

Chrysalis 1031

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Chapter 1031.3: Far Ranging Part 3

[Move quickly, Garg, we need to gain distance.]

[Right.]

Nothing brought monsters to an area faster than the sounds of battle. The chance to jump on others in the middle of a fight, or capitalise on an exhausted victor, was too good to pass up. Of course, what ended up happening most of the time was that a smaller fight quickly escalated into an all out melee as the opportunists ran into each other.

They were coming now, she could sense them, weak cores flickering in the darkness as the monsters skittered forward.

From her position on Garg's back, Columbant fired acid blasts at the targets behind them, the sizzling liquid boiling through the air. Almost all of the shots went wide, but at least one hit home, a monster crying out in the darkness and drawing others towards it.

All around them, the sounds of battle began to ignite, the frenzy spreading rapidly. Which meant the monsters in front of them were also drawn to the fight.

[Garg, charge!] Columbant ordered.

[Gladly!] the big beetle replied.

She lowered her head and rushed forward, putting all of her significant mass behind her reinforced horn. The pride and joy of Garg and Columbant's beetle-beast design, the horn was formed of condensed bone covered in hardened chitin. Highly mutated, it was a deadly weapon and a powerful defensive tool at the same time.

And Garg demonstrated it now, lowering her head and spearing the first target to put its head up in front of her. A shadow beast crept over the rock and hissed at them, only to receive a horn to the torso. Garg threw the monster off with a flick of her head and rumbled out a laugh as she continued to barrel forward.

[Keep up with us, Slither!]

[I'm here.]

[Rist, give us a fire wall.]

[Gladly.]

It took only a moment for the fire demon to unleash his power, the tunnel brightening as the fire erupted behind them. The flare revealed the hovering beasts, each looking for an angle, but they shied away from the heat before pouncing on each other, giving Columbant and her pets the space they needed.

[Run, Garg! Follow my directions!]

Steering the beetle with antennae taps, Columbant directed her group through the packed tunnel as more fights began to break out around them. As long as they stayed that little bit ahead and didn't get caught in the middle of it, they would make it out.

The terrain rushed past as Columbant ducked low on Garg's back. In her mind, she kept checking the Tunnel Map, tracking their progress as they drew closer and closer to the next junction.

She steered her charging steed expertly, narrowly avoiding spires and rocks and more monsters emerging from their hiding places to seek prey in front of them. There were many victims of Garg's horn as the race continued and the beetle-beast was rumbling merrily by the time they arrived at the second junction.

[Slither, we need your shadow again.]

[I don't have long.]

[That's fine, over there!]

As one, the group dove into a pocket of darkness and once again sank into the shadow that Slither provided. Not a moment too soon. As the fighting behind them caught up, chaos erupted. This was a meeting place between two large, arterial tunnels, monsters were everywhere and any excuse was enough to send them into a feeding frenzy.

[One minute,] her shadow pet ground out, the strain evident in his voice.

[That's fine,] she assured him, [don't push yourself too hard.]

She constantly scanned the surroundings as the brawl spread. They'd come this far, their odds of escaping had climbed significantly, but the next part would be the most dangerous. With the shadow exhausted, they had no choice but to make a break for the third and final junction. If they made it to that point, they'd be clear to ascend higher in the stratum where they outclassed the monsters much more heavily and spawn rates would be lower.

For fifty seconds, they rested and waited as Slither shrouded them in darkness, but all too soon, their time was up. Once more they were revealed, but Columbant held them still.

[How's your mana, Rist?]

[Almost full. I can go anytime.]

[How are the legs, Garg?]

[Fine.]

[All right. We're going to creep to the left side and then make a break for it.]

[Got it.]

The three smaller group members piled onto the top of Garg and prepared for the next dash. They were in a tight spot, but they'd been in many before. They could make it.

Hugging the walls, Columbant directed them to the far left side before she aimed and carefully fired three acid shots towards the right. The sizzling liquid arced through the air, catching the attention of the more dull-witted monsters and pulling them away from her crew.

[Now!]

[Quietly?] Garg asked.

[No! Full speed ahead!]

The beetle-beast was tired, but rallied herself and charged forward, horn lowered. She had utmost trust in her mistress to steer her to safety. The ground rumbled as the six-legged monster charged ahead, her weight enough to crack the stone beneath her as she ran.

[Need you to free fire here, Rist. Try not to run out of power, but don't hold back too much,] she instructed her demon pet.

At tier six, Rist was the strongest of her helpers, a scarce demon core that fell into her grasp before this current outing. He'd only grown into maturity two weeks ago and was still coming into his own, improving his Skills from their baseline levels.

[Got it,] he replied before his hands ignited and he began to hurl explosive balls of concentrated fire out into the darkness.

The cries and shrieks of monsters rang out immediately as the cavern lit up. Despite their power, the explosions didn't spread as far as they should; the suffocating thickness of the cold and shadows suppressed the fire and light.

[Keep going, Garg! You're doing well.]

[I will.]

And on they rushed. They were climbing now, gradually making their way higher into the Dungeon and toward safety.

Hope rose in Columbant's heart. She felt rising relief that none would need to be sacrificed. She loved her pets and desperately wanted them to survive.

The monsters were thick around them now, and she bit and fired acid at everything she could reach. But nothing could stop Garg's momentum. She was a spear, designed for this and this alone.

Then suddenly, things grew quiet. Monsters scrambled to hide and the surroundings grew colder. Columbant felt a shiver of fear run over her carapace.

She'd been too busy piloting and watching the monsters around her to notice the real danger. Now it reared up before her, staring down with cold, cold eyes.

The serpent had returned!

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Chapter 1032: Far Ranging Pt 4

The ghostly serpent hovered above them for a short moment, its powerful core glowing bright in Columbant's eyes. Then it bared its fangs and lunged for them.

[Dodge, Garg!]

The beetle-beast tucked her legs and rolled to the side as the others threw themselves from her carapace, barely avoiding the lightning fast strike.

[Garg, up front! Slither, sneak attack. Rist, behind me. Standard formation, everyone.]

Her Pet Detection array sparked to life inside her, giving the ant a perfect picture of where her allies were positioned and their general state. The Skills she had trained so diligently came to the fore as she tried to squeeze out every advantage for the coming fight.

Pet Commander gave bonuses to any action she ordered her pets to complete. Pet Coordinator allowed her to direct and position her pets with maximum efficiency. Even the more passive Skills that made her pets grow faster and stronger, increasing their Skill growth, stirred as her pets drew on their abilities.

Before the serpent could retract for another strike, Garg was already there, recovering from her roll and charging in headfirst, trying to land a blow with her horn. The monster was too quick for that, twisting its long, ethereal body to dodge, and pulling back for another bite.

Despite herself, Columbant couldn't help but admire the elegant design of the monster. So simple, yet so brutal. Somehow, the creature had lucked into a powerful evolution despite being completely wild. A rare event, but with millions of Dungeon monsters being spawned and killed every hour, it happened more than most would think.

Balls of fire streaked overhead and again, the serpent twisted, coiling itself with incredible speed to avoid the flames. It didn't realise that the explosions were coming.

BOOM!

A deathly hiss filled the tunnel as the flames scorched the monster's ghostly flesh. Fury ignited in the serpent's eyes as it locked onto Rist, the source of the offending fire.

[Slither!] Columbant called.

The slug revealed itself, rearing out of the shadows not two metres from the serpent's tail. His mouth opened and he spewed forth a torrent of black, acidic goo.

In a flash, the giant serpent reacted, spinning to slash at Slither with its tail. In one blow, the loyal pet was launched from the safety of its shadow and splatted against the distant wall.

[Slither!]

[I'm fine,] he replied as he reformed his body and sank into the shadows again. [Much faster than I thought.]

[Charge!]

Garg had reoriented herself and rushed forwards once more. It was her only move, but it was a powerful one.

The giant bug blurred as she lunged, utilising her Skills to the fullest extent to reach incredible speeds. Not even the serpent was quick enough to uncoil itself to avoid the charge and Columbant felt a surge of triumph as the beetle-beast struck home with her deadly horn.

Garg bellowed joyfully as she felt the contact, twisting her head to maximise the damage, but the response didn't feel right. Columbant could see the ghost-flesh of the serpent didn't sustain injury the way a normal body would.

Threads broke off, translucent strands that drifted through the air like the dark weeds that floated in the shadow sea. Clearly, the monster had suffered damage, but rather than writhing in pain at the grievous blow, the serpent instead rose up, baring its fangs.

It doesn't feel pain!

[Garg, dodge!]

Her pets were well trained and Garg reacted instantly, pulling back and rolling, except she couldn't. The unhealed wound in her flank reared its ugly head at the worst possible time. She staggered as her middle-left leg spasmed, the muscle tearing as she put too much force through it.

The snake bit home.

Two enormous fangs punched through Garg's hardened carapace, tearing into the flesh beneath.

Dammit, no!

Fire roared overhead as Rist unleashed his remaining arsenal, trying to protect his fellow pet. Columbant poured her efforts into forming a healing mana construct, pumping out the precious life-giving energy as she blasted acid at the snake.

Their efforts were enough to force the serpent to release its grip. Garg quickly scuttled back out of range, but was deeply wounded. Columbant didn't need her advanced Skills to know that. Only her incredible carapace saved the big bug from instant death.

[Hold still, Garg, I've got you.]

[I can fight,] she groaned, [I'm alright.]

[Don't be stupid.]

The core shaper sent every drop of healing energy into her loyal pet that she could and felt the wounds begin to close. She cursed her lack of energy, but gave everything she had to Garg.

[Get yourself out of sight and recover. That's an order!] she snapped before she turned and rushed at the serpent.

Unable to refuse, Garg ground her teeth in frustration and limped to the shadows, still burning with pain.

This is far from ideal.

The serpent hissed as it loomed over the smaller ant. Columbant thought furiously about what she could do. With Garg out of action, Slither wounded and Rist running low on mana, they were in a near hopeless predicament.

The serpent was strong. It would be a tough fight if they were in peak condition, but they were far from that.

I could run. I could order Slither, Rist and Garg to charge and then escape.

It was what core shapers were meant to do; they were the true investment of the Colony, not the pets. The Eldest had demanded that they preserve their own lives to the fullest extent, but she knew she wouldn't do it.

Guess I'm a failure of a core shaper.

[Rist, give it everything you have left! Slither, we need more acid!]

It wouldn't work, but she would go down fighting alongside her pets to the end. Columbant gnashed her mandibles and charged for a final time.

The serpent swerved through the air, mouth wide and ready to bite down on the puny ant rushing toward it, when it felt something cannon into its side.

Columbant almost couldn't believe her eyes when a monstrous turtle rumbled forward and pounced on the snake, snapping at its ethereal flesh.

She knew that turtle!

"Magellant?" she called.

"You look like you're in rough shape," her fellow core shaper called back. "Good thing I was in the area!"

Two more pets sprang out of the darkness, a bear tyrant and shadow spider, throwing themselves at the serpent, which hissed with fury as it suffered yet further damage.

[Let's go, Slither! Can't let them take all the glory!]

Looked like she wouldn't have to die after all.

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Chapter 1033: Far Ranging final

"It's all yours," Magellant said magnanimously.

"Are you sure?" Columbant replied, antennae flicking with indecision.

"Of course. You and your team did the bulk of the work, I only arrived to provide cleanup at the end."

"Then I will claim it with gratitude. You have my thanks."

With one swift movement, she scooped up the powerful core sitting on the stone between them and tucked it into the pouch slung around her carapace. All of a sudden, the bag felt far more burdensome than before as the dense core settled amongst so many weaker ones, but it wasn't unwelcome.

The serpent had been a powerful monster, with a strong core. She would study it carefully when she had the time, documenting everything she could find for the core shaper records. After that would come the brain-bending work of altering the core, attempting to engineer an even more perfect creation.

If all went well, she might have found her fourth pet! She'd need to buy the Skill to increase the number she could have first, though.

"I can't thank you enough for arriving when you did. The situation was hopeless."

"I noticed that the tunnels were far more dangerous than expected and thought it would be best for us to meet up early. I'm glad your trail hasn't faded, otherwise I might never have found you."

"It's a bit embarrassing, but I made the poor decision to flee trouble by going deeper into the Dungeon. A foolish mistake, I know."

Ranging from the Colony as they did, there were basic principles that they all strove to follow. The most fundamental of all: deeper is more dangerous, not less. No matter how inviting and safe that tunnel might appear, or how much pressure you were under, you didn't go deeper unless you were fully prepared.

Feeling the pinch from heavier than expected fighting, Columbant had taken one turn that she should never have considered and ended up in an even worse predicament as a result.

"What's the plan now?" Magellant asked. "You want to head back to the nest?"

"If you're amenable. I know we planned to stay out longer, but after recovering this core and running so close to disaster, I need to get my bearings and do a bit of study."

"That's not a problem. We've got a long way to go before we get home, I'll be able to hit my Biomass targets as long you donate a little my way."

If that was going to be the price of cutting the expedition short, then that was all well and good.

The two core shapers began to plan the return journey, scratching out maps and lines on the tunnel floor. They were sixty kilometres from the territory of the Colony in a straight line. Naturally, the Dungeon didn't work in straight lines. They'd have to move much farther than that before they reached safety.

They spent long hours planning their route as the pets continued to annihilate any monster who drew close to the position they held, huddled against the wall. It was necessary that they have a firm agreement on as much as possible before the journey began, so they talked back and forth, working out as many kinks as they could before departing.

This far from the nest, they had no one to rely on except each other and their loyal pets. A successful expedition was one that was properly planned, this was a core shaper maxim.

"This will work," Columbant said, examining the diagram closely, "are you ready to depart?"

"Right away."

[Gather up, everyone, we're heading home,] Columbant said to her pets.

Garg pushed herself to her feet, the healing process nearly complete after a day of repeated treatments and several large meals. The brush with death had forced Columbant to reevaluate just how durable her design really was. She'd felt that nothing would be able to threaten the beetle-beast within the second stratum, but she'd been proven wrong.

She would do everything she could to secure a strong evolution for Garg. Elevating her to the fifth tier would do a lot for the group, allowing the softer targets like Rist and Slither to move more freely.

She quickly checked on Garg's status. She wasn't far away, though there was a little work to be done on mutations.

The journey was a long one, the rising tide of monster spawns slowing their progress significantly. Thankfully, as a consequence, Magellant had no issues collecting the Biomass she'd wanted for her pets. Even so, Columbant was able to harvest her fair share.

When the two weary core shapers finally crossed the threshold into the Colony's territory, they heaved a massive sigh of relief.

It was an exhausting process, ranging out so far from the colony, but the instant they crossed the boundary and sensed the familiar pheromones against their antennae, all their stress melted away. The random monster attacks ceased; within the well regulated lands of the ants, such a thing didn't happen.

Soon they came across siblings who waved and welcomed them back vigorously.

"Welcome home! How far out did you go this time?"

"Working hard out there?"

"Make sure you... *get some rest.*"

That last one had seemingly come from the shadows, but when Columbant turned to look, she saw no one there.

Not matter, she wouldn't be caught skipping on rest. Now that she was home, she had a great deal of torpor to catch up on.

The second homecoming for the two core shapers occurred when they entered the complex reserved for their caste.

"Welcome back, you two," the door-ant greeted them at the entrance. "Make sure you sign into the book."

"Wouldn't dream of forgetting," Columbant chuckled.

The two lined up and wrote down a brief description of their journey, including number and quality of cores collected, and Biomass harvested for their pets.

"Profitable trip then," the door-ant noted. "Turn over any spare cores, and welcome home."

The two ants picked up their pouches in their mandibles, rummaging to hand over every core they could afford to part with.

“The caste is grateful for your generosity, sisters. These will be used well to support the rise of the next generation.”

“You’re more than welcome,” Columbant clacked her mandibles happily.

It felt good to support the growth of the caste. She herself had relied on donated cores to start practising her Skills.

Through the entrance, they were immediately amongst core shapers. Greetings were exchanged, brood mates warmly tapped, but they had a more important job to do before they could truly rest.

[There you go, Garg,] she told the big beetle, [go in and have a good sleep.]

Garg scuttled into her pen, a fresh meal of Biomass already waiting for her. Slither ducked into his own deeply shadowed chamber while Rist found comfort in his heated, rocky rest-area.

Seeing the three of them settled brought a smile to Columbant’s heart. They’d worked hard, all four of them. They would regroup and recover, plan and prepare, and then they would go out again.

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Chapter 1034: Election Season

“Congratulations,” Enid smiled down on the still recovering young woman.

“Thank you mayor,” Lilin replied, radiantly happy despite what she’d just been through.

“We’re very happy,” her husband Phillip said as he stared lovingly down at his wife.

“And how has the care you’ve received been?”

“Oh, just perfect,” Lilin said.

“We couldn’t be happier, mayor. Thank you,” Phillip said.

“That’s good. After the effort we put into building this place, I’m glad it’s all come together.”

[We told you it would be fine,] the on-rotation ant-medic said. [I still don’t understand why you doubted us in the first place. When is the Colony anything but first-rate?]

[I should have believed in you,] Enid admitted, [but even I wasn’t sure how well you would be able to run a maternity ward. You don’t know anything about human reproduction.]

[Bah,] the ant grouched, [our queens give birth hundreds of times every day. You think we can’t heal someone who has given birth only once? Don’t be ridiculous. Now get out of the way, I need to check the patient.]

Healers, medics and doctors always managed to be rude and ill-tempered. Even the non-human ones! In some ways, Enid took comfort knowing that this fact of life was even more universal than she’d thought.

The ant bustled forward, its head just barely high enough to see over the top of the bed Lilin rested in. Even if the eyes didn’t quite reach, the antennae certainly did. The recovering mother was lightly tapped and brushed by those curious feelers as Lilin’s eyes took on that slightly glazed expression of a person engaged in mind to mind conversation.

After a few moments, the antennae glowed brightly as they imparted a quick burst of healing mana to the patient.

Job done, the ant backed up and began to make her way out of the room.

[She'll be fine,] she said, [the baby has been cleaned up and checked. It will return to this room in one minute.]

And so it was, nestled in the mandibles of another healer ant. For a moment, Enid was forced to confront just how bizarre it was that she could see a genuine Dungeon monster skittering around with a newborn in its grip and feel absolutely no fear for the child. How strange. How marvellous.

[Here he is,] the new ant said cheerfully, and Enid could only assume it was a younger, less evolved healer. She hadn't had time to absorb the proper grumpiness expected of the caste.

Lilin's face lit up as her new baby boy returned to her arms. As Phillip leaned in to embrace them both, Enid brushed a tear from her eye. Such a touching scene, one that she would never tire of. How long had it been since she saw her own children? Too long. Goodness knows where they were now.

"Well, I will leave you to it. Congratulations again."

"Thank you, mayor," they replied and she smiled at them once more before she exited the room."

Who could have imagined they would have their own hospital? It was less than a year ago that they had fled the ruins of their homes, and already they thrived as they never had before.

She raised one hand to pat at the expertly cut stone walls before she exited the facility, doing her best to stay out of everyone's way. She stepped out into the streets of Renewal, and finding herself in a reflective mood, began to appreciate just how well built they were.

Wide and composed of perfectly formed stone, with deep drainage ditches along both sides, they were the sort of roads only the wealthiest lived on in Liria. This sort of mage-work was laborious, and expensive, which made it rare, at least, rare before the catastrophe. Every street in Renewal was formed this way, crafted by the carvers with exacting precision. Not only that, the layout of the town itself was a masterful stroke of planning and forward thinking.

The town council could take some credit for that, but even there, the influence of the Colony was felt. Traffic flowed so smoothly, it was rare to see someone waiting more than a few seconds at any particular junction.

She was engaged in conversation regularly as she made her way to her destination, the citizens pleased to see her and unafraid to approach and ask whatever questions were on their minds. She welcomed it. Where not long ago these exchanges were a never ending series of disasters as too few resources were divided amongst too many people, now that desperate edge was gone.

The people were comfortable. In fact, the people were *thriving*. Renewal had more than delivered upon its promise.

She found her way back to the council chambers in time, her own office situated in the same building. She walked behind her desk and sat with a weary sigh, her old bones creaking as she took the weight of them.

She kneaded her hands for a few minutes. They were so stiff these days, and healing magic didn't help at all. It wasn't possible to heal ageing, after all.

When they felt limber enough, she grabbed a pen and began to compose a letter. It wasn't overly long, but she carefully pondered each word, which dragged out the time. As it turned out, she finished just before the meeting was due to take place.

She debated taking the time to place it in an envelope and seal it, but decided against it. A waste of paper. Too inefficient, as the Colony would say.

She groaned as she heaved herself to her feet and made her way to the council chamber to find the others had already arrived, chatting amongst themselves.

It was interesting to note that the worried frowns and concerned whispers that so often marked these gatherings in the early days were gone, replaced with chuckles, back slapping and warm greetings.

"You're all here, that's fantastic," Enid greeted them, waving back those who came to speak with her. "If it's all the same with you, I'd like to jump straight to the business at hand. Unless there are any objections?"

There were none, so Enid sat at the head of the table and began to chair the gathering.

"Very well, let's get started. Mrs Hull, you're our minutes taker today?"

"Yes, mayor. Ready when you are."

"Wonderful. Thank you, dear."

She pulled out her letter and placed it on the table.

"I had the pleasure of witnessing a birth today. This child was conceived, carried and born in Renewal, the first of many, I hope. So it seems as good a time as any. I'm resigning my position as mayor, effective immediately."

She stood and stretched her back.

"Good luck with the rest," she said as she made her way to the door surrounded by stunned silence. "I need some tea."

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Chapter 1035: Election Season pt 2

"Are you sure you want to retire now? There's so much uncertainty around town right now," Terrence asked.

"Wherever there are people, there's uncertainty," Enid groused as she brought her tea to her lips for a drink. "Ah, that's lovely. Is this a new blend?"

"The Colony delivered a few bags yesterday. They said it was a test batch. I'll need you to fill in a survey when you're done."

“Hah,” she laughed. “I’ll be happy to. Drinking their tea has been one of the great pleasures of recent months.”

She picked up a biscuit and gave it a hearty nibble.

“And they bake so well. Who would have thought?”

“Mayor,” her secretary said sternly. “You haven’t answered my question. Are you sure you should retire now?”

“Of course I’m sure. If I wasn’t sure, I wouldn’t have done it,” she waved the man’s concerns away. “I’ve done everything I can for this place, more than I ever thought I could, but I’m old and tired. I don’t have much time left and I believe it’s important to turn these duties over to the younger folk while I’m still around to offer advice.”

She eyeballed Terrence over the edge of her cup.

“And by the way, aren’t you the mayor’s secretary?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you here? I’ve resigned.”

“I suppose I’ll have to take the tea with me then....”

“Nobody said you have to go that far!”

The two chuckled together.

“I’d like to say thank you for all that you’ve done then, Mayor Ruther.”

“Pish! Call me Enid.”

“Very well. What do you hope to do in your retirement then, Enid? Now that you’re free of all obligations?”

The old woman thought for a moment, a frown adding a few further wrinkles to her brow.

“I’d like to help in the hospital, for one. It’s a joy seeing new children brought into the world. Even if all I do is chat to the parents, I think I’d enjoy that. I wouldn’t mind one last trip into the Dungeon either. I haven’t seen the Queen for a while, I’d love to have a chat with her again. Anthony as well, though that might not be possible. Goodness knows how deep he is now. Too deep for my old bones, I’d say.”

“One last trip? You make it sound as if you’ve got one foot in the grave,” Terrence said. “Surely you aren’t as infirm as that.”

“I’m old, Terrence. Far too old to be running this place. I’ve done the best I can to get Renewal off to a good start, but it’s time for someone younger, with a little more vigour, to take on the role.”

She eyed him seriously.

“I’m perfectly happy being a secretary, thank you very much,” Terrence replied dryly. “I don’t have a way with people like you do.”

“Pish,” Enid scoffed, “if you put in a little effort, you’d do just fine.”

The two paused and sank into a companionable silence. Enid looked out the window, a soft smile on her face as she watched the people going about their days outside the window. She could never have imagined she would have the opportunity to make something good, this late in her life. The satisfaction in knowing that she had done the best job she could do, and the pride she felt seeing her fellow refugees rise to every challenge to make something remarkable, was something she never expected to feel at this age.

“Are you sure you’ll be able to go that deep into the Dungeon?” Terrence asked quietly. “To meet the Queen and Anthony? It’s dangerous down there.”

Enid looked pensive.

“It won’t be easy, but that doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing,” she huffed. “I’m old, not decrepit. As long as I take my time and adjust to the mana levels, I’ll be fine.”

Terrence nodded. The Colony were very good about helping people go up and down in the Dungeon. They had begun to build chambers with the sole purpose of helping people adjust to varying mana concentrations.

“What do you think is happening back in the council chamber?” Terrence mused, allowing his mind to wander.

Enid snorted.

“They’ll be running around like chickens with their heads cut off. But that’s fine, they’ll sort it out in the end.”

Back in the council rooms

“She can’t just quit!”

“This is a disaster!”

“Get that old woman back in here, right now!”

“Show a little respect!”

It was pandemonium, with fingers being pointed, shouting and a general feeling of bewilderment. Diplomant, the only Colony member in the room, watched it all happen with studious interest.

Such a fascinating lack of control. These boiling emotions demanded release and the normally professional and friendly members of the council had turned on each other to vent their frustrations.

Unthinkable amongst the Colony. Very few ants were so forward with their feelings, and none would let them get in the way of work. She would be fascinated to see how the rest of this conversation played out.

“Would all of you SHUT UP!”

A meaty fist crashed down on the table, cutting through the noise and drawing eyes to Mr Durn, owner of said fist.

“Good,” he growled before jabbing a finger at the individuals around the table. “The mayor is allowed to resign. Of course she is! Enid Ruther has worked herself to the bone for this place, and I’ll be damned before I let anyone take away her chance to rest and relax. If anyone in this place deserves it, it’s her.”

He glared and more than a few people wilted under that steady gaze.

“Well, what do we do now?” Mrs Blindon asked. “We’ve only ever had one mayor. Enid wasn’t technically elected, even, nobody ran against her!”

“Well that’s it then,” Mr Durn stated, “we need to make an announcement about the mayor’s retirement, and give notice that there will be a new mayoral election. If anyone wants the job, they’ll have a week to secure a nomination.”

“Isn’t that too short?”

“We’ve got a thousand projects on the go right now. We need to establish a leader as quickly as we can, otherwise things will go to pot. Any objections?”

There were none. One foreleg rose into the air.

“Diplomant would like someone to explain the concept of an ‘election’,” the translator standing next to the ant said. “She is most curious about it.”

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Chapter 1036: Election Season pt 3

“Thank you for everything, mayor.” A woman tearfully held Enid’s hand in a too-tight grip, looking down at the aged mayor.

“You’re more than welcome, dear,” Enid smiled, patting her on the shoulder and diplomatically freeing her hand. “What we achieved, we achieved together. No one person can take the credit.”

A few more words were exchanged and then she moved on, only to be stopped down the road by someone else who wanted to thank her for her service. It had been like this ever since her retirement had been officially announced by the council three days ago. Every time she stepped out her door, she was accosted by the people of Renewal who wanted to let her know how much she meant to them.

[This must be confusing for you,] she said to Diplomant, who accompanied her, [this outpouring of gratitude to someone who no longer wants to work.]

The ant skittered along at her side, antennae waving slowly.

[There are several concepts at play that are not wholly understood by us. As creatures of the Dungeon, formed of mana, we do not age, so the idea of ‘retirement’ is not one that we think about. I can see how one might want to indulge in a ‘well-earned rest’, as their capacity to work diminishes. The gratitude of the people is also heartwarming to see. They deeply appreciate the work you have done, and so thank you for it.]

[You've grasped it quite well,] Enid mused. [We humans eventually slow down and run out of steam, unlike you monsters. Usually, once we can't do as good a job as we could do before, we stop working, and our families take care of us until we die.]

[There are several points I don't understand in what you said. Firstly, I do not believe that your work has suffered at all. The town is thriving, the people are happy and the decisions you have made benefited all. The Colony has learned much by closely observing your performance as an administrator.]

[That's awfully kind of you to say. If I were to be specific, then I would say that I don't believe my performance has declined yet, but that it soon will, so I wish to remove myself before that happens.]

[Very well then. Secondly, you say that old humans depend on their families to care for them? I was unaware that you had family in the area.]

[I don't,] Enid sighed, [not for a long time.]

[Then the Colony will care for you,] the ant said firmly. [You have contributed much and we would celebrate that.]

The old woman felt genuinely touched.

[I thank you,] she said with a smile. [That is most kind. I will trouble your hospitality then.]

"Mayor Ruther! Mayor Ruther!" A breathless young man ran up to her.

She scowled.

"Matthew Porl, I'm not the mayor anymore, just call me Enid."

"You remember my name?" he blinked.

"I'm old, not senile," she grouched. "What do you want? You ran over here like a crazy person."

"I wanted to know who to vote for," he said, "I mean, who *you* think I should vote for. I'm having trouble deciding."

Enid gaped at him.

"Don't ask me! You're supposed to work it out for yourself. There's no right or wrong answer, you pick the person you think will do the best job."

Mayoral elections weren't anything new to people born of the frontier. The country might reside in the hands of the monarchy, and the titles in the hands of the nobility, but at the local level, it was normal to have a commoner step in to do the actual work.

[Are you even aware of who the candidates are?] Diplomant asked her, after a pause to have the conversation translated.

[Not especially,] Enid replied. [I haven't been keeping track of it on purpose, it's not my business anymore.]

She turned back to young Matthew.

“Do you know who is running? Have you informed yourself at least that much?”

“Of course!” he exclaimed. “The nominations aren’t closed yet, but most of the big names are already in the mix.”

[Ask him to elaborate,] Diplomat said, [I should like to know more of this process from his point of view.]

[Fine,] Enid rolled her eyes.

“Well now, there’s a lot to say already,” Matthew scratched his cheek as he pondered where to start. “The Followers of The Great One and the Ant Path have a lot of sway in town, obviously, and there were rumblings that Priest Beyn would be put forward as a candidate, but a representative stated he was too busy and that nobody with a position in the Church could take up authority in the town.”

Enid nodded. That was something they had agreed on early in the town’s history. She had great respect for the work Beyn’s people did, but there needed to be delineation between the roles. The Church would do what a Church should do, and the Town Council would do the rest.

“Head of the Farmer’s Association, Bill Knightly, has put himself forward, running on an unsurprisingly pro-agriculture platform,” Matthew went on. “He won’t win, though, because he’s demanding that the ants get more involved in harvesting crops.”

[Why is that a bad thing?] Diplomat wondered. [We will help when asked.]

“The public doesn’t like it when someone makes demands of the Colony,” Matthew replied when Enid passed on the query. “Asking them for help is one thing, but making it public policy is quite another.”

Enid had always included a line about “reaching out” to the Colony in her proposals, but never depended on them coming through. The people of Renewal loved the ants, but didn’t want to be a burden to them.

“Mr Durn is making a strong run,” Matthew went on. “He’s already announced his own preferences for council seats and they are a diverse and competent group, even including a few others who have announced their candidacy. He has a lot of trust amongst the people, since he worked closely with the previous... with you, Enid, and has a strong financial position, given his business success.”

Mr Rothen Durn had been a trader, from further north, before the wave. He’d had contacts and assets in still standing kingdoms and older empires, but had chosen to come here with the other survivors. He was competent and brooked no nonsense.

“There is a general upswell of momentum for another candidate, but it lacks a central figure to push forward,” Matthew said.

Enid frowned.

“And how can that be?”

“There’s a large group of people who would vote for a candidate put forward by the Colony, without question. Except nobody has been able to convince an ant to run.”

He and Enid both looked at Diplomant.

[We aren't interested,] the ant waved an antenna when she understood the problem. [We are still feeling out exactly how involved we should be in territories that we work with, or those we absorb, but generally, we feel that direct control is not the best practice. Even if we gain it through electoral means.]

"That's a shame," Matthew sighed, "that movement was just starting to get organised. They even named their group."

"What did they call it?"

"The Colonisers."

Enid made a face. Then brushed it aside. She looked at Matthew Porl with new eyes.

"You are actually remarkably well informed on the matter, aren't you?"

The young man grinned and patted himself on the chest.

"I take this seriously, you know? It's important for Renewal, and the town is important to all of us. I'm so worried about making the wrong choice, it's keeping me up at night."

"Why don't you come with me, young man, we should have a conversation. Tell me, how much do you know about the printing business?"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1037: Election Season Final

"Support might be weakening for the Labourer candidate after his new policy proposal landed flat yesterday. People weren't happy with the idea of using the ants as farm animals. Unsurprising. This is interesting: apparently, there's been a late surge by a new group," Enid mused as she read over the pamphlet that had been delivered that morning.

"I cannot believe how quickly you got that organised," Terrence muttered as he poured tea for the two of them. "Where did you even source the ink?"

"The Colony was able to facilitate a trade with one of the underground cities that they manage. The whole thing was above board."

"And your enchanted printing press? I suppose you purchased that for the market price?"

Enid had the grace to look abashed.

"I have to admit, I didn't expect something like that to appear. The ants were curious about the concept of mass printing, and I told them how I believed it was done. I could hardly expect they'd drop a completely finished press on the doorstep *two days later*."

"You did have a rather amusing expression on your face, as I recall."

"Oh hush and pass the tea. Thank you."

"The real question is if they'll be able to adapt the technology to mass print their scent writing. If so, then they'll be able to produce books, libraries, and whole repositories of knowledge."

“A golden age of ant information sharing?” Enid said. “Come to think of it, this could be the perfect time for them to take up such technology. They’re getting more and more spread out as they expand, pretty soon, a crafter on one side of the Colony will never meet one on the other. Being able to share information will be critical.”

“And you just happened to introduce them to the idea right when they might need it,” Terrence rolled his eyes.

“Not everything I do is part of some grand scheme,” the old woman huffed as she sipped from her fine cup. “Sometimes it’s just an accident.”

“Fine.”

The two sat in companionable silence for a time, enjoying their drinks and the warm air that wafted in through the open window. It had been five days since Enid had first pitched the idea to young Matthew about putting out some writing about the election. It was important to educate the people on what was happening, and he’d been just the person to get the ball rolling. She hadn’t expected it to blow up as quickly as it had.

Already, he was doing limited, daily runs of short pamphlets detailing the goings on around town and the election. Likely, the pace would slow down once they had a new mayor, but already, Enid was seeing some return on her initial investment.

She’d never expected to be a printing mogul in retiring years. Oh well, something to take up the time.

“So who is making a late surge then?” Terrence finally asked.

“The Well Rested Alliance,” Enid replied.

“I can probably guess their platform.”

“It may have something to do with the number eight.”

“I figured. People are already terrified to miss out on sleep! Renewal is already the most rested place I’ve ever seen! Even the tavern closes early. What further policies can they possibly enact? We already have kidnappings for goodness’ sake!”

Enid eyed her former secretary over the edge of her cup.

“That’s dangerous talk,” she warned him. “They’ll come for you if you aren’t careful.”

“And do what? Read me a lullaby?”

The only way to experience the true terror of the sleep police was to fall into their shadowy clutches. It wasn’t even what they did, that was downright helpful, it was their unnerving and uncanny ability to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

“In truth,” she returned to their earlier topic, “the Well Rested Alliance is not interested in forcing people to sleep eight hours a day.”

Terrence raised his brows in surprise.

“They aren’t?”

“No.” She sipped her tea. “They want to make it nine.”

“Path’s mercy,” he groaned.

Enid laughed.

“That way, they can be even more certain that the proper number of eight has been achieved. They worry about ‘sevens’, people who are getting seven hours and fifty-something minutes.”

“How dreadful.”

“One does have to admit that general productivity is up, violence is down and people are far more pleasant to be around since this was enforced. I’m not saying ten minutes either way makes a difference,” she held her hands up at Terrence’s irritated glare. “I’m just saying I can understand why they’ve latched onto this particular aspect of ant-culture, it has measurable benefits. They have other proposals as well.”

“Such as what?”

“A lot of stuff about ensuring sleep quality is as high as possible. Under their plan, better quality mattresses, pillows and blankets would be provided by the council to every citizen. They also intend to form a blanket collective, which will source volunteers to help make blankets that will be shared out amongst the populace. Since so many people are sitting in bed when they wake up early, there’s already an underground quilting community out there, this will suit them just fine.”

“Oh, no. They’re going to win, aren’t they?” Terrence sounded horrified. “Who’s the candidate?”

Enid checked her pamphlet again.

“Mr McRanith.”

“WHAT?!” Terrence slammed a hand down on the table. “Doesn’t he sell bedding? Is he trying to send himself out of business?” His eyes narrowed. “Or is he hoping to sell his own stock to the council at a markup?”

Enid grinned, and Terrence’s face sank.

“He’s promised to donate everything he has to the council, if elected,” she told him. “He already signed the documents and holds them up everytime he speaks in public.”

“You’re saying, he actually believes what he’s saying? He buys into this madness?”

“An honest politician,” Enid hummed.

“Great One save us,” Terrence could only shake his head.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1038: Sport of Queens pt 1

Peter looked out over the field and realised with a mild sense of surprise that his work for the day was done. The crops were watered and growing well, the weeding and pest control had been done. He eyed his fences askance, no, they were fine too.

He'd been a vegetable farmer for many years, but he couldn't remember a time when his work was actually *done*. That wasn't how farming *worked*. You spent the day slogging your guts out, elbow deep in filth, and you went home when it got too dark to work any longer and collapsed in a heap, most of your tasks left undone.

The middle-aged, grizzled man reached out a hand and gave his wooden fence a poke, almost as if he didn't believe it could be as solid as it looked. The pine betrayed him, barely moving as he nudged it.

All he could do was put his hands on his hips and sigh, looking up at the clear blue sky. Things were just so *efficient* now. The watering happened basically automatically, a complex syphoning system had been installed by the ants, an *enchanted* system. He barely understood the start of how it worked, but all he had to do to give his plants a drink was pull a lever.

Fence maintenance was a communal effort, the wood provided was far finer than what Peter's last house had been built from.

"Welcome home, dear," his wife, Renita, greeted him as the doorbell rang when he came through the entrance. "Back early again?"

Peter sighed again and kissed his wife on the cheek. She merely chuckled at his mood.

"You need to get yourself a hobby," she advised him patiently, for the hundredth time. "I don't think this free time is going to go away anytime soon."

He tried not to wince as she said 'free time'. He almost succeeded this time.

"I know," he said, "I'm just not used to it. I feel like I'm being lazy."

"Well we wouldn't want that," she chuckled.

He rolled his eyes.

"I'm going to go for a walk. See if I can clear my mind," he announced.

"That's a good idea, dearest. Grab a loaf if you pass by town."

He grunted. He hadn't planned on heading that far, but now he probably would. The best bread would be long gone by this hour, but he could find something worth chewing on, surely.

Another ring of the bell and off he went.

It was a pleasant afternoon, the sun was out, a light breeze blowing. The surroundings were picturesque. The well cut and beautifully made road cut a straight path through fields, some with budding crops, some with cattle or sheep. He waved to a few of his neighbours as he made his way slowly toward town, the giant anthill looming larger on the way.

The roads kept a wide enough berth around the enormous mound so that the regular folks such as himself wouldn't have ants getting in their way and vice-versa, but he was certainly close enough to see them at work.

There was quite a bit of activity on the surface today, which was a little unusual, groups of ants discussing together (the antennae wagging were always a dead giveaway) as they looked down on something happening beneath his line of sight.

Normally, Peter was more than happy to leave the Colony to its business. He was just a humble vegetable farmer, what did he know of Dungeons and monsters and goodness knows what else they got up to? Nothing, that's what.

But for some reason, curiosity took hold and directed him off the road, toward the hill and groups of ants clustered around something he couldn't see. He had no fear of the monsters. If they didn't want him poking around, they would let him know and that would be that, but as he grew closer, he found none were in a hurry to move him on.

Instead, he was able to walk straight up to them and found himself looking down into a pit, possibly ten metres deep, a hundred long and fifty wide. The dirt in the bottom was hopelessly churned, and as he watched, a pair of smaller ants, mages he guessed, were moving around smoothing it out whilst, at either end of the pit, two teams of ants were discussing amongst themselves. Vigorous antennae slapping occurred at both ends, which indicated the conversations were rather lively.

After a few minutes, the two groups descended into the pit, a hundred metres between them, and took up their positions. He noticed a few things at that moment. The groups were made up of different types of ants, for starters. Smaller mages, larger soldiers, mid-sized scouts and generals. There were ten on either side, and interestingly, one group was carrying a rock or stone of some type.

Obviously, this was a training exercise of some type, a drill of some kind to practise a particular Skill or scenario the ants had dreamed up. For some reason, however, Peter felt he wanted to see what happened.

The signal to begin was invisible to him, but clearly not to the two teams. The twenty monsters exploded into motion, lunging forward as they raced towards each other. The mages hung back initially, but soon the ground began to boil beneath them as ramps, tunnels and walls of pure stone began to erect themselves.

On the front lines, the soldiers crashed into each other with tremendous force, straining to shift each other as they grappled with mandibles. The faster scouts tracked each other as they raced along the sides, darting left and right with blinding speed. They used the walls for cover, ran upside down on the ramps and slopes or even on the side of the pit as they tried to position themselves to best advantage and slip past their opponents.

It was chaos, but organised chaos. It took a little while, but gradually Peter was able to work out what was happening. The team with the rock was trying to move it to the other side of the pit, while the other group was trying to stop them.

Exactly what combat scenario this fit, he had no idea, but he found himself gripped by the spectacle as the two teams battled with grit and guile to achieve their objectives. This particular round ended when a

mage managed to catch an opposing soldier by surprise, shifting the ground beneath her, causing a stumble. The soldier wrestling with her didn't miss her chance, lunging and twisting, levering her foe out of centre position.

Like lightning, a scout launched into the gap, cut through the lines which hadn't been able to adjust in time, and reached the end of the pit.

Peter burst out into applause.

The two teams turned to look at him for a long moment, until he felt self-conscious and stopped. They regrouped on either end of the pit, discussing amongst themselves once more.

The farmer realised they showed every sign of going again, so he settled down and sat, strangely eager to watch it all happen again.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1039.2: Sport of Queens part 2

"I'll see you later, darling," Peter called.

"Enjoy your walk, dearest," his wife replied, amused.

He'd managed to get through his work in record time today. The tomatoes were ripening, so he'd made sure to give them the attention they deserved, but he couldn't remember a time he'd worked with such purpose and efficiency.

He'd even got a Level out of it. He now had access to [Master Plant Tending (IV)]. His crops would be more vibrant than ever.

"Pete, nice to see you," a voice called as he reached the road.

The farmer turned.

"Herrick, good to see you. Finished early today?"

The other man laughed.

"Oh you know, just wanting to get a breath of this fresh air," Herrick winked.

The two joked back and forth along the road and soon were joined by others making their way out of the fields.

"Tomas, how's the potatoes this year?"

"They're bleedin' potatoes. They're always fine."

"Andis! How's the wife?"

"She's well, Pete."

Soon enough, there were a dozen dusty-looking farmers walking down the road to Renewal. Certainly an unusual sight, not just at this time of year, but at any time. These gentlemen rarely left their farms, at all, let alone early.

They joked back and forth as they walked briskly along the road. Soon enough, they approached the anthill and the group turned and stepped off the road as a unit. With unerring precision, the men found themselves walking toward the pit where the ants had been so diligently working through their exercise for the past several days.

Shortly, they arrived and began to settle in. Andis opened the bag he had packed and handed out cups and beer, Tomas reached into his jacket to reveal a rolled parcel that contained cured meat. Each of the farmers had brought something and they stood together in a loose group, eating and drinking as they turned their eyes to the pit.

“Who’s in today? Anyone recognise the groups?”

“The left group is the Pink Blitz. You can tell because the soldier has that distinctive colour on her carapace. Some sort of healing mutation, I think.”

“The Pink Blitz?”

“I’m not good with names.”

“Alright. What about the other team?”

“The Burrowers. If you check the mandibles, you can see they have that scoop shape for dirt moving. I call this team the Burrowers.”

“Right. Who’s got the formsheet?”

“I’m on it,” Pete said. He already had pen and paper in hand as he scratched out a new line:

Pink Blitz v Burrowers (o)

It was important to indicate which team was the offence. Sometimes, the ants would swap between the two sides, but more often, one team would work on their attack while the other focused on defence.

“What are your thoughts, chaps? Anyone willing to make a prediction?”

The two ant teams were between rounds right now, tapping and slapping at each other as they discussed whatever it was that they talked about.

Andis rubbed a hand across his grizzled chin.

“The Burrowers are a great defensive team,” he pronounced. “I saw them yesterday against the Boulders and they didn’t give an inch. They can shift dirt like nobody’s business and cause all sorts of problems. On the offence, though? I’m not sure their strengths will be as effective.”

“Could be an interesting matchup then,” Tomas chipped in. “The Blitz are a quick, attacking team. They’ve got speed and skill and they hate standing still.”

“Looks like they’re ready to go,” Peter noted. “Predictions in now, or they don’t count.”

The men went around, one by one, and gave their predicted score for the next ten rounds. Naturally, they didn’t always get ten rounds from the two groups competing when they turned up, but it was the maximum number they could stay for.

When the match itself started, the atmosphere around the men changed. No longer as jovial or joking, an intense air of focus had descended as they watched the action unfold.

The earlier assessments proved to be correct. The Burrowers, as the offensive team, had to bring the rock from one side of the pit to the other in order to succeed in the exercise, while the Pink Blitz were tasked with preventing them. A solid defensive team, the Burrowers were less comfortable on the attack and it showed.

The moment the match started, the Blitz rocketed forward, legs ablur as they rushed to the opponent. For their part, the Burrowers seemed to have predicted the move. Rather than compete on speed, they pulled into a tight formation and began to build a fort-like structure, the rock-carrier well protected in the centre.

The Blitz ranged around the outside of this brick, picking and poking, looking for weaknesses or trying to bait out a mistake, but the Burrowers held their ground and began to grind forward, the earth itself shifting forward along with them.

“Moving castle strategy,” Peter grunted, “not bad.”

The rest of the men nodded and grunted in reply as they continued to observe the action.

The Blitz were relentless, harrying the sides of the formation, rushing forward in pairs, or threes, as their mages tried to wrench gaps in the walls of the castle. The Burrowers managed to hold firm, though it wasn't easy. Several times, they nearly allowed an ant to break through their lines, but they held on.

That is, until halfway across the pit.

No longer willing to allow the Burrowers to advance at their own pace, the Blitz decided to contest them head on.

Two huge soldiers lowered their heads and charged, causing each of the farmers to lean forward, eyes widening.

BOOM!

The front lines clashed head-on with a thunderous meeting of chitin and stone.

“Hooooo!” the farmers roared.

The soldiers from the Blitz side dug in their legs and pushed, mandibles gnawing as they tried to break through. On the other side of the moving wall, the Burrower soldiers held firm, their bulk reinforcing the wall.

Desperate to back up their offensive, the rest of the Blitz rushed to support their soldiers. A full head-on assault against the Burrower castle ensued, ants on ants as the earth churned and both sides sought the advantage.

Just when it seemed like neither side had the advantage, a lone scout lunged from the Burrower castle, rock held firm in her mandibles as she dashed for the end of the pit.

The farmers leapt forward, hollering wildly as the Blitz tried to respond in time. Only one managed to disengage quickly enough, rushing back at absurd speeds. She lunged, mandibles wide, hoping to catch the rock-carrier before the line!

But she didn't make it! Despite being grabbed, the Burrower managed to touch the edge of the pit with the rock, if only by the barest of margins.

The farmers went wild, applauding and cheering the bold and audacious play from the daring scout, and the heroic chase down that so nearly succeeded.

The ants merely looked up at them, curious for a moment, before they returned to their groups and climbed out of the pit for another wagging-conversation.

Peter marked the result on the sheet carefully before turning to the others.

"Thoughts on the match?"

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1040: Sport of Queens Final

Peter and the steadily growing audience of farmers continued to become more invested in watching the Colony members compete in this strange activity, showing up everyday to talk, laugh and spectate.

Even when the teams they had been following so closely moved on to other things and a new group came through, their passion wasn't dimmed. In fact, it was further inflamed. A new 'season', watching the 'players' grow from their hopeless first attempts and build their strategy and skills as they went, added a whole new dimension to the experience.

For Peter, he found himself enjoying those afternoons spent by the anthill more and more as time went past. So unexpected, so welcome. The longer it went on, the more he and the others wanted to invest themselves in this pastime. He and Andis had been in the process of building a more permanent and comfortable seating setup on the side of the pit when they were finally approached by a member of the Colony.

[What are you doing over there?]

The voice rang inside the old farmer's head and for a moment, he had no idea what had happened. He swung his head wildly, staring up at the sky to try and see where the voice was coming from. Only when he noticed a smallish ant down in the pit staring up at him did he realise what had happened.

Mind magic. One of the ants was speaking to him directly! A first for him.

[Uh,] he tried thinking, [can you hear me?]

[I can.]

The voice was definitely female, and faintly amused. He swallowed and did his best to answer properly.

[We are... my friend and I, that is, are trying to make some seating. So we can sit... I suppose... a bit more comfortably when we come to watch.]

[I can see that much for myself. I'm wondering why you come to watch at all.]

Well that was a question. Peter found himself flummoxed for a moment, but then decided to be perfectly honest.

[It's fun,] he said.

[Fun?] the ant replied, her antennae wagging in confusion. [Watching young ants going through their training exercises is fun?]

Again, there was a lot he could say, but he decided to just be honest.

[Yes.]

He nodded for emphasis.

[Why?]

Well now. With an invitation like that, he could no longer resist. He launched into a ten minute long diatribe on the wonderful viewing experience the 'training exercise' was. The powerful feelings of enjoyment from watching the ants learn and improve, the incredible expression of skill and ability, grit and determination that made a team a winning one. The tactical depth of the game was endless, the ability of the collective to work together bottomless, the capacity of an individual to create a winning play on their own, inspiring. When he finally ran out of words, the ant continued to stare up at him quietly for a moment.

[I see,] she replied.

[If I can,] he blurted, [could I ask what the purpose of this exercise is? And what's it called?]

[As you've noticed, this exercise is to develop the tactical ability of the groups, whilst giving them an environment to train and develop their Skills. The activity is simply a challenge that they must work together to solve, utilising everything they have at their disposal. By working against other groups, the challenge adapts to them and their approach, forcing them to continually seek improvement. My sisters and I have used this as part of the academy training for several months now, and we find it pays dividends down the line as the graduates are experienced working in diverse teams before they leave our care.]

[Your sisters?]

[The Brood Tenders.]

A brood tender? Here?! They were very rarely seen outside of the nests, as he understood it. He stood a little straighter and tried to find a more polite way to stand, giving up after a few moments of awkward fidgeting.

[We call it Tunnel Ball,] she said. [Though the name doesn't really matter.]

Tunnel Ball. It worked.

They continued to discuss the training and what the humans got from it, until eventually the ant bid him farewell and disappeared underground. He and Andis had finished up the work and gone home, only to reappear the next day to find everything had changed.

The small row of seats they had arranged were gone, their labour obliterated. In their place was a huge construction of tiered seating, with room for hundreds of spectators, most of which were full.

"There you are, darling!" a voice called.

Peter turned in slack-jawed shock to see his wife in the front row, with her best dress on and a broad grin on her face.

"I didn't know this was where you were disappearing to every day. I thought you were drinking at the tavern or something."

"Renita..." he said, "why are you here?"

"You didn't hear? I swear you and those men never listen to anything that goes on in the town. The invitation went out yesterday evening for people to come and watch an event. The whole town's been buzzing about it. There wasn't even seating for everyone who showed up, they're in the process of fixing that, I think."

She pointed over his shoulder and Peter turned to see a dozen or so ants climbing about on the other side of the pit. Moments later, stone began to take shape, seemingly out of thin air, as they began to build a mirrored seating arrangement on the other side of the pit.

"It's very exciting," Renita said, eyes sparkling, "the Colony never invites us to anything, I wonder what they have in store."

The farmer could only shake his head. What had that Brood Tender gone and done? And why so quickly? They really didn't work in half measures....

[There you are.]

He turned to see the ant from yesterday standing right behind him.

[Ah! I mean... hello.]

[I've been waiting for you to arrive. We need you to explain what is happening here today to the audience.]

[What?] he said stupidly.

But it was too late, he had already been dragged away to a small platform situated on one corner of the pit with a beautiful view overlooking the field.

[Talk into this stone here, it's enchanted to amplify your voice. Wait until everyone is seated and then we can begin.]

[What is happening?] he blurted out.

The ant wagged her antennae in amusement.

[We are often confused about ways to reach out and build connections with the non-monsters we live alongside. When you explained what you had been doing yesterday, it seemed like the perfect

opportunity to involve the community more with the Colony. Right, wait a few minutes and then we'll start.]

She patted him on the shoulder.

[You'll do fine,] she said.

He found that strangely encouraging, then realised it probably had something to do with her specialised nature as a teacher. The old farmer sweated it out for a few long minutes until he received the signal. It had only taken that long to construct the simple seating and get the rest of the audience in place, all dressed in their finest clothing and chatting excitedly.

"Ahem. Welcome," he started.

All eyes turned on him. He froze. Then swallowed and continued. He explained how he had stumbled on the ants training one day, and how interesting he had found it, how exciting and enjoyable an experience it had been. He quickly explained the rules of Tunnel Ball, particular things to watch out for, and then it started. Two teams of ants came out under the watchful eyes of over a thousand people. They didn't seem to care, though, going into their little huddles before the start of play.

Peter continued to talk as things wound into gear. Once he started to describe the intricacies of his newfound passion, the words came easily. The crowd listened as he explained what was happening and they watched, enraptured, as the ants slapped each other back and forth, discussing their approach, then waited with bated breath as the two teams made their way down into the pit.

He experienced a brief moment of pure panic as he considered that the audience might not find it as interesting as he and his friends did. Suddenly, it seemed a little ridiculous that he would gain such enjoyment from watching monster ants run around with a rock in their mandibles.

He needn't have worried.

When the team on the right scored with an impressive run from a speedy little ant who dove *under* a looming soldier to make the play, the crowd erupted in rapturous applause.

Renewal would never be the same again.