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Chapter 271: Back from patrol 2

"Then we were fighting theshe monsters and they are like freaking shombies, I'm tellin' you. No matter what I hit them with they just don't shtay down. Finally I burn the shtoopid thing so much it falsh down and this ugly ass bug breaksh out of iz back and jush crawlish off!"

"Donnelan, I think you've had enough. I can't understand what on earth you're saying."

"I'm..... FINE!"

"You are not fine, you've been trying to drink out of the bowl of nuts for the last fifteen minutes!"

"... Maybe I'sh had enough."

"I thought you mage types were supposed to be smart. You had enough an hour ago you moron. You're juicier than a fiddler at festival time. I bet you can't even walk."

Donnelan's eyes go blank for a moment as he sways from side to side, testing his balance.

"Yous right!" he declared. "I cantsh walk."

Mirryn grunted with irritation. She'd been happy to join in and have a few drinks but she was quick to realise that the spirits they brewed down here were several levels more intense than anything they'd drunk on the surface. So she'd slowed down her pace, enjoyed the convivial atmosphere and watched the various races and social grouping here in Railleh mixing within the venue.

Donnelan had just wrecked himself and complained.

"Is he going to make it home?" rumbled the barkeep as he approached.

The enormous Golgarin male had kept a watchful eye on his business all night but hadn't had to flex his size on anyone, something that Mirryn was quite grateful for. Easily seven feet tall and quite literally looking as if he'd been carved from a mountainside, the man looked as if he could crush two human heads in one of his massive palms.

Mirryn had heard that the Golgarin weren't actually made of stone, just that their skin was so dense and, combined with the greyish texture, gave the appearance of rock.

"I'll give him a shoulder" she assured him, "he'll be okay."

The barkeep grunted and stomped to the other side of the bar, ready to serve another customer who was prepared to continue deep into the morning.

"Come on Donnelan, up you get" Mirryn urged, grabbing her friend by the shoulder.

"Ey! Eashy!" he mumbled as he staggered to his feet.

An hour later Mirryn walked out of Donnelan's room in the barracks, loud snoring rumbling out the doorway already. The moron had staggered and stumbled each and every step, not to mention a few

stops on the way to expel the worst of his drinks, causing the journey to take four times as long as it should've. The second she'd thrown him at his bunk, he'd been out like a light.

"Big night?" a quiet voice found her from the dark corridor.

Turning to her left she found Tribune Aurillia approaching from the officers' quarters, further down this wing of the barracks. All of the Liria branch trainees who had been recently promoted, along with their officers had been bunked together in one wing of the barracks.

"Ah" Mirryn coughed awkwardly, "bigger for some than for others."

Aurillia laughed. "I'm not surprised. Young Donnelan always struggled to deal with stress. Considering how much has changed for him lately, this was only to be expected."

"Well, as you say, we've had our lives turned upside down. We don't even have a home on the surface anymore" Mirryn pointed out, a little bitterness leaking through. "It shouldn't shock anyone that some people can't cope."

Aurillia only nodded and walked towards the far younger woman, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"We have all lost our homes and family above. We can only hope and pray that some of them have survived and fled. Until the mana levels recede, our duty is to hold the Bulwark and prevent even greater destruction."

Mirryn shrugged her officers hand off and turned to face her directly.

"And when exactly will that be? Ever since we've come down here we've been fighting. I've killed more monsters in the past two months than I've killed in all my life up to this point, and it isn't stopping. Even now the soldiers in the forts are fighting. No matter how much we fight it doesn't seem to matter. Are we even making a difference?"

"We are" Aurillia affirmed, no trace of doubt in her voice. "Every monster we kill is a threat that has been removed, every day we hold the Bulwark matters."

"Why though? Why is it so important that this part of the Dungeon be sealed off? Is this sort of thing normal for the Legion? Have we created pockets like this elsewhere?"

Aurillia closed her eyes for a moment before opening them and looking directly into the younger Legionary. Mirryn had always been strong. Not only had she taken to the Legions training exceptionally well, she had displayed a rare emotional strength. She'd been the rock of her training group and many who might have failed had passed by leaning on her for support.

In many ways she reminded Aurillia of herself when she was younger. This was a Legionary who would go far. Probably further than she herself had managed.

"What do you know about the Ancients?" she asked.

Mirryn blinked at the sudden change of topic.

"Not much? I mean, are you referring to the people before the Rending?"

"No" Aurillia shook her head, "I'm talking about the Ancients. The first monsters."

Mirryn's eyes narrowed and seeing it, Aurillia couldn't help but chuckle.

"All superstition isn't it? The first monsters who rose during the Rending and broke the world. Just a legend. The Church of the Path has worked hard to make people forget those old stories, and in some ways for a good reason."

The officer turned to place one hand on the wall of the barracks, feeling the solidity of the shaped stone. "There are members of the Legion who have gone to the Sixth Strata, hundreds of years ago, the only non-monstrous entities to ever descend that far. Did you know that? It nearly drove them mad but they came back and told us things we didn't dare to discount."

"What did they see?" Mirryn whispered.

That anyone had been able to descend that far was beyond her imagination. The mana down there would be so thick you could practically swim in it. Just what sort of monsters live down there?

"There are nineteen of the Ancients recorded in the old texts. Nineteen. The Legionaries who descended that far came back with confirmation of three of them. Enormous creatures of fathomless power. More like Gods than monsters. When they returned the Legion turned all of its resources to uncovering their secrets, learning whatever we could about these creatures. In time we discovered something we didn't expect."

Aurillia took her hand from the wall and brushed the grit on her uniform.

"The System wants another Ancient. As far as we know there have always been nineteen of them, but sometimes powerful monsters are called to descend. We aren't sure how, or what happens when they get there, but we don't want to find out. The Legion and other forces have shared knowledge and resources to prevent another Ancient from being created."

"Garralosh" Mirryn stated.

Aurillia nodded. "That fat Croc got the call a long time ago. The Dungeon seers can sense it somehow, when the Dungeon reaches out and calls a monster. The second the call went out, the Legion mobilised to lock this region up. We haven't been able to kill Garralosh, she's wily and tough as nails, but we've successfully prevented her from descending."

Mirryn shook her head, trying to take this new information in. One thought nagged at her and she had to ask.

"What's the big deal about the Ancients. If they do exist, they haven't appeared for thousands of years. Does it really matter if another monster joins them in the depths?"

"Maybe, maybe not" the older woman responded, "there are some who think like you, that it wouldn't make much difference, there are others who believe that when their number is complete they will rise again and trigger a second Rending. There are some who study the ancient writings who say that Pangera will end at the hands of twenty monsters. Who can say what is real or not? We simply protect, as best we can."

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Chapter 272: Triumph of training

Finally back!

In reality it probably didn't take that long, but leading these hatchlings around and making sure that they don't get themselves killed has been a royal pain in the global financial markets. Although they displayed surprising tactical acumen, organising themselves and operating as only a team of ants could, stamping out the remaining impulse towards sacrifice and martyrdom from their minds has proven to be difficult.

"It's the most efficient strategy" one of them protested to me at one stage.

THWACK!

"Efficient how?! Whilst having a decoy worker draw away the majority of the pack will allow the rest to engage the mature wolf hound in safer conditions, it's a suicide mission! One hatchling is no match for ten wolf hounds, even if they are cubs!"

The victim of my rage rubbed at their head with an antenna. "It's time efficient and makes use of the resources we have available to minimise losses!" they protested, "it's not the same as pointless self-sacrifice!"

"Time efficient is it?" I growled, "let's see about that."

I turned to the rest of the hatchlings. "Who volunteers for the suicide mission?"

Nineteen antennae went into the air. Turning back to the hatchling who had suggested the plan I found they had raised their antenna as well.

"So, how quickly and efficiently are you going to collectively decide who is going to go?"

The mastermind of the scheme looked a little dejected. "I see your point."

"No" I corrected them, "you are still only seeing part of it."

THWACK!

Using my antennae to bring down a vicious double barrelled thwack, I smack the workers head straight into the ground.

"You are STILL not measuring the weight of your lives correctly! The amassed experience and resources, the investment the colony has made in you, the potential work that you can achieve in the future! You would throw all of that away over one hunt?! It's not worth it, not even for one of you! AND ..." I spit, rounding on the rest of them, "with even a little thought, you could have made arrangements for the ant tasked with the diversion to survive!"

They all stare at me blankly. The thought hadn't even crossed their minds, I bet.

"Dig an escape tunnel for them to run to in advance, prepare a hiding place, use a pit trap, connect the tunnels so they can loop back, there are many options."

The menace in my voice caused quite a few hatchlings to break out in a cold sweat on the inside of their carapace, I've not doubt.

"For not even thinking of preserving your own lives, we will go ahead with the diversion plan, but I will take the role of the sacrificial diversion myself."

"No!"

"Dammit!"

"That should have been me!"

"Before this day is done I had planned to lay down my life gloriously and unselfishly!"

"Yeah that's right" I jeered at them, "no dangerous jobs for you, just the clean up!"

"Boo!" they roundly boo me for taking the 'glory' for myself.

Following that discussion I had the hatchlings re-evaluate their plan and take the time to prepare a way out for me, even though I didn't really need one. Following that extra preparation we executed the strategy flawlessly and the hunt was successful.

Despite having already evolved once, the hatchlings were able to rack up experience very quickly, with Tiny, Crinis and I defeating anything they couldn't handle and feeding them the last hits. With their stomach upgrades making it so that they suffered no Biomass penalties for their only evolution, they racked up the points and mutations quickly as well.

All in all it took only slightly longer than a full day of delving to get all the ants up to level ten. When I think about my own struggles in my early life and compare it to the silver spoon these chumps have been handed I can't help but feel a little bitter.

Suck it up Anthony! This is for a future of relaxation! If these guys can take care of the colony then you won't have to! Remember to play the long game!

When we finally trudge back into the nest, I get the ants to form up around me. I want to give them a little pep talk before the second evolution. This is a big step in their lives, after all.

"This is a big step in your lives. At this evolution you will be the first workers to select a caste that will determine the nature of your service to the colony. This is the system I designed to allow each individual to choose the path that they themselves believe is best suited to them. The drawback is that multiple specialisations are not really feasible. Because we start so weak as hatchlings, spreading our resources too thin is just too inefficient."

They all nod at that. Being efficient and getting the most out of every worker has been one of the lessons I've hammered into them the most.

"Think well on how you wish to contribute. Do you want to fight? Do you want to tend to the brood? Will you be our next Queen? Will you help craft and build in ways no ant has ever done before, or will you learn magic and assist the colony through spellcasting?"

I can see the thoughts turning over through the eyes of every hatchling before me. They are all burning to contribute to the colony, but unlike any ant who has come before them, they get to make a choice. Not some instinctual reflex either, but an actual reasoned, considered choice. I'm not worried that

they'll pick something they aren't suited to, these ants are nothing if not brutally honest with themselves.

"Consider your choice carefully and when you are ready you can begin your evolution. I don't have any particular rules for you this time around. You're smart enough to make your own decisions."

With that, I let them go.

[Crinis, Tiny. I'll get you to watch over them while they evolve please]

[Yes Master]

[Hrn]

With that taken care of... I'm gonna sleep!

I'm an absolute wreck. It may not seem like I've done anything stressful, and in reality, I haven't really, but my core is FREAKIN sore! I feel as if all of the bones I don't have inside my body are broken. Every step is painful. How have I managed to hold on this long? Sheer grit and determination. I will raise up these twenty hatchlings and then my time of rest shall come! Dreaming of not having to stress and worry about the fate of the colony has driven me this far, but I'm spent. If I don't rest and recuperate then I'm worried my core is just going to straight up shatter.

Thinking that I still have half a rare core to go my whole body shudders in despair. I'm already full! How the hell am I supposed to fit anymore in, I don't know. Claws crossed that my body will adapt to my larger than intended core.

I nestle into a corner of my chamber just as the hatchlings are beginning to do the same. After my nap, I may awake to see the fruits of all of this labour.

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Chapter 273: Naming the twenty

HAZZAT!

I'm up!

My mind sprung to alertness and the first thing I noticed was that the pain inside me had eased a minute amount. JOY! The pain was still intense, to be sure, I felt a like a giant roll of cracked toffee, but the simple fact that I could expect the pain to reduce over time was such a relief that I could weep except that I can't.

I stretched my legs gingerly, allowing the ache to settle into each of them in turn before looking around the room. The obvious thing to check on was the hatchlings. I wonder how their evolutions are progressing?

Oh Ho?! Looking good!

It would appear I didn't wake too late. The hatchlings are well into the evolution process, their sizes and forms changing to take on the different castes that they have selected. Tiny and Crinis are tip-toeing

amongst them, swatting monsters as they attempt to burst out and attack whatever is near them. I should have let them evolve above ground, now that I think of it. Ah well, my pets had it all in hand.

I can already make out the choices of a few of the ants, several of the casts look distinctly different after all. This mostly has to do with size. The soldiers put on a fair bit of size after their first evolution, not quite enough to match me in size but that's mainly because they increase the muscle density just as much as bulk and a fair chunk of energy is spent on defensive glands. They'll receive a regeneration gland as well as the inner carapace plating at this point, vastly increasing their survivability.

Others will take the leader path, giving over sheer size and defence for a bit more smarts and buffing auras to push their pure combat brethren to greater heights. For the soldiers there is also the scout path, smaller but faster, better able to stealth and with enhanced endurance and sensory organs, these ants will be the far ranging eyes and ears of the colony, their enhanced acid attacks will ensure they can contribute to any fight from range.

The specialised workers are certainly smaller, their energy going to enhanced minds and more delicate control of their extremities. These will be the workers who tend the brood, enhancing the growth of the hatchlings through aura effects and expediting their hatching, as well as the artisan caste who I hope will turn into the ant builders and shapers.

The Juvenile Queens, contrary to expectations, actually put on the most size, huge chunks of energy going to increasing their raw mass as well as laying the foundation for their egg production system. Even after this evolution they won't be able to produce young, having to wait one more evolution for their full capacity to come online. In the meantime they can support hunting expeditions with their bulk and healing mana glands.

Yeah I modelled them on the existing Queen, she's perfect, so why not?!

This does mean that any egg producing Queen will be difficult for the colony to produce, since they'll be tier four monsters, going all the way from hatchling, to juvenile worker, to juvenile Queen, to Young Queen. Just another reason why the Queen's must be protected at all costs!

Seeing the young ants begin to stir, my heart swells with pride. This has been a heck of a long project. The first seeds of this idea were planted after the first war of the hill, so long ago. Seeing the ants throwing their lives away so wastefully, I knew that if I could I would change that, give them the ability to reason and plan. Turns out I still had to thwack the suicidal impulses out of their heads but it'll be worth it in the end. Now the colony will grow and I won't have to worry about protecting the workers from themselves. Not as much, anyway.

The ants are waking up now, beginning to move themselves and adapt to their new bodies. I can see them curiously turning to examine the rest of their siblings, wondering what each ant picked. Looking at them I can see that they've almost perfectly distributed themselves across the roles I had envisioned. I'd be shocked if they hadn't coordinated themselves after looking at the menu. Sneaky little buggers.

"Gather around me young ones."

At the sound of my voice, the young ants turn towards me and drew closer.

"You have taken the first step and chosen the method by which you will grow the colony. Well done all of you. As a sign of my benediction, and in recognition of your status as the first of a new generation, I will give each of you a name."

I pause for dramatic effect.

"What's a name, Senior?"

Dammit.

They're ants. Of course they have no idea what a name is. They barely have a concept of what an individual is, why would they have any idea of names.

"A name is like a personal title that belongs only to you. It allows people to remember you and associate your actions to you, even without having seen or met you."

They still look confused. I guess it doesn't really matter if they understand it or not. I'm giving them names more for me than I am for them.

"Can the two Juvenile Queens step closer."

Yes indeed, not one, but two new Queens. One more evolution for these two and the egg production in the colony could triple. Not that the Queen is really running at full capacity right now, but as the workforce expands, the rate that food comes in will very quickly rise. Not to mention the aphid strategy.

The two ants before me now were very placid as hatchlings. Attentive and looking out for their siblings they were perfect to take on the mothering role of Queens.

"Hmm. As the prospective Queens of the colony, I shall give you suitably royal names. You will be known as Antionette, and you will be Victoriant."

The two Juvenile Queens are almost the same size as I am and other than looking mildly confused, they seem pleased enough and retreat to make room for the next ants.

"Can the Carver Ants come forward."

The specialised crafters, two of them, step forward. Not much larger than before but with enhanced minds and their front legs ending in the special articulate claws with an opposable digit that will be the calling card of their caste.

"As the future crafters and smiths of ant kind, I'll name you Cobalt, and you Tungstant."

Receiving their names the two ants make space for the next to be summoned.

"Core Shapers, step forward."

Two more Artisans step forward, small, quick and clever. These are the caste that will be dedicated to exploring the art of creating custom pets, seeking the heights achieved by the Sophos. The two ants move with an easy grace and confidence that can't help but influence my choice of name.

"I shall name you Ellie (sort for elegant) and you shall be Bella."

Receiving their names, the two Core Shapers step back smoothly.

"Can the two generals step forward."

The two ants who selected to become the leadership variety of the soldier caste step forward. Somewhat bulky but surrounded with empowering auras, these two give an air of determination and solidity.

"I shall name you Sloan, and you Victor."

Then it was time for the Brood Tenders.

"You will be known as Theresant, and you shall be Florence."

Next was the ant mages.

"Hmm. What sort of magic are you thinking of specialising in?" I say to the first one.

"Ice magic, Senior."

"Very well, you shall be Coolant. What about you?" I say to the second.

"Fire magic Senior."

"Understood. You shall be Propellant."

Next was the scouts.

"You will be Burke, and you shall be Wills."

Then the two healers.

"You shall be Mendant, and you shall be Frances."

Finally it was time for the two soldiers. Larger than all of their siblings but the Queens, looking potent and dangerous they stepped forward as a unit.

The first one I remember well. Constantly declaring that they would be dead before the day was done, it took a lot of effort to keep this one alive.

"Firstly, I shall call you Leeroy. Then you shall be Grant."

With that, my work is done.

"Go forth! Soon there will be another two hundred of you to take care of, then another two hundred after that. You'll be plenty busy! I'm going back to sleep."

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Chapter 274: The first council

The twenty young ants depart the chamber of the eldest in silence, allowing their Senior the rest and quiet that they seem to crave. They don't quite understand it, this desire for solitude and a reprieve from work, an unnatural concept for an ant, but due to the individual making the request, they respect it.

Without communicating they move as one, through the Queens chamber and towards the upper chambers. Now there are six hundred of their kind waiting to be born here, the Queen has been pushing herself towards full production as fast as possible and only yesterday another clutch was laid. It will be one day, maybe a little more, before the first wave of two hundred is born. There is much to do.

Filing into an unoccupied upper chamber, the twenty arranged themselves into a rough circle. They haven't planned or discussed this council, but by some instinct they knew it would occur. The mantle of leadership does not belong to any one ant, all members of the colony understand this, but the twenty, despite being so young, understood that after the eldest and the Senior known as Vibrant, they were the eldest of their race, thus they were expected to lead.

"Much to be done" the Carver known as Cobalt was the first speak.

"Indeed" several others answered.

The general Victor waved their antennae in a gesture of frustration. "The Eldest has many ideas, but the implementation has not been carried through."

"You speak of the farms?" Burke the scout asked.

Victor nodded. "I do. Their capacity is woefully inadequate."

Ellie the Core Shaper stepped forward to speak. "If the Queen is laying at full capacity then we can expect two hundred new hatchlings every few days. Currently, the colony is woefully underprepared to feed and groom that many workers, certainly not to the standards the eldest hopes for."

All twenty lowered their heads in contemplation. The eldest, the first and progenitor of their species, was something of a puzzle to them. As their Senior and indeed, the Eldest of their race, they revered and respected that individual as every member of the colony did, but they were frequently confused by them. Un antlike concepts and behaviour, such as the insistence on the nurture of each individual to the best of the colony's capacity, went against their instincts, even if they could intellectually understand the benefit.

Antionette spoke for herself and her fellow Juvenile Queen, Victoriant. "I believe we are all agreed that the farms must be dramatically expanded. At least double, perhaps as much as five times the size" she offered softly, "we must ensure that the young are able to grow without want."

The twenty all nodded. This was the first priority. The wave was a temporary phenomenon in theory, but whilst it persisted they could exploit it to harvest the Biomass and cores they would need to fuel the rapid expansion of the colony. The workforce required to hunt and acquire such an amount of food under normal circumstances did not exist at the moment, so exploiting the current circumstances made a lot of sense.

"Let us discuss the composition of the workforce moving forward" rumbled Grant, "I would like to hear your thoughts."

The Eldest had insisted that each worker be allowed to choose their own path, which the twenty acknowledged, but again didn't quite understand. Of course, each individual ant would choose whatever it was that the colony needed. They themselves had been quite conflicted upon being told they would need to decide for themselves what to evolve into. Only after a lengthy discussion had they decided that

what would best serve the colony was for a representative of each caste to be represented amongst them, thus allowing the ants to choose the caste that best suited their temperament without concern.

The new wave of hatchlings would be desperate to know what it was the colony required, and would then be overjoyed to evolve and fill that gap.

"We all know why you do not want to speak first" grunted Tungstant, "the colony needs soldiers more than anything else. We have pressing need for strength in combat, scouts and leaders in order to protect ourselves and increase our hunting efficiency."

"Indeed" seconded Theresant the Brood Keeper. "We also require more workers to tend to the brood. If we wish to ensure that the young are given the best start to life we can manage, security, sustenance and care in the larval form are required."

The twenty all nodded. This was reasonable, and also ran into the other problem that the Eldest had dropped on them unwittingly.

"Those of us from the specialist classes should begin to experiment and research skills as quickly as possible" Cobalt spoke their thoughts. "The Eldest has procured information from a source outside the colony but we should not trust that source implicitly. Each skill unlock and fusion combination needs to be tested. Not to mention" Cobalt continued wryly, "some castes do not have a clear purpose as of yet. We will need to discover it from scratch."

The others nodded. Exactly how the Cavers and Core Shapers were supposed to operate, what exactly they were intended to produce, was completely nebulous at present. Not understanding, with exacting precision, their purpose in the colony was unnatural and intolerable to the ants. It was unlikely they would rest for a moment until they were able to discern a function they could fill.

"I agree" Sloan pitched in, "we need to establish a complete map of all skill options, fusions and mutations as quickly as possible. For all castes. Peak efficiency is to be sought at all times."

How the eldest had blundered forward, choosing this and that with seemingly little thought to future possibilities and consequences, yet still managed to become the most powerful individual in the family, was faintly miraculous. The workers did not wish to take any chances, all things should be planned and mapped as much as possible.

"Now we come to most difficult question" Coolant the mage spoke solemnly.

All the ants fell still as they contemplated this, most serious issue.

"What exactly are we going to do with the Eldest?" Burke muttered.

The strangely puzzling, compelling and powerful progenitor of their race, followed loyally by the two guardians, each a powerhouse in their own right, represented a tremendous asset to the colony, but also a somewhat random and chaotic element.

For now it would appear that their Senior intended to ... rest. Surely after a time the Eldest would wish to continue to work for the colony and what should be done then? Should the Senior just do whatever it is that they wanted? Should the twenty make suggestions? As a potent asset to the colony, they certainly didn't want to see the Eldest pass away during a poorly thought out escapade in the Dungeon.

"We may need some time to consider this issue" Victoriant broke the silence. "I suggest that we rally the colony and commence work for the time being, let us reconvene just prior to the next wave of pupae hatching."

In silent agreement the twenty turned and rushed out into the bustle of the colony, dropping scent trails and gathering workers for the project they had in mind. It was going to get busy around here.

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Chapter 275: Purpose going forward

Knowledge of Demon societies of the Third Strata is limited, to put it mildly. I've no idea why you would contact me seeking such knowledge, it's hardly my area of expertise! I suppose it is true that my academy has amassed the most records regarding deep delves of the Dungeon, but that doesn't mean I've had the opportunity to read them all!

Honestly Ranlon, I don't know why you waste your time in that third rate college of yours. A scholar with your pedigree would be more than welcome here at the tower. I know of your distaste for 'petty nobility and their feckless children', as you have put it, but surely you must be feeling the pinch, rolling around in the dirt with those commoners.

As far as Demons and their ilk, I have managed to scrounge up a few records for you. Only a few groups have ever admitted to making contact with the Demon clans, the Legion, a few Mercenary companies of renown and several of the old empires. All of their public statements on the matter agree that the Demons were cordial, did not attack and allowed them to leave in peace, but in every other way they were detestable. Trickery, lies, deception and entanglement supposedly come as second nature to the Demon clans, making any negotiation with them a tangled nightmare.

A few successful trades have been reported, but those were only secured after shrewd bargaining and open threats of violence and retaliation from both sides.

Everyone knows that the different clans differ vastly from one another and that the wild 'beast demons' infest the tunnels of the third strata, but specifics are just impossible to find. I've put the word out that if a text should be unearthed from the archive with pertinent information to have it brought to my attention but that is the best I can do for the moment.

Do consider my offer Ranlon, I'd hate to see a mind so bright rot away for such paltry people.

Excerpt from 'Letter to Ranlon' by Magio Scholar Barrentalio of the Gold Tower.

Tiny, Crinis and I eventually retreated to a higher chamber and settled in for some rest time. I was vaguely aware of the immense amount of activity throughout the colony but so long as there was no attack or dire need of me I intended to let my aching body rest up.

And rest I did! For an entire day I did nothing but flop about, dip in and out of torpor and complain endlessly within my own mind about my aching core. Perhaps it was a little sad, pathetic even, but dammit, a little self-indulgent whining never hurt anyone! Well it probably has to be honest.

After another full day of rest the pain in my body had once again been reduced ever so slightly and I decided I'd had enough sitting around on my backside. Even Tiny looks like he might pass out from sheer boredom if we don't go and fight something soon. Emerging from our chamber the frenetic atmosphere

that has pervaded the colony hits me right in the face. Workers are rushing around with mandible loads of dirt, carting it to the surface for disposal and then rushing back down into the depths of the colony. What is going on?

Fighting against the flow of traffic I push my way down into the nest and eventually run into the Carver Ant Tungstant.

"Hi there Tungstant! What is going on down there?"

The smaller ant turned towards me and responded somewhat tersely. "Finally emerged Senior? The hatching of the next wave of pupae is expected any moment and we are racing to finish the expansion project before they arrive."

"Expansion project?" I mutter, "what expansion project?"

"In order to cater for the increased number of hatchlings it was decided that the colony needed to expand, especially the farming operation. The need for Biomass, experience and cores is going to rise dramatically after all."

I suppose ... that makes sense.

"Seems like a good idea" I stutter, "anything for me to do? I'm happy to pitch in."

If there is work to be done, I'll roll my sleeves up and help out. What is family for, after all? I've had my fill of self-pity for the time being. Time to work and contribute to the colony!

"Not at the moment" Tungstant immediately cuts down my growing enthusiasm, "preparations are basically complete and the hatchlings are expected any moment. The others are in position to welcome them and commence their training. I'm expected there at the moment as well. If you'll excuse me Senior."

With a dip of his antennae, the Carver ant is off, zipping down another tunnel and heading towards the brood chambers, leaving me somewhat at a loss, standing in a tunnel like I have a stick lodged in my market square.

This feels strange.

After being the catalyst for most actions around the colony for so long, it's weird to wake up and find that not only have plans been made without me, they've been completed! The twenty have done exactly what I wanted them to do and take the lead for the colony without having to consult me, so why do I suddenly feel so empty!?

Overcome with a sense of loss, I rush to into the Queen's chamber and push aside the tending workers until I find her.

"Mother!" I cried, "am I still special?!?!?"

.....

The Queen looked at me, a mixture of amusement and surprise warring on her face.

"What on Pangera has gotten into you, child?" she asked, bewildered.

"The other ants are running the colony without me!"

The Queen looked even more baffled if anything. "Child, no single one of us 'runs' the colony. We are all members of the family and we each have our own role to play in helping us to thrive. You have done much already for the colony."

"Is that so?" I ask, wanting to be convinced.

"Of course" she affirms, "there are many things that only you can achieve to assist the colony. Do not worry if another worker is doing what you were once doing. Think instead about what it is that only you can do to help our family."

After speaking to the Queen I make my way back to my chamber, somewhat embarrassed by my outburst and reflecting on what it is that I should do now.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 276: Anthony sallies forth

My immediate goals have mostly been achieved. The twenty hatchlings of the new era have made a successful debut and with my teachings ringing in their ears and the ideal start to life that they've enjoyed they have already begun to lift the burden of leadership from my shoulders. Even if it does make me feel somewhat despondent, this is what I craved! The only question now is, what am I supposed to do with myself? I could work on grinding up my skills I suppose. Not to mention levelling up. I felt that levelling up assisted in reducing the burden on my core after I absorbed the first special core, so grabbing some experience would certainly help me.

Tiny and Crinis need to continue to increase their strength obviously, not to mention I could seek out my third pet. From what I understand, three pets will be the limit without purchasing skills to increase it and frankly, the investment of cores and Biomass would probably climb too high for me to justify the cost. I have to contribute resources into the colony now, I can't continue to hoard them all for myself. One more pet will be my limit. Hopefully I can find something good.

After all, it isn't as if the colony has no enemies. Those stupid Crocs have been quiet over the last few days, thankfully, and we haven't had to fight off any attacks lately, other the constant buzz of monsters battling away in the tunnels due to the concentrated mana. I don't doubt they'll be back, which means I'll need to be stronger in order to protect the colony.

Thinking further ahead, what if my family wants to expand further down into the Dungeon? Odds are they will. With potentially three Queens producing young at a ridiculous speed, there will be thousands of ants in the colony before too long. Tens of thousands even. With all of those mouths to feed, the colony will need more space, more Biomass, cores and other resources if we are to develop the thriving industries that I envisioned.

To expand down there I'll need to pave the way, to protect the colony and remove the threats before they become a problem. If we come across a new expanse I'll need to go in first in order to subdue them to minimise the risk to my siblings. I wouldn't want them to lose lives going in there and getting hurt!

Come to think of it, there's actually a ton of reasons for me to get stronger...

But how am I supposed to do that if I need to stay with the colony and protect it? They couldn't possibly survive without the protection of me and my pets! Actually, is that even true anymore?

There are the twenty hatchlings, each of them isn't super powerful but they can coordinate and organise the workers, each of whom is far more intelligent than they were before. Shortly, there is going to be hundreds more of them. With the colony getting stronger, and the village also getting stronger, more people have picked up classes and their levels are rising thanks to their frequent Dungeon excursions, I'm probably not needed to fend off the level of incursions we've been seeing so far. Especially since Morrelia is around to berserk her way through the hordes like a scythe.

That lady is scary.

So I guess, if the colony doesn't need me around all the time then I'm free to scuttle off and do some exploring and levelling with Tiny and Crinis? As long as I don't get too far away it should be fine, right? I should probably try and push towards the lands formally occupied by the Kingdom of Liria also. With a little luck I might be able to track down another of big momma crocs children who is no doubt behind the attacks that have been sent our way over the surface.

That settles it then! Time to go exploring for a while. I have some unfinished business down in the Marsh Expanse, may as well look into that first.

Just as I get my feet under me and prepare to depart a resounding shout began to echo throughout the colony as hundreds of individuals roared out in pheromonal language as loud as they could.

"MY LIFE FOR THE COLONY!"

"SACRIFICE FOR THE COLONY!"

"BEFORE THIS DAY IS DONE WE SHALL BE TORN ASUNDER FOR THE COLONY!"

Dammit Leeroy!

From the sounds of things the next two hundred hatchlings have emerged from their cocoons! How exciting!

[Come on Tiny, Crinis, let's go check it out. Then we might head down into the Dungeon for a while. It'll be nice to find something to fight.]

Tiny grunted in agreement.

[Fight. Good.]

Quite so.

After making our way through the nest the three of us emerge into one of the brood chambers. Inside we find hundreds of tiny hatchlings bustling about, continuing to shout and roar as the first twenty move between them, attempting to get them organised. After a few moments of cheerfully watching the high energy of these new hatchlings I begin to grow irritated by their slow response to the instructions of their Seniors.

"SHUT IT!" I snap at them.

By some miracle the hatchlings immediately cut off their racket, turning to face me along with the first twenty. Uh, I didn't expect to get all of this attention. Whilst I have it I may as well say something.

"To the new hatchlings, let me say welcome to our family. Now do as your told and crack in, the colony needs workers, not corpses! Listen to your seniors and work hard!"

"Yes Senior!" they shouted and begun to file their way out of the chamber under the watchful eye of the twenty.

"Thank you Senior" Tungstant approached me to say, "we underestimated how worked up the hatchlings would be upon hatching."

I could only laugh at that. "You don't remember what happened when you and your siblings hatched?" I asked him jokingly, causing the Carver ants antennae to droop with embarrassment.

"I'm sure you and your brood mates will do a fantastic job taking care of these hatchlings Tungstant. You've done good work preparing for them, it'll go well. I'm planning on taking Tiny and Crinis out for a bit of exploration and levelling. We won't be far away if you need us, I'll leave a trail for you."

"As you say Senior. We will look forward to your return."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 277: Delving once again

I briefly contemplated paying a visit to the village and checking in, I just don't know what I would say. I don't think I'd explain the changes in the colony, I'm not exactly sure how humans would react to the creation of this new species. Knowing the people in the village, their fervour for all things ant may only increase, an outcome I'd rather avoid. If they get even more fired up in their ant obsession I'll come back to find a temple or something in the middle of the village.

That's the last thing I need. It's already difficult to go into the village due to getting swarmed by people moments after I arrive, then the priest shows up and starts shouting to the heavens. It's a pain to say the least. If I didn't have Enid there to talk to I'm not sure that I'd bother communicating with them at all.

It'll be nice to actually get away from all, not feel pressured by time and obligations, just by the jaws and claws of the deformed beasts in the Dungeon attempting to rip my face off. The less stressful stuff. Tiny lumbered behind me as we began to make our way down into Queens chamber and further down into our own private chamber, currently occupied by a few monsters attempting to claw at each other.

Impatient and annoyed, Tiny smashes these monsters in a single backhand before squatting in place, waiting for me to give the go ahead to move further down the tunnel. The intense light down here hasn't changed for weeks. Compared to when I first arrived in the world, the illumination is intense, almost stinging my eyes. I'm looking forward to this stupid even coming to an end though. From what I understand, the waves are not supposed to last this long. A week, maybe two, then things start to die down and the accelerated spawn rates go back to normal, everything is gravy. It's been months with this wave! The extra Biomass is nice but I really want to be able to sleep peacefully underground again.

Ah well.

[Come over here for a second Tiny, I want to check your core.]

Rolling his eyes the bat faced lightning gorilla stomped over to me before plonking himself on the ground with a thud. Real graceful.

I feel like checking in on the progress of my pets every now and again is important since they haven't been the best at taking care of themselves. I might be driven into taking further pet based skills just to help manage these two. Tiny with his dim witted decision making and Crinis with her paralysing fear of failure have caused no shortage of issues. Play it safe and stay on top of the problem. That sounds like a good policy.

Bringing forth my antennae I access Tiny's core and sift through the information to piece together his status.

Name: Tiny

Level: 21 (core)

Might: 154

Toughness: 42

Cunning: 7

Will: 15

HP: 84/84

MP: 210/210

Skills: Expert Ape Boxing level 12; Severe Brutal Uppercut level 4; Enhanced Leap level 6; Advanced Heavy Smash level 3; Advanced Athletics level 5; Advanced Grappling level 3; Potent Crushing Blows level 9; Dazzling Fancy Feet level 4; Advanced Dash Level 5;

Mutations: Meteoric Enhanced musculature +15, Stone Bones +15; Starfall Legs +15; Shattering Sonic Enhancer +15; Hard Compressing Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +10, Hard Compressing Lightning Mana Affinity Gland +10, Hyper Rapid Energy Conversion Gland +10;

Species: Dire Lightning Storm Kong

Skill points: 17

Biomass: 104

Overall things are looking good for him. Lots of level ups, plenty of mutations. I think he's chosen to enhance his +5 mutation every single time he advances things to +10. Which means at +15 he only has the one option to deal with. Makes sense I suppose. Tiny likes to keep things simple, which suits his personality just fine.

I can't even be mad.

He's well on his way to the complete +15 which is excellent. He still has a fair chunk of Biomass packed away in the tank as well. He's probably just waiting until he upgrade at least two things at once to cut down on the time he has to spend in the menu.

[Good job Tiny, everything looks good! You're getting really strong!]

He nodded once at my praise.

[Tiny strong] he affirmed.

[Alright Crinis, your turn.]

[Ah! Are you sure, Master?]

[Yes.]

Before she can protest further I stretch my antennae back towards the small black sphere sitting on my back.

Name: Crinis

Level: 8 (core)

Might: 78

Toughness: 65

Cunning: 34

Will: 32

HP: 130/130

MP: 210/210

Skills: Expert Shadow Flesh Manipulation Level 1; Expert Grappling Level 1; Expert Shredding Level 6; Enhanced Tremor Sensing Level 6; Brutal Dismembering Level 5; Greater Fear Inspiration Level 3; Mana Shaping Level 9; Smooth Tentacle Walking Level 4;

Mutations: Dense Durable Shadow flesh +10; Rapid Disintegrating Void Maw +10; Vast Bottomless Dimensional Stomach +10; Empowered Dividing Tentacles +10; Sharpened Ripping barbs + 10; Pointed Macabre Teeth + 10; Wide Fine Mana Sensory Gland +10, Deep Shadow Magic Gland +5, Swift Shadow Flesh Generator +5

Species: Special Death Ball

Skill points: 14

Biomass: 54

This is looking impressive! Mana shaping already up to level nine? She must have been practicing diligently in her spare time to grind away at those levels. She'll be up to Mana Transformation in no time! If I keep slacking at practicing my spell casting then I'm going to look bad.

On the mutation front she's coming along nicely. Very nearly full at +10 across the board.

[You've been spending your points on your own! I'm very impressed Crinis!]

[T, thank you Master!]

She sounds as if a weight has been lifted off her tentacles. She must have been worried I'd criticise her choices, as usual. On the contrary, I think it looks like it's all making sense and that she's getting much stronger overall.

[How are you finding the Mana Sensing Gland Crinis? Is it helpful?]

[Ah! Yes it is! *ahem*. The gland has been very useful Master. I can detect mana sources nearby, even if they attempt to conceal themselves visually, it is much harder to hide their mana. I've improved it to be more sensitive and have a wider range.]

[Yes I saw that. Looks like it's working out well.]

With my inspection complete its time to depart. Grinding skills and consuming Biomass are the aims of this expedition, with a little scouting on the side. Intent on clearing out the Dungeon, we don't even bother to utilise the shortcut but instead plunge straight down the tunnel that connects to our chamber, threshing the monsters in our way like wheat.

Fingers crossed this helps me deal with my ache!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 278: Aphid association

Moving with some hesitation so as not to tax my aching body we advance down into the Dungeon, fulling in any gaps on my tunnel map as we go and earning me another level in that skill for my troubles. Unlike before we liberated the Marsh, the tunnels are filled with plants and beasts fighting their maddened little hearts out, tearing at each other as a near endless supply of them continues to rip out of the walls and throw themselves into the fray.

In other words, normal Dungeon behaviour. It's a little weird how normal this has all become. Ravenous creatures out of nightmares tearing out of the dirt that surrounds me, attempting to eat me sounds like a nightmare. After living here on Pangera for a few months, it's all beginning to feel a little blasé. I can't even muster up a sense of danger or excitement as Crinis and Tiny swat most of the monsters the moment they come close to us. I barely get enough time to try and utilise my mind magic to trick and deceive the enemy they last so little time. This isn't even useful for grinding!

I sighed.

We've become too evolved and too highly mutated to feel threatened up here at this level of the Dungeon. The reality is starting to sink in more and more that in order to gain power and strengthen myself for the purpose of protecting the colony then I'll need to go lower into the Dungeon. Which means leaving the colony for extended periods of time with Tiny and Crinis to hunt, something I'm not prepared to do until I'm certain that my family will be able to protect themselves from all threats. Thinking of Vibrant, the Queen, the twenty and all of my siblings coming to harm I can't help but feel tight and panicky in my thorax.

No harm will come to them! I'll work hard to make sure that it is so!

With the number of ants starting to climb rapidly, and those ants being more special than any species of ant that has come before, it won't be long until the colony becomes powerful in its own right. All we need is time.

Completing a clean out of the tunnels my pets and I continue to grind our skill as we take the long the long way down to the Marsh. Refreshingly, we don't encounter any of those filthy Croca Beasts. I've had quite enough of having to fight those punks.

By the time we reach the Marsh itself I'm tired, aching and more than a little irritable. In order to recover we unearth the shortcut and the three of us clean the place out and huddle inside for a little peace.

[So, Tiny. What do you think you'll evolve into next?] I ask my furry bat faced gorilla companion.

Tiny's eyes lose focus as he stares blankly into the air, considering my question.

[Gorilla] he stated finally, nodding with satisfaction at having arrived at such a definitive answer.

...

[Aren't you already a Gorilla?] I press him.

He frowns for a moment before his eyes widen with sudden understanding. He then proceeds to stare vaguely into the air again as he contemplates deeply.

After a minute he arrives at another answer.

[Bigger Gorilla] he declared with finality.

To be fair, he's probably right. Each evolution has made him more impressively powerful and yet, each time he also grows increasingly more dim. If this trend were continue through further evolutions we wouldn't be talking about dim any longer, the lights will go completely out!

I'm a little worried about Tiny. He's always been thicker than a concrete milkshake, it's a part of his personality and I've somewhat accepted that to some extent I'll always have to take care of a few things for him, but if he gets any worse after his next evolution I think I'll have to step in personally.

It will cause him immense emotional pain, I've no doubt about that, but he may have to sacrifice some of his impressive flexing capacity in order to ensure that his brain doesn't deflate like a popped balloon.

[How about you Crinis?] I turn my attention to my other pet, [What do you think you'll evolve into?]

[Don't you know, Master?] she asked, referring to the adjustments I'd made to her core before she had been reconstructed.

[Well, as it turns out there are a few options for you at the next evolution] I lower my voice menacingly at this point, [you will have to... MAKE A CHOICE!]

[A few tentacles extend and start whacking me on the back.

[S-stop teasing me Master!] Crinis protested.

[Gweheheheh. There are a few options there. I was able to shape the general direction of those forms and I believe the system will have tidied up the edges for me automatically. I wasn't quite as skilled at core manipulation back then, so I wasn't able to go as deep.]

[I'm sure you did wonderful work master!]

[Very kind of you to say so. I might take a look at the core just before you evolve though. Do remind me about it, would you? I need to make sure that nothing weird or useless has been mixed in.]

[As you say Master] Crinis said contentedly from my back.

I feel like she gets reassured when I'm prepared to look into her evolutions and stats personally. If what she was worried about is my disapproval, then perhaps the steady drip of compliments and positive reinforcement I'm been feeding her lately is starting to have an effect?

I hope so.

After an hour of rest to get my aching core back under control we progress into the Marsh expanse itself. What appears before my eyes is that grand vista of swampy waters, densely swaying vegetation and the savage roars of thousands of monsters engage in the vicious struggle of life and death.

Music to my ears.

Time to harvest some experience, skill levels, Biomass and most importantly, check in on my little aphid friends. The colony needs to expand its food supply and those little critters might be able to provide me with a solution.

Chrysalis

Chapter 279: The grind of battle

The Marsh Expanse is teeming with monsters and the constant roar of battle. I have a ton of Biomass that I need to collect and a whole host of skills that I need to grind. With Tiny and Crinis by my side I feel perfectly confident wading into the expanse and beginning to battle.

Monsters are fighting in every tree, on every mound of earth and inside every tepid pool of marsh water. The three of us barrel into the expanse and begin to battle everything that we can see. Tiny is in his element, smashing his fists in every direction, his massive hands thumping and grabbing monsters the moment they fall within his reach. His incredible punches hit with the force of a solid truck and smaller beasts are sent flying out, slamming into trees and splashing into the water as Tiny hoots and bellows his rage and joy.

With her new mana detection sense, Crinis is a menace. No longer reliant on the sense of touch, forced to reach out in every direction to find her foes before she can apply her damage, she now lashes out with precision. Her tentacles reach in every direction, latching onto monsters and binding them before they can blink. Once a creature is entangled by her limbs, it's over already. Inevitably, more tentacles latch on the foe, winding around arms, legs and torsos before she twists and tears, her barbs extending and rending them apart. Those monsters unfortunate enough to get too close, seeking to attack her spherical main body find an even more unfortunate fate, snatched up by tentacles that suddenly unfold from her body and then forced into her gaping maw wherein her frightening teeth gnash and disintegrate them.

For my part, I am intent on training my skills. Both of my sub brains are engaged in maintaining a mind magic transformer and casting mental spells. This involves forming a mind bridge with the foe and then utilising it to send magical constructs that essentially detonate in their mind as false stimulus. With my sub-brains and my even my main mind engaged in this activity, I keep things simple as much as possible with my physical fighting.

Bites, bites and more bites. Shattering bite is a higher level than my other two bite skills, Splintering chomp and Tearing bite, so the latter two and skills I focus on. With my mandibles infused with mana from my core, my mandibles transform into engines of destruction that these newly spawned monsters are unable to stand before.

In this manner we spend several hours battling to our hearts content until we emerged from the expanse and stumbled back into the shortcut, stopping up the entrance behind us and collapsing in a heap. Battered, bruised but satisfied, the three of us cleared out the monsters in the shortcut before taking a quick break. We have battled hard, eaten as much as we could and our relentless focus on our skills have reaped dividends.

[How'd you go Tiny?] I enquire of my ape companion.

He nodded. [I punch good!] he declared.

[Yes, but did you manage to improve your skills?] I ask, exasperated.

He nodded again. [Punch better now!] he shouted, thrusting one fist into the air.

Fair enough, I'm not going to get much more definitive information than that by asking.

[How about you, Crinis? All things on the up and up?]

[Yes Master] she responded, clearly pleased with herself, [I am quite satisfied with my skill progression. I believe I'll be more useful than ever before.]

[You don't really have to worry about how useful you are...] I tried to tell her, [it isn't like you'll ever be left behind or anything...]

[No!] she stated definitively, [as a pet we must be useful to our Master! It would be disgraceful if I wasn't able to carry my own weight. I'll work even harder to make sure that I won't be useless!]

Geez, you're far from useless. I almost feel bad that I can't defeat monsters much faster than my own pets. I suppose if I was to start dropping gravity bombs everywhere that I would be racking up experience faster, but the unintended side effects of casting that spell are what worries me. For example, getting myself caught in the blast by accident.

After a little rest, rotating the position of guard to keep the spawning monsters out of our hair, we saddle up and cut our way back into the expanse for the second round. This expanse really has some interesting monsters in it. More of those stupid hippo turtles have appeared, along with some monster types I hadn't really seen much. A few scraggly looking ape things, a plant that looked like it had been crossed with a mosquito took a chunk out of Tiny before we even realised it was there. With a long, ludicrously pointy, needle like barb emerging from the centre of the plant it looked menacing enough,

but we didn't expect it would be able to extend that needle out on a supple vine, certainly not at speeds like that!

Before we could blink, Tiny had a massive needle stuck straight into his leg and judging by the look on his face he wasn't enjoying it much. Fortunately we were able to snap off the needle and destroy the plant before too much damage was done but the fact that Tiny doesn't have a decent health recovery mechanism continues to worry me. His evolutions seem pointedly driven in the direction of glass cannon. He has immense strength and some natural toughness but can't recover from damage very well.

His leg bled profusely so we decided to halt our hunt at that point and retreat up one of the larger mangroves. Nestled there in the branches we took a moment to breathe, eat a little Biomass to recover our strength and I went looking for Aphids. Just like ants had done for thousands of years, I wanted to try and exploit the smaller bugs for the syrupy sweet Biomass that they provided in exchange for not eating them. If the colony were able to control them, farm Biomass from them here in this expanse, then another reliable source of Biomass would be unlocked for the colony, fuelling our expansion and the growth of the workers.

Only now was I starting to appreciate the double natured demand of the colony for Biomass. Not only did we need it to fuel the population growth of the family, we also needed it to meet my ideal of each individual worker being as strong as they can reasonably be. I myself have spent hundreds of Biomass points to get as strong as I am. I know not every ant could hope to do the same but surely having every member of the colony reaching +10 in their mutations was an ambitious goal but not an unreachable one.

The aphids themselves are still up there, performing whatever alchemical wizardry they do to extract nutrition from these fat fleshy leaves and convert it into Biomass. The smaller aphids are roughly basketball sized whilst the larger ones are about the size of a Labrador. Round, chubby looking beetles with a long prod for a mouth with which they stab the trees to extract sap, their thin spindly legs and long antennae make them look somewhat like an overweight ant. As opposed to myself, a proud formica ant, the aphids are green, helping them blend into the leaves.

I activate my Mana Sense and carefully scan my way through the aphids. There are a couple of aphids who meet my needs, good. I was worried none of them would have cores. Let's see if I can get friendly with a few of these aphids and perform a little core surgery.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 280: The modified aphid

In my quest to domesticate the aphid, there are a few options available. I could try and tame them as they are, not changing them in anyway, though I'm not sure exactly how that would go. Aren't monsters supposed to be brutal, ruthless and cold-hearted killing machines? The very idea of a monster that seems this peaceful doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

Although, when you think about it, the life of insects on Earth are just as bloody and merciless as what goes on here in the Dungeon. Ants, spiders, mantis and others battle constantly and without pity, ants themselves kill more insects than any creature on the face of my old planet, seizing the protein of their

fellow insects to feed to their larvae to fuel their growth. Even in that ultra-competitive environment, aphids exist. Harmless creatures who curry favour with other, stronger insects by offering them food.

So I suppose it shouldn't be too surprising that such a monster exists here in the Dungeon, prepared to offer its predators an offering of Biomass in order to continue to exist. I can't help but be curious about them. A quick core inspection should help me work out exactly what the situation is.

Approaching the little bugs who continue their placid existence, latched onto the slender branches and fleshy leaves of the large trees, I can tell that several of them have detected my approach as they turn their little bodies to allow themselves to continue feeding yet keep an eye on me at the same time. A few of the larger specimens are what I'm after. Thanks to my mana sense I can detect that they contain cores.

How on earth they amass any experience at all, I've no idea, but apparently they must, there are at least three of the little blighters on this tree alone with cores.

Tentatively, I approach one of the large specimens and the creature quickly turns to present its food court and offers me a glistening globule of Biomass that it excretes. I'll be ok for the moment thanks friend, let me take a quick look at your core.

Looming over the creature I extend my antennae to tap it on its green carapace and activate Core Surgery. My mind is suddenly flooded with information and the inner secrets of the Aphid Monsters are laid bare before my all seeing eyes.

It takes a few minutes for me to piece together the information into a more cohesive picture. What I see is frankly a little surprising. Offering Biomass for free? Innocent little bugs, living a life of non-violence that would make Ghandi proud?

I was naïve!

These little buggers are poisoners! Tainted Biomass! A betrayal of the highest order. Within the core all of their secrets are laid bare and plain as day I can see the process by which the offered Biomass is produced.

The creatures essentially extract nutrition from the trees, which are themselves high in concentrated mana, due to their position here in this expanse, drawing water from the mana infused pools that about in this expanse. Most of the sap that they extract is used as simple food, fueling their growth and sustaining their lives, but part of it is drained off into a separate process. A 'Biomass infusion organ' for want of a better name, uses mana and a chemical process to 'encode' the sap into Biomass, which the aphid can then use on itself. Not a whole lot of Biomass is produced this way but it's better than they would get from fighting, that's for sure.

But there is a further process beyond this, another organ that instils the Biomass with a subtle venom, something that won't take effect immediately, but should a creature frequently make use of the Biomass from these critters, the toxins would build up in their bodies until they died.

Sneaky devils!

As I stare down at the seemingly harmless aphid, continuing to offer me its tainted gift, acting for all the world as if it were as innocent and harmless as a baby. I see through you! I have seen your evil black heart!

Well this is a little disappointing. My hopes of providing a herd of aphids to the colony are still very much alive, I'm just going to have to alter the way I go about it. No easy options now.

I could manipulate the core of this one aphid, making it safe to consume and loyal to its new ant overlords, but that doesn't help that much. I'd have to change every aphid individually, which isn't really feasible since most of them don't have a core.

No.

Something different is required here. I need to solve the problem of the poisonous Biomass a large number of aphids at once, whilst maintaining their relatively low intelligence and weak physiques. There is a wonderful example I can draw from within my own personal experience.

I shall create a new species of Aphid! A benign, loyal, harmless team of Biomass producing livestock for the colony. How will I do it? I will craft a new organism that the Dungeon has never see before: the Aphid Queen. The Queen will produce as many members of the new species of aphid as the colony needs, thus bypassing the need to manage or change this existing species.

Which is lucky, because in order to create this new Queen, I'm going to need quite a few aphid cores...

Sometime later, there are far fewer aphids on the nearby trees but I have managed to collect quite a few cores, six to be exact. The issue I'm going to have is that each individual Aphid has the basic shape of the aphids I want to create, but they do not have sufficient meat in their cores to allow me to create the Aphid Queen I am envisioning.

What I'm going to have to do is fuse these six cores, whilst maintaining the structure of the Biological information encoded within. Every other time I've fused cores the contents have become a complete mangled mess. That hasn't mattered since I was only fusing them to increase the energy contained inside and produce special cores which were rapidly absorbed, but this time it'll be different. The more edits I have to make to a core, the harder it becomes. If I fuse the cores and the information contained within gets completely jumbled, there is no way I'll be able to get it back into a functional form before the sheer number of changes required makes the Core manipulation impossible.

I will need to bring all of my willpower to bear and try to perform this new feat. For the sake of the herd!