to all stats was perfect. Great Job!]

[Thank you child] the Queen sounds genuinely pleased to be praised in this way. [Are we ready to lay the first generation of new workers? How many are needed? 200? 400?]

[Whoa there! Hold on a second! 400?!]

I can tell the Queen is pumped up to get back to growing the colony and the promises I've made about the next generation are clearly exciting for her but she needs to hold onto them horses for a bit longer.

[No way! Not yet!] I say firmly.

[What? Why?] I can tell she is genuinely disappointed. Sorry Mother!

[First of all we are going to get that egg production gland to +10 for sure. If it's possible to get another +2 to all stats to stack with the existing advancement that will absolutely insane. Game breaking even. I'm not kidding, +10 for the egg laying is a must!]

The Queen is silent for a moment. I can almost feel her sadness...

[It's ok! It won't take long! We brought up a huge feast from below, it'll surely get you to +10! I'll make sure the workers bring every bit of it here for you, ok?!] I say desperately.

[Thank you child] she says gratefully.

[as for the first generation] I continue, relieved her mood has improved, [my suggestion is that we keep it small. Only twenty workers]

[So few? I haven't laid a clutch of eggs that small since the first. Is that really alright?]

[absolutely. These workers will be completely different than the ones in the past. I'll have to teach them a few things and bring them up carefully. Once they hatch I'll start teaching them and you can save up on Biomass. When they're ready you can lay the second generation of 400 and the workers I've trained will be able to take care of them. See?]

[I understand. I'll be patient]

[Thanks Mother]

I chat to the Queen a little longer before sending my crew down below into our little chamber and making my way back to the surface to make good on my promise. I personally lead the workers to the food cache and instruct them carefully before supervising them transport the massive load of food directly to the Queens chamber for her to feast on.

If that organ can be doubled up to +4....

Things are going to get crazy.

Filled with hope for the new workers I wander over the human area and see what the pests have been up to whilst I was below. As I approach I can see they've erected a few crude shelters and unpacked most of their stuff. Someone took the time to use some fallen branches to put up a picket line for the beasts of burden as well.

As I draw closer I observe the people a little more carefully, it doesn't take long before something strikes me as a little odd...

Why are these homeless refugees looking so chipper?

It's true. Where I expected to find weeping, gnashing teeth and fists being shaken at the sky there appears instead calm people, many smiling and joking with others as they go about their labours.

Odd.

Also, aren't there more of them?

[Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 196: Humans and their needs**

Once I get close enough I'm quickly recognised by the people and the reaction is a unlike what I expected.

Firstly the humans seem unusually comfortable with having a monster ant wandering up to their area. I guess they've seen plenty of ants wandering here and there over the last few days.

Secondly they seem a bit... reverential. When they recognise me (I look different enough from the other workers I suppose) they fall quiet and still. There are hushed whispers and people rushing off towards the rear of the settlement where the shelter is. Other people are gesturing in my direction and talking animatedly to the people next to them. Even the children are pointing and whispering.

....

Annoying!

So annoying! What are these people doing anyways?!

I wait impatiently on the edge of the settlement, not willing to wander in and subject myself to more pointing. After a few moments Enid and the white robed priest Beyn came rushing over. She looks a bit nervous but he appears positively beaming with joy.

Hastily I weave together a mind magic transformation construct and connect to Enid whilst she patiently waits for me to complete the magic.

[Enid. Have your people managed to stay within their bounds?] I say abruptly once the mind bridge is finished.

[Yes. We've been staying within the boundary you set very carefully] she says nervously.

....

It appears to be true. When I detect the pheromone trail on this side of the settlement with my antennae it does seem to be fine. I'll check the other side before I leave as well.

[There seems to be more people today?] I ask dubiously.

[More refugees from Liria. It appears the monster horde is moving further south. These people arrive only this morning and we herded them in here as quickly as we could so that they weren't...]

[Eaten?]

[... right]

...

[So what are you people going to do?] I ask. More to the point... how long are they going to stay?

[We have nowhere to go. Most of us are content... surprisingly content, to remain here and build a temporary shelter. Wait for the wave to pass and then hopefully return to our homes]

I brighten up immediately.

[So you don't want to stay forever? Head back after the wave is sorted out? Sounds good!]

....

Wait. How long is the wave going to go for? Well.. As long as it isn't permanent it should be fine.

[There are a few things we would like ask] Enid asks hesitantly, [as you know we came with very little and have made do with what we have. We have access to the stream for water but food is scarce and shelter is hard to come by. It isn't too cold right now but it will start to cool soon]

Weather? Honestly I don't even notice anymore. I do spend most of my time underground, to be fair.

[So... you want me to remove the restrictions on movement? This land isn't tame by any stretch. The colony is chewing through a lot of the local beasts on the surface but there isn't any guarantee you won't come across monsters around here. Other than us, I mean]

She nods. [We're aware of that but we need to do this or we'll perish. We have to forage for food, perhaps try to clear a field that we can sow in the spring. The people here are feeling positive about



their prospects of living safely here. They have hope again and they want to do something positive for themselves]

She's quite persuasive when she puts her mind to it. Since this area is untamed, uncultivated wildlands there are woods everywhere, plenty of places to go foraging. If they want to clear a field though, that's going to be a heck of a lot of effort. There's ready access to water from a nearby stream which will help with irrigation....

I may as well help them out a little. If they get off to a good start they'll have less reason to come and whinge at me later.

[Enid. I'll help by cutting some trees and bringing the logs to the edge of your settlement and I'll start work on the stumps to help get your field started. Tell your people they can start foraging but not to come closer to the anthill. I'll mark a new boundary halfway between here and there and I recommend you make sure your people don't cross it] I warn her.

Her expression brightens immediately. [Thank you so much! This will mean the world to these people. Wait till I tell Beyn]

She turns and starts talking rapidly to the priest next to her. As soon as she's finished tears begin to flood down his face and he kneels in the dirt before me, raising his one good arm to the sky and shouting with praise.

....

I'm starting to regret this already...

When the other villagers hear his words of thanks they all beam with joy and many bow or wave in my direction, some go as far as to kneel along with their priest!

I'm getting out of here.

[I'll be back to check in after two more days Enid. Try to keep your people in line]

[I will. Thank you]

Sheesh.

I flee rapidly from the effusive praise and get to work checking on the old boundary as I circle around and erase. It appears as though Enid was telling the truth after all. With that job done I call Tiny up to help me and leave Crinis on defence duty under the Queens chamber before marking out the new boundary in a straight line roughly two kilometres long between the settlement and the nest.

With Tiny helping its fairly easy to clear out trees. After surveying a little we choose an area a hundred metres from the stream and several hundred from the settlement. Using my infused savage mandibles I cut the trees close to the ground and Tiny carries them over his huge shoulder back to the humans before dumping them on the ground. Once we've hauled a few trees over I get digging and Tiny helps me lever out the stumps, leaving behind deep holes in the ground that the humans will need to deal with.

After a days' work we manage to clear almost fifty trees and the human camp is a hive of activity. As we skirt the edges on our way back to the nest the people are bustling everywhere, talking back and forth, hauling the logs about and readying the tools that they have on hand. Looks like they'll be busy enough with that for some time. So long as they don't come and bother me it's worth it.

We've got serious business to be about back at the nest.

Preparations need to be made and the Dungeon below needs more exploring. Not to mention the intense food packing program we need to undertake for the Queen to start mass producing the new generation after the first are born.

When I get back to the nest I high five the workers I pass on the way in and send Tiny down to our little guard post under the Queens chamber and summon Crinis to help me. I need to dig out some farms! With Crinis helping to relocate the dirt I create two large empty chambers accessible only by a narrow tunnel on either side of our guard spot. I get Crinis to haul the dirt back to Tiny and let the ape carry big handfuls into the Queens chamber where the workers get annoyed and take it to the top, dumping it on top of the hill.

Once the mana veins extend into those chambers we'll be able to begin harvesting Biomass from right here near home, if not quite as much as we were before due to the longer gestation time the monsters are experiencing right now.

With that done... time to nap!

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 197: Improve thyself**

wwwWWWACHA!

I'm up!

Snapping alert after my nap I immediately leap into more work. Got stuff to do, no point slacking off like a dumb croc! (yeah I said it!)

First thing on the menu is expanding the farm chambers. I originally thought that two would be fine but now I'm not so sure. I need to be more ambitious if I want to grow the colony to the sort of size it needs to be in order to support itself in a never ending expansion of the glorious ant empire. Everyone wants what's best for their family right? I'm no different. What's best for the colony is obviously Dungeon domination. This is the conclusion I've come to.

To that end I make the existing two chambers larger and dig out another two the same size, relying on my pets and the workers to deal with the dirt issue. The first two chambers have already begun to incubate monsters, I can detect their heat easily. I'm not worried about the monsters taking over the nest either. There is literally two hundred workers and the Queen chilling just above where these farm chambers are. The odds of them overflowing with enough numbers to take out the colony are basically non-existent.

Not to mention the farm chambers connect through narrow passages to my resting place, where Crinis and Tiny will be on guard duty anytime we aren't away from the nest.

The digging also pays off with a level. Taking my excavation to level 8! Every extra level increases my digging efficiency that little bit more and I can't help but be happy to see that happening. After all, digging is the way of ant zen!

Refreshed from my labours I prepare myself for the next task I've set myself for the day. This is one I'm not really looking forward to. I feel nervous about what we experienced in the Marsh Expanse, that formless pressure, those waves of monsters. We can handle the waves ok for now, but what if they get larger? What if more powerful monsters come? I'm getting worried that my current rate of growth isn't enough. Even without laying eyes on the beast in the marsh I'm certain it's going to be a tough cookie to crunch.

I'm feeling some anxiety. There isn't any real direct threat to my family right now but if something were to happen and I couldn't save them...

I refuse to let that happen. I lost my family in the last world but I refuse to let it happen in this one too.

I'll do whatever it takes to make sure this family stays together!

With a surging feeling of determination I unearth my core collection and begin fusing together a special core. I'm so focused that the mental strain barely registers in my conscious, all that occupies my mind is visions of workers marching themselves down the gullet of a brutal crocodile beast the size of a house.

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

Reinforce!

The painfully familiar process begins once more as the oversized core gradually dissipates into pure energy that is drawn into my own core, enlarging and condensing it within my body. It doesn't take long for the pinch to come, the awkward feeling of being a little too full on the inside that grows more unbearable over time until it becomes an acute pain.

I will endure! This isn't enough! Not nearly enough!

I grit my mandibles and hold on until the entire process is finished. It feels.... Not good! But I can take it! For the colony, I can take it!

Painfully but not less determined than before I move out to take on my next task. Hopefully over time I'll be able to become accustomed to this size core and the pain will fade much like it did the first time I took in a special core early.

Then I'll see about what else I can do ...

For now, I wander over to the Queen's chamber and check in with her. It turns out, the masses of food we sent up had in fact been enough to tip her over the edge and allow her to upgrade her egg laying organ to +10. Eagerly I activate the Core Surgery skill and inspect her choices. Ready to behold the future of the ant race on Pangera.

And it is beautiful.

[Enhanced Boosting egg production gland +10; Gives a bonus +4 to all stats for each egg produced]

DAAAAAYMM!

It's really here!

I immediately retract the skill and perform an excited six legged tap dance in front of the bewildered Queen.

"Yahooo!" I cheer.

"You seem happy child" the Queen laughs.

I refuse to stop the dance. This music must be expressed!

"This is going to make all the difference Mother!" I cry whilst my feet keep tippity-tapping, "the next generation are going to be something very special, just you wait!"

"I have already begun to stockpile Biomass. When I have enough for the first twenty I'll let you know" the Queen assures me.

"Fantastic! If I get a chance I'll head down into the Dungeon and try to rustle up some grub. The sooner we can get this rolling the better!"

The Queen seems quite pleased by my enthusiasm even if she has no idea how to take my celebratory dance. I swear I saw her shuffle her own feet a little before growing still once more.

I don't want to make any more changes to the new generation, they'll be fine the way they are. With all the upgrades in place the egg production will be quicker and produce more powerful hatchlings than I had originally planned for, everything is coming up Biomass.

Full of enthusiasm I waddle my way back down into my chamber and settle in for a little bit of planning. There are a few things I want to look into before we move out again. The challenges are getting a little real right now and I want to make sure that we are in tip top fighting shape, myself and my pets.

For me, this means a little skill point spending. For my pets, it means a little core surgery so I can take a look at their skills and mutations. I need to be able to better understand what I'm dealing with.

There is a skill that allows me to directly take a look at their status but since I can use core surgery I don't really think it's necessary. I mean, I could just ask them for the information and I'm sure Crinis would be happy to provide it but Tiny.... Well, he has communication issues....

If he gets any dumber I'm going to have to shift some energy into beefing up his brain. I'm almost afraid to look at how low his Cunning has gotten...

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 198: Quick, status report!**

[Crisis, could you come over here please?]

[Of course Master] the tennis ball of endless darkness responded immediately.

I get the feeling that she's able to sense where I am since she manages to roll towards me despite having no sense of sight. Once she reaches a space just in front of me she unfolds a few tentacles and 'stands' up, holding her body up on a few slender tendril like limbs.

[How are things going Crinis?] I decide to lead with a general question.

[Well, Master!] she replies happily, [since maturing I've been able to gain levels and Biomass at an accelerated pace. It feels good to be useful to you Master]

[Yep, you've been a great help]

The little ball wiggles happily in front of me for being praised. Despite her image she really is quite weak to positive reinforcement....

[How have you found spending your skill points and Biomass Crinis? Has there been any issues? Do you need any help or advice?]

She pauses for a moment. [I've been a little hesitant to spend my points Master since I couldn't be sure my choices were exactly what you wanted. I didn't want to make any mistakes...]

What?!

[It's your skills and your Biomass Crinis, you spend it however you want!]

Just because they are pets I don't want to micromanage every aspect of their lives! I'm probably a bit naive about it but I like the idea of my pets making their own choices and finding their own way in life.

Is it because I'm lazy and can't be bothered going through all the menus and burning up my brains working out a balanced strategy where every member of our group functions as a cohesive part of a whole?

...

Maybe.

Still... viva la freedom! Viva la pet choice!

They can work it all out on their own! I don't need to get involved!

[So tell me Crinis ] I say cheerily, [how many points have you spent? What sort of skills are we looking at?]

[.... ]

What is this? ... Somehow, even though she doesn't have a face, I can tell she's looking away from me.

[What's wrong? Have you got a few points stored up? I'm happy to give advice if that's what you want.... ]

[....]

Something is starting to dawn on me.

[Crisis ... How many points have you saved?]

[.. All of them]

[ALL OF THEM?! You haven't spent a single thing?!]

[I'm sorry Master! I didn't want to spend them incorrectly!]

[It's fine if you just spend them however you want! Do what you think will work for you!]

[ but, but, but what if I make a choice that doesn't work out!? Or doesn't work with what you wanted me to do?!]

.....

Sigh. It's nice to have a pet that's diligent and thoughtful, a direct contradiction to Tiny, but she's TOO diligent and thoughtful. She's become paralysed by wanting to make the perfect selection. Unable to make a choice because she's preoccupied by what I might want.

It's time for me to show my understanding side and educate her, just as I educated Tiny.

....

WHAP!

Using my antenna I swing one in a wide loop and whack straight into the little ball suspended in front me.

[M m m Master?!] she cries in shock.

THWAP!

[Go spend your points! All of them! Right now!]

[But!]

THWA PAAAA!

Spinning both antennae I whip one from the left and the other from the right, timing it so that one strikes a moment before the other, cannoning the little ball into the second blow which sends her flying to the corner of the chamber.

[Every point! I'll be checking back on you in an hour!]

I turn aside from Crinis mental snivelling with a heart of cold steel. I know she's only trying to do what is best by me but if I relent and go through the process with her this time she'll come to rely on me even more. I want my pets to be more independent than that. If she can't even upgrade herself without consulting me just how independent could she possibly get?

This is tough love!

You can do it Crinis! This is for your future growth and not because I don't want to dig through all of your menus with you!

....

In truth, a part of me kind of hopes that I can release my pets one day. The idea that they are essentially indentured servants, magically unable to refuse my orders kind of sits uncomfortably with my modern sensibilities. Much as the colony has come to be my family, Tiny and Crinis are also part of that family. I would rather that we teamed up and worked together as fellow family members than master and slave...

Perhaps I'm just too sentimental...

[Tiny! Wake up buddy, come over here for a minute]

The giant ape wearily opens his eyes and groans before rolling over and gradually picking himself up.

.....

Is it really that much of a bother to move five metres over here?

Eventually he pulls himself up onto his feet and walks over to me. His dark red bat eyes contrasting sharply with his black and silver fur. He really is an impressive sight. His huge, bunched shoulders and massively thick arms are intimidating enough, but his huge fists, well beyond basketball size at this point, look truly scary.

[How's it going Tiny?] I lead with an easy one.

[.....]

Any minute now.

[Good]

There it is.

[How are those skills going? Spending your Biomass points ok?]

[.... ?]

He tilts his head quizzically to one side.

Well.... I knew it was going to be like this...

[I'm going to use a skill on your big guy. Hold still for a minute ok?]

When he nods I place both of my antennae on his arm and activate the core surgery skill. Immediately huge amounts of information flood my brain and I have to whip my processing speed up a gear to comprehend it all. Using the core surgery skill isn't like directly looking at the status menu of another monster and then making changes. Whereas the status screen is a nice piece of paper with everything written neatly, using core surgery is like sticking your face in a bowl of crumpled sticky notes.

All of the information is there but you need to filter it, sort it and poke about here and there before being able to piece together the full picture.

Eventually I manage to get a handle on what Tiny's status is like.

Name: Tiny

Level: 7 (core)

Might: 154

Toughness: 42

Cunning: 7

Will: 15

HP: 84/84

MP: 210/210

Skills: Ape Boxing lvl 5; Uppercut lvl 5; Leap lvl 5; Smash lvl 5; Stamina lvl 5; Grappling lvl 5; Crushing Blows lvl 5; Fancy Feet lvl 2;

Mutations: Enhanced musculature +4, Bones +4; Legs +4; Heightened Sonic Enhancer +4; Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +4, Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +4, Energy Conversion Gland +4;

Species: Dire Lightning Storm Kong

Skill points: 28

Biomass: 129

....

.....

So first off. He hasn't upgraded anything... Like nothing. He has what? 28 skill points and ... 129 Biomass.....

ARE YOU KIDDING ME TINY?!

AND WHAT THE HECK IS FANCY FEET?!

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 199: Spendin'**

What the heck has been going on Tiny? I mean seriously man... You haven't upgraded anything? Haven't spent your skill points at all? The only skill that look like you didn't already have it is 'fancy feet' and what the heck does that do? Have you been dancing behind my back, have you? Little bit of tap here and there?

...

Sigh.

I use my antennae to rub at my temples in an effort to ward off the impending migraine I feel coming on.

I really thought that the pets would be able to handle this stuff without me interfering. Even if Tiny couldn't I was sure that Crinis would be fine. After all the effort I put into enhancing her intelligence .... Still nothing.



Nothing!

With Tiny.. I'd mentally prepared myself for a lot. Nonsensical upgrades that made no sense, no synergy or evidence of even a mild amount of thinking. I'd prepared myself for that. To find that he hasn't done anything at all somehow hurts my head worse than those other options.

I don't think he hasn't done it because he doesn't understand the idea of spending Biomass or skill points. His mind is slow, that's for sure, but I doubt that he can't understand how to upgrade himself. Centipedes and Dragon Wolf Cubs can spend Biomass, I know they can, I've seen them with upgraded body parts. There is no way they can do it but Tiny can't.

No no. The reason he hasn't done it is because he can't be bothered. It's too much hassle.

This lazy ape!

[Tiny, lean down here for a moment, would you?]

Puzzled, the giant ape leans down, bringing his bat face a little closer to mine.

...

THWAP!

I whip my antennae around and smack them into his head on both sides!

[Go spend all your points! Right now!]

[..... Why?] he sounds dissatisfied as he rubs at his bruised cheeks.

..... Stubborn gorilla!

He has to obey my instructions so he will spend them, but it would be better if I could give him motivation that would make him try harder to spend them well.

....

[If you spend all your points properly, you'll be able to hit things better!]

...

[Ooooo!] a spark of interest lights up in his eyes.

Tiny leans forward eagerly towards me, hoping for more.

[You'll grow stronger too. Maybe enough to fight that scary thing in the marsh!]

His brow furrows for a moment as he thinks hard before rushing to his feet and pounding his chest.

[OOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!]

[That's it buddy! It's a good idea to spend all of your points! Go get 'em, now!]

[OOOOOOOOOOOO!!!] He roars in his mind as he turns and sprints out of the chamber.

....

[OI GET BACK HERE YOU APE! Spend your points, don't go fighting!] I cry as I chase after him desperately.

It takes a little while but I manage to calm Tiny down a little and reinforce the idea that spending points good, leaving them unspent bad. I get him settled in one corner where he sits with a glazed expression on his face as he trawls through the various menus. I don't envy him, he has to go through upgrade menu's for literally every upgradable body part he has.

Crinis is still vaguely wobbling in the corner as she also grabbles with the problem of upgrading herself. She won't have nearly as many skill points or Biomass as Tiny to chew through but the fact that she is yet to spend a single thing makes a little worried. Even with my orders hanging over her head she'll probably struggle to make choices. I think she'll be awhile.

Time for me to spend a few points myself!

I've got nineteen points of Biomass to spend and another fourteen skill points. The Biomass will go quickly but the skill points I'll need to spend a little more time on. I've got enough that I can branch out a little and perhaps allow myself a little leeway to pick up a few non-essential skills.

Alright then!

Biomass first!

This one's easy enough. 12 points are needed to take my inner carapace plating to +5 which will leave me with seven points to spend. I think I'll spend the extra six on my acid gland. The fact that I can spin magic now shouldn't take away from the ease of use and deadly restrictive properties of my business zone. I'm also pretty hopeful that there might be some juicy advancements to choose from when I get to +10. I'll keep my tiny little claws crossed on that one.

[Do you want to upgrade Inner Carapace Plating to +5 and Restrictive Acid to +6? This will cost 18 Biomass]

[Yup!]

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

Then pow! The menu hits me right between the eyes again with a plethora of options. I start picking my way through, searching for something that makes sense for me and what I want from my inner plating. What exactly do I want from it?

.....

More defence, I guess? I mean, as far as I see it there are two options for improve defence, tougher shell or faster healing. Generally speaking I like having a mix of both. The tougher the shell is, the more valuable the healing right? I have the regeneration gland to provide sweet, sweet healing in the event I need it and I have my Diamond carapace to provide the hard outer shell.

The Bone Plating right is basically a reinforcing layer underneath the carapace, supporting it and making it more difficult to break through. I don't mind if the plating serves as a double role. Reinforcing the outer shell and helping to repair it at the same time...

Let's see if I can find something along those lines...

...

Bingo!

[Regenerative Inner Carapace plating, helps to regenerate damage done to the carapace in addition to improving its defensive properties].

Nice!

With this my shell is capable of healing itself even more than before! Muahahaha! All I need now is to bolster my defence against magical attacks in some way. I need to start investigating and training my skills...

[Would you like to confirm these choices?]

Yep!

.....

FFFFFFTAGN!

All over the inside my carapace! Nooooooooooooo!

.....

Uhg that's horrible. Now for skills.

For the first time in ages I bring up the skills menu and start pouring through it carefully, looking for options that might help me out in the current situation.

I saw one skill in Tiny's list that I thought looked helpful so I go straight to confirming what that might be.

[Stamina, reduces the cost of actions or skills that drain physical endurance. The amount of reduction increases with skill level].

Hot damn! That is handy. Consider it bought!

Ok what else is there....

I check through the pet related skills again to see if there is something I really want. Increasing growth speed doesn't really appeal, being able to view status....

Well if I think about it terms of what the skills will turn into when advanced rather than what they are then what would those skills turn into?

Growth speed could become... levelling speed? Increase in xp or biomass gained? That could be really handy...

Viewing status would become... changing status? Being able to spend skill and Biomass points?

The second one still doesn't interest me but the first one could become useful. It's worth spending a point on. Purchased!

The joy of spending points and growing stronger is filling me! Or is just the knowledge being dumped into my brain space?

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 200: Upgraded and ready to roll**

The rest of the pet skills don't interest me right now, I don't need to take the skill to increase the number of available pets until the system refuses to allow to. I may as well try and find a third now that I have the faster pet growing skill, presumably I won't be able to level it up unless I gain a new pet.

At that time perhaps the system will refuse to allow me reconstitute a monster and I can easily pick up the skill then. For now, let's look about and see what other skills I can find.

Scrolling through the menus takes a significant amount of time. They don't seem to be organised in a properly logical way, with movement skills mixed with mental skill and magical skills sometimes tucked away amongst physical ones. It's almost as if you need to know what you're looking for and where to find it ahead of time, otherwise your only choice is to trawl through the lists checking every entry until you find something you like.

Which is exactly what I'm doing right now. And it sucks!

This one? No...

How about..? No...

Hmmmm..... No...

Who would want to get better at that anyway?!

Madness!

There has to be some juicy new skills here somewhere. I need to look a little more carefully. I remember when the skill list had only five options on it. I don't know how, I don't know why but that has ballooned out to over one hundred at this point. I'm not sure exactly what causes the skills to become unlocked... there must be some sort of prerequisite that needs to be met. Perhaps with stats... or even actions in the world?

For example the pet skills. I don't exactly frequently check the skill list but they didn't appear until after I had reconstituted my first pet. I didn't go looking for them until after I'd met Formo the Sophos but it stands to reason that they were unlocked somehow.

Which means that other skills must also have prerequisites before they become available. I suppose that humans and civilisations like the Sophos would have had hundreds of years to learn all this stuff and map it out, uncovering the most optimal paths, planning the best combinations of skills.

Well, the ant kingdom will also have to compile this knowledge! Starting the first twenty of the new generation I'll begin the process of learning the secrets behind the entire skill tree! Not a single leaf shall remain unturned!

With renewed determination I start reading through the skill descriptions one by one and I manage to uncover a few gems.

[Mana Miser; allows the user to be able to do slightly more with slightly less when utilising mana. Effect will increase along with skill level]

[Cerebral Endurance; the user will be able better marshal their mental resources, reducing the mental exertion for complex will based tasks slightly]

[Meditation; user will be able to relax the mind and achieve clarity of thought. Each level will make the state more effective and easier to achieve]

Each of these three makes a lot of sense to me from a magic user perspective. More efficiency with mana, better mental endurance and a clearer, more focused mind? Perfect for my spell slinging ways!

Purchased!

....

Man the number of skills I have is really climbing! Now that my skills are starting to climb into the third tier it's becoming harder to train them, meaning I have to upgrade them less, causing my current skill point build up.

I shouldn't go too crazy picking up new skills... perhaps only a one or two more.

I keep flipping through. I've already picked up some skills on the mental side.. Is there anything on the physical side that I could pick up? I start to focus in on skill names that seem to focus on physical prowess but most don't seem that useful.

There has to be something that could be interesting... I need to remember not to judge a skill on exactly what it says at the first stage. After reaching level five and then level ten the skills become much more useful. Look at dash for example. I ignored it initially since charging forward when I was just born would be little more than charging forward to my own death. After witnessing the awesome movement skills of the humans it became clear that after being upgraded that dash was almost essential for physical combat.

Ooooo how about this?

[Precise shooting; the user will become better able to target objects with ranged attacks]

This should work for my acid shot as well as my magic right?

Purchased!

Alright then... there has to be something else... something less passive.

One more skill...

Eventually I come across something that catches my eye. Even then... it sounds a bit nasty....

[Ripping bite; increases the users' ability to make bite attacks aimed at tearing away part of the targets body]

....

That.... Is badass.

Purchased!

With the warm trickling sensation of new skill knowledge flooding my brain I feel pleased with my new purchases. New skills to level! New horizons to explore! Who knows exactly what these skills will turn into in the future?!

One thing I do know is that I need to start training up my skills quickly. My current options aren't nearly enough to handle the sort of conflicts we are going to start getting into so I need to lift my game!

Content with my spending for the moment I turn to check in on my pets. Crinis is still bobbling away in the corner and Tiny remains seated, eyes glazed as he contemplates the upgrade menu.

Good luck guys, I wish you well!

....

Since I don't have much to do I may as well start trying to grind my skills.

Who knows? Perhaps I'll be able to unlock something interesting if I can get some of my skills to evolve...

I settle in to wait for my pets to complete their spending and try to activate my meditation skill. It takes a little while but I gradually feel a calm sensation begin to pervade my mind, my thoughts growing still and placid, my emotions fading into the background.

With the proper mood established I call on my mana and begin to practice. There's a lot of work to do.