

## Chrysalis 281

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### Chapter 281: Counting the gains

After collecting my small collection of aphid cores I get Tiny to carry them and we descend from the trees to battle amongst the monsters once more as we make our way back to the shortcut. To be honest the non-stop grind and battering of battle against the monsters is strangely refreshing. It feels nice to exercise, something that I didn't really understand as a human. But now, with my mandibles crunching down on my foes and the endless tide of monsters battering at my shiny carapace, I get it, it's nice to use your body. Especially when it's such an incredible specimen of an ant body like mine!

All things considered, this little escapade has been well worth the time, even if I were only to concentrate on the gains in skills and Biomass. When we finally make it back to the shortcut, clear it out and settle in to rest with Crinis taking the first guard shift I decide to tally up my gains.

Things have gone relatively well on the Biomass front, we don't exactly get a lot of time to eat in the Expanse right now since the battle frenzy is in full flight, but I was still able to pile up a substantial amount. With this hunt and previous snacking included I've managed to gain another 138 Biomass, which takes my current total to 189. Not too shabby if I do say so myself. The repeated eating and fighting really seems to aid the digestion, speeding up the process of getting the food through the system and freeing up space for the next meal. Perhaps this is the ideal Biomass gathering method, as opposed to gorging until I can barely drag my business district around. I should share this information with the hatchlings, this could be vital for the colony to maximise efficiency!

My skills have also seen significant improvements. Tearing Bite has reached level 9, one step away from reaching the third rank, which is nice. Advanced Cerebral endurance gained a few levels to reach 7 and Mediation reached the third rank due to my essentially constant use of the mind affecting skill, allowing me to punch it up to Profound Mediation level 2. This skill really has been having a potent effect, allowing my mental state to achieve a level of clarity that is startling. The amount of mental processing I'm able to accomplish in moments of heated battle is becoming astonishing, allowing my high mental stats to come into their own.

Mind Magic Affinity has, thanks to my constant use and heavy focus, also managed to rank up to Enhanced Mind magic affinity. I eagerly checked my available skills the moment after I made the purchase but no new magic affinity options had become available to me, sadly. Along with two levels, those were my total gains.

The constant fighting and heavy battering I received also helped to take my mind off the suffering my core is currently inflicting on me. After levelling a couple of times the pain has noticeably receded, but is still quite intense. It's going to be a long term project to complete the absorption of that stupid rare core. The evolution I receive had better be absolutely amazing for me to endure all of this suffering. Level forty is still a long way away, so hopefully by the time I get there I can complete that task.

Rather than spend my points and mutate here and now, I decide to spend some time working on core manipulation. Tiny carefully places the six small, spherical gems on the floor before me where they glitter beautifully. One by one I activate Core Surgery and take a good look at each of the cores, confirming that the information encoded within each, the monstrous DNA, if you will, is the same for all

of them. Indeed they are all a match, almost identical in the basic details, only the individual mutations, skill levels and a very minor stat variance exists between each of them. This should be the ideal circumstances to attempt the core fusion that I want.

In essence, I want to take these cores and meld them together, retaining the general shape and form of the creature within, preventing the data from overwriting or scrambling during the process. In the ideal outcome, I'll be able to combine these cores and create what is basically a large aphid with much more potential energy to play with. From there I'll be able to manipulate that blueprint and form the Aphid Queen from which my species of docile farm animals will spring.

Okay, here we go. Deftly rolling the first to gems into position with my antennae, I tap each of them with one antenna each and activate the skill, gently pressing them together as I do so. Immediately the pressure on my brains explodes in magnitude as the cores resist my attempt to push them together.

So far so good. This bit is perfectly normal and I've done it dozens of times already when making special cores. This time is different. All I had to do last time was overcome the resistance of the cores and squash them together, this time I need to do that whilst simultaneously ensuring that the information contained within the cores forms a harmonious whole, the new data sliding neatly over the old.

In order to achieve this duality I task my two sub brains with the fusion itself whilst my main mind is dedicated to ensuring the information within the core maintains its integrity. Deliberately slowing down the fusing process, my mind reaches into both cores at once and tries to get a clear picture of the information flowing between the two.

Almost like the individual brush strokes of an artwork, each piece of information is part of a complete whole, only making sense in the context of those strokes around it. The colours, the forms, width and depth, all layered on top of and around each other to build up a cohesive image. In fusing the two cores together as I did in the past, I'm basically taking two art works, melting one down into a bucket of paint and throwing it at the other.

Naturally, chaos was the result!

I'm getting a bad feeling about how this is going to have to be done.

I can't take all of the paint and throw it together haphazardly, it needs to be done just like painting a picture would be, line by line, stroke by stroke. Which means this is going to suck.

With sheer force of will, my two sub brains cooperate to hold the cores in a state of near fusion, just on the verge of beginning to meld together. Then, with my main mind I reach into one of the cores and strip away a single piece of data, a single brush stroke of the image, which I hold delicately with my thoughts as I transfer it over to the second core and carefully lay it over the top of the same data, melding the two pieces together.

As the two pieces of data merge flawlessly I feel satisfaction but also weariness. Such delicate work is tiring on the mind and my sub brains are already feeling the strain of this constant effort. I'm going to be wrecked by the time this is done...

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 282: My finest creation?**

Holy moly, I'm completely wrecked. Each of my three brains feels like seared mush; soft and jelly-like, yet wreathed in hot, hot flames. I managed to gain two whole levels in cerebral endurance in just under two hours, that's how mentally intensive this work was. However, I have been successful.

I have triumphed!

Despite being some of the most draining and mind bogglingly difficult mental work I've done, I managed to complete the project as well as I can. It was enough to gain me three levels in core surgery, going to show just how difficult what I was attempting to actually was. Each of those levels helped significantly with the task at hand however, so I can only be grateful in the end.

In front of me sits a gleaming special core, plump with energy, ripe with the encoded information of my artisanal hand crafted creature, ready to be instantiated as a pet.

I knew I wouldn't be able to make a heap of edits to the creature I'd created after successfully fusing the cores together, so I hadn't gone crazy with it, but I was mostly able to hit my goals. After the fusion was complete there were a few oddities that had slipped into the design. A few sloppy bits about the place, such as the one leg that somehow had lost its knee joint, but managed to gain two extra feet. Fixing these took a bit of a toll on me but I was able to have the finalised creature I had hoped for: an oversized aphid, roughly the same size as myself, stuffed full of spare energy.

Naturally I used that energy to shape the egg production pathway, something that took a heck of a lot more potential than I had thought it would. The egg production organs are expensive. Luckily I had enough budget after fusing six of the normal aphid cores together. Then it was a simple matter of neatening up the edges. I lowered the creatures Cunning a little, I want them to be dependent on their ant masters after all, took away the poison gland, made them overall a little weaker and gave their Biomass production organ a mutation that increased the amount of Biomass they could produce straight out of the gate.

So if all things go according to plan, once reconstituted, this core will give rise to the first aphid Queen, let's call her Aphy, who the colony will care for and raise until she is mature and can start producing her aphid offspring which the colony will nurture and use as their own Biomass producing herd. This should work out well, by the time Aphy is producing eggs the colony should have the numbers and levels to start launching raiding parties into the expanse itself and with a little clever planning the aphid farming project could go into action at that point.

Nice work Anthony!

I'm quite proud of myself, I have to say. This was a lot of effort and could prove to have a major effect on the colony going forward.

Weary but satisfied, it's time to retreat back to the colony. We've been gone for roughly a day, which isn't as long as I thought I'd be off on this particular excursion, but I'm chasing a rest and I want my aphid core to begin its life as a loyal pet of the colony, something I can't really do down here.

The three of us battle our way up the surface via the shortcut and then make our way across the land towards the ant hill. I can't wait to nestle into a nice chamber and get some sleep!

As we approach the colony I start to notice something is going on. It looks like there is a lot of activity around the anthill. Heaps of ants and it looks like ... humans? What the heck is going on? Each moment we draw closer the more questions I have. The humans have been grouped together, surround by workers on all sides and they seem to be moving closer to the anthill and almost appear to be about to climb up with the intention of going into the nest.

That would be insane! Certain death!

What on earth do they think they are doing?!

Weariness forgotten my legs scabble wildly into the dirt as I break into a sprint, rushing towards the nest. The workers are the first to notice me coming and make way before I crash into them, I don't drop any speed until I reach the front the human group and start making my way up the anthill where I notice a few of the twenty are waiting for me.

"Sloan!" I gasp at the ant general, "What the heck is going on here?!"

Sloan flips his antennae around in a confused manner. "We found these creatures living in close proximity to the nest. In your absence we weren't sure what to do so we convened a council and discussed the matter."

"And?" I demand.

Sloan's mandibles twitch slightly at the tone of my pheromones. The twenty hatchlings I trained had to put up with my angry roaring on many occasions. I can almost see the fear of thwacking rising within him.

"Well, uh, we decided that it would be best to remove the threat and collect the Biomass that these creatures represented ..."

THWACK!

All of the nearby react with a twitch when they hear the sharp kinetic thud of my mandibles impacting on the poor generals carapace.

"You wanted to eat the village?!" I roared.

"We were going to feed them to the Queen!" Sloan protested, "when we approached these creatures they were strangely unafraid of us, they even approached us of their own volition! So we gathered some workers to herd them over this way and they came without a fuss!"

"You didn't think that was a bit odd? That these things would just wander up to the nest and feed themselves to the Queen without protest or fighting back in any way?"

I can see the gears turning in the generals head.

"No" he replied firmly.

"Why?"

"I would gladly give my life to the colony, perhaps these creatures feel the same?"

THWACK!

"Not every organism on the face of this world is so eager to die for the sake of the colony you eejit! Think it through! I don't want the village harmed, they have a great deal of information that they can teach us!"

"You never said anything about that to us!" Sloan protested weakly.

THWACK!

"Never mind that!" I roared, "spread the word that these humans are not to be harmed and they will be returning to their homes shortly."

"Of course, Eldest."

All right. I might have stuffed up a little there. But why the heck are the humans just going along with this situation? Where the hell is Enid? Or Morrelia? Surely they wouldn't be so stupid as to let their people march into the ants nest!?

I cast my eyes amongst the crowd, desperate to locate them so I can form a mind bridge and explain this event away with some excuse that doesn't let the village know how close they came to being Queen food.

Unfortunately, I don't spot Enid or Morrelia amongst the people. I do notice one man, dressed in a white robe, with one arm, waving at me enthusiastically from the front.

Stupid Priest!

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 283: Feast averted**

As he walked towards me Beyn displayed a face splitting grin, his eyes alight with energy and passion. This moron is still obsessed with the colony, the ants and me in particular. He probably thinks the village is being 'blessed' with a visitation to the nest, when in fact the twenty have arranged the village for a surprisingly peaceful slaughter!

I weave a mind bridge and connect it to the fool. What on earth am I going to say? How can I explain this away? Gandalf, bestow upon me your wisdom, your sweet gravelly voice and your dominatable eyebrows.

[Beyn, you have come to the nest] I stated the obvious.

I don't want to talk as if I have no idea why they are here. I'm supposed to be the ant who decides what happens with the village and I'm the only one who's interacted with them so far, if I don't know what's happening then that might raise some suspicion in the mind of the priest I'm not quite as in control and omnipotent as he seems to think. If possible I want to get out of this situation without destroying the trust between the village and the colony. They still have much to teach us and I don't feel it's right to destroy these people who have done nothing to harm us.

[OH GREAT ONE!] He bellowed, [WHAT A MEMONTOUS -]

[Loud!]

[Oh! I'm sorry Great One! My excitement has gotten the better of me! I'm just so happy to get the chance to bring the people so close to the holy mountain!]

Mountain? What mountain? Does he mean the anthill?! How is even a mountain? It's only twenty metres tall!

[Ah, yes. Welcome here, to the foot of our great, uh, mountain?]

[We are all so honoured to be here Great One! When the esteemed members of the great colony came to the village and begun to gather us together, we were filled with shock and joy! I can only imagine what you have gathered us here for today!]

[Yes, oh it's, incredible stuff... Could I ask were Enid, Morrelia and her warriors are?]

Beyn grimaced at my words. [It is most unfortunate timing, oh Great One. They have left with many of the strongest villagers for a somewhat extended training session in the Dungeon. We have sent scouts several days out from the village and so far we have encountered no sign of another incursion so Morrelia deemed it would be wise to make use of this breathing room to push as hard as possible to raise the levels of our best fighters.]

Dammit! Of course they aren't here at this time, they wouldn't have let something stupid like this happen!

[Yes, that is wise of them] I nodded in what I hope is a sage-like manner.

[So for what purpose have you brought us here Great One?] Beyn asked eagerly, [will you be inviting us within the precious sanctum of your colony? Are we to be inducted into the great secrets of your kind?]

The guys face is practically shining. So full of hope and light that I would close if my eyes were it a physical possibility. Oh boy, come on Anthony, think!

[I have brought you here to announce something!] I declared.

Beyn turns to the people crowded behind him, their faces bright with expectation, and raises his hands, bringing a hush to the gathered throng before he tells them I will be speaking to them. At once, every face is turned towards me as I stand slightly above them, perched on the slope of the anthill.

I can't help but feel a little self-conscious with all of these eyes on me. I nervously clean my antennae and I hope my carapace is at its sparkling best. I haven't had a chance to inspect it too closely since we came back from the expanse and I'd hate for my glorious exoskeleton to be unsightly at this moment.

[Ah, I wish for you to inform the people that, err, that the, ah, colony has undergone a glorious rebirth!] I stuttered out.

Perhaps if I give them some small details of the evolution our species has undergone they'll be satisfied with this announcement and return to the village.

Overreacting as per usual, Beyn fell immediately to his knees at my hesitant pronouncement.

[Oh Great One! How could the radiant and System borne colony of in dominatable workers be made even more perfect? Exactly what has changed within the colony?]

Good question, and one that I need to be careful when I answer. Too much information could come back and bite the colony, not enough and they may feel the need to push for more. I need to tread the line with care, lucky that I have six legs and the grip skill, walking narrow lines is what I'm all about.

[Through the power of the system our species has taken a great step forward, each individual worker has grown stronger, with greater potential. It is safe to say that the Dungeon has never seen a colony such as this one. We will capable of more than before, better coordination, faster development and a level of sophistication that many of the sapient races on the surface can only dream of!]

The eyes of priest grew wide, his face frozen as if seized by some powerful emotion. After a moment to collect himself he turned to speak to the gathered village and despite not being able to understand his words, I can see the people turning to admire and examine the workers around them, trying to take in any differences that may have occurred.

[Further, we have brought you here, to the seat of our kind, to announce our desire for continued and deepening ties of cooperation between your people and ours. The colony has much to learn and there is much that you can teach us. In return there will be many things that we will be able to do for you. A mutually beneficial relationship that we will be pleased to engage in if you are willing.]

I'm sweating a little on the inside. Hopefully this is enough for them. Further cooperation with the village and its people has been part of my plans, the ants have so much that they don't know, about the system, about crafting, about the surface and about the Dungeon. The humans of the village can help us to develop so much faster than we could on our own.

As Beyn turned towards the villagers and spoke, I watched them with care. Any concerns I had regarding how this proposal would be met by the humans was swept aside in an instant as they began to cheers and shout, raising their hands to the sky and bowing before me.

I see some of them weeping with joy even. There is seriously something wrong with these people. How on earth did they become this obsessed with a group of monsters?

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 284: The Queen has a new pe**

As the villagers return to their homes and the rapidly expanding buildings that make up their new town, I breathed a deep sigh of relief. That was not something I had expected to have to deal with upon my return. Turning to one side I face Sloan, the general and organiser of this human round up.

[Gather your siblings together Sloan] I growl at him, [I need to have a word.]

[Of course Senior.]

He scuttled off to find his siblings. I'm sure I'll find them later down in my chamber, where I'll have to explain a few things to them. It's not their fault. I failed to explain the relationship I was trying to cultivate with the village and its potential benefits to the colony. I forgot to explain the concept of leaving friendly people well enough alone! In truth, a dramatic oversight on my part and not a fault of

theirs. They saw a wealth of Biomass and experience in such close proximity and sought to claim it, as any good monster should.

At least disaster has been averted and the workers have been warned off attacking the villagers. My insides sweat when I think about how close to a massacre we had been. The only reason the workers would have left the humans alive was so they could feed the experience to the Queen since they weren't resisting in any way. The thought of those men, women and children being funnelled into the Queens chamber, believing they were about to experience something miraculous, only to have their lives ended by my mother's jaws ... it's disturbing to say the least.

No need to think on what might have been! The worst case scenario has been averted and I'll work hard to make sure that something like this doesn't happen again! For now, it's time to introduce the Queen to my new creation!

Climbing up the nest with Tiny and Crinis close behind I pass numerous workers who are all happy to call out with their customary advice:

"Work hard, Senior!"

"Make sure you're working till you drop!"

"Hi there Senior! Work!"

I GET IT.

Yeesh. I know they're called 'workers' but come on. I wonder if I can create a hobby or something for them, some sort of ant diversion. Perhaps I could invent a sport of some kind? It would have to involve digging in some way.

Musing over ants and their lack of diversions I climb down the main shaft of the nest into the Queens chamber. Below the surface level and packed full of workers, the Queen continues to spend almost all her time in this room, being defended from the ever-spawning nightmares of the Dungeon by her loyal guards who make sure to pass on as much Biomass as possible to their mother.

"Hello, Mother!" I called out, trying to see the vague outline of the Queen between the seething mass of workers that crawl over her.

"Hello, child" her warm voice emerges from within the swarm and after a few moments she shifts closer to me, the workers peeling away from her head so that I can see her.

Big, as always, the Queen is still at least twice as tall as I am and several times longer. An ant the size of a minibus is really quite the impressive sight. I can only image the havoc that would have occurred on earth had something like the Queen ever been discovered!

"What brings you back to the nest so soon child? I had heard that you were out exploring?" she asked mildly.

"I was! Much exploring was happening! But I've managed to cook up something that I think will be extremely useful for the colony and I need your help."



The Queen's antennae wave back and forth in curious patterns. "What is it that you need me for young one? You usually don't require my assistance to meddle with the colony."

There is definitely a tone of amusement in her voice as she continued to look down on me kindly.

I take a little time to explain what I found in the marsh expanse, a species of monster that can extract nutrition from plant life and convert it into Biomass that it offers up in exchange for being left alone. I went on to detail the poison that I had detected within the creatures and the steps that I had taken to remedy the situation with my own custom designed species of Aphid.

"With these loyal aphids, we will have another reliable source of Biomass for the colony, one that doesn't even require us to have to fight and makes use of resources that we otherwise wouldn't be able to utilise. Those trees offer no sustenance to us, but through these aphids we can farm an infinite amount of Biomass over time! If the Dungeon Wave ever recedes, then our farms in the nest will be useless, this could help offset that loss!" I declared with pride.

I can see that the Queen is interested. She leaned down to inspect the core that I had Tiny place on the chamber floor. The gem glittered brightly in the blue light emanating from the veins of mana winding through the walls of the nest.

"It does sound like it would be useful" the Queen pondered out loud, "what would I need to do?"

"Not that much" I said eagerly, glad to see that she was interested in my scheme. "The core here is for the aphid Queen, someone needs to reconstitute the core and keep her as their pet. I thought that you would be the best candidate for that. Aphy can stay here with you and the colony will provide the Biomass she needs to produce the aphid for us. We can then send workers down into the expanse to clear out the existing aphids and replace them with our own kind. Some workers will need to remain in the expanse, tending to the aphids, keeping them safe and collecting the Biomass they produce, but they should be safe up in the trees since not many monsters go up there."

The Queen fell silent as she contemplated my words. I'm not sure exactly how she felt about having to give up some of the Biomass that would normally be directed to her and instead let it be fed to the Queen of another species, but I'm certain she was intelligent enough to realise that the colony would get far more back from the aphids than we spent to create them.

As far as I know, monsters don't actually age. As long as the aphids are kept safe, they can go on producing Biomass for the colony for eternity. They may not be able to make a ton of it in one day, but with enough aphids over enough time, it'll add up fast!

Sure enough, mother was more than smart enough to understand the benefits of my scheme.

"Very well" she acquiesced, bringing her antennae forward to rest on the core.

Immediately, the core began to glow and expand, taking shape and changing colour until a brand new Aphid Queen sat blinking on the chamber floor.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 285: The second council**

The Queen seemed quite taken with her new pet. After giving a little advice regarding skills such as Pet Communication, Pet Growth among others. The Queen eventually decided to take the communication skill, the growth skill and the skill that allowed her to view the status of Aphy, the aphid Queen.

Those decisions made sense, since she wouldn't be able to communicate with her new pet without spending a skill on it. Mind magic is not on the horizon for the Queen and Aphy does not have a pheromone gland. Helping her pet grow more rapidly at the cost of a single skill point also seemed worth the investment to the Queen. Particularly when considering the potential benefit of producing aphid cattle as fast as possible.

Finally, after I shared my thoughts that the status viewing skill would eventually lead to being able to manipulate the status directly, possibly also guide evolutions, the Queen decided to pick up this skill as well. I think that was the correct choice. Aphy isn't all that smart and has no chance of being able to access the custom evolution process, not to mention spending her skill points and Biomass points in sensible ways. If the Queen can take over those duties then Aphy will have a much brighter future.

By the time I leave, the Queen was looking down fondly on her new pet as the green shelled miniature aphid Queen turned this way and that, skittering around the chamber under her masters' watchful eyes.

The workers seemed willing to accommodate Aphy without complaint also, making room for the little bug and steering it away from trouble when she got too close to dangerous parts of the walls.

All in all, I'm extremely pleased at how this project has gone! The Queen is happy to have her own little pet and Aphy will produce a host of aphids that the colony can tame and use as our own herd animals. We'll care for them, protect them, bring them to food, and in return they shall reward us with precious Biomass! Gweheheheh. It's perfect.

Burning my minds to a crisp in order to produce that engineered core was totally worth it, and the process helped to reveal some of the technical aspects of combining cores in a non-hodgepodge manner. The practice of lifting one one line of information at a time and layering it over the data within the other core, like transplanting a painting onto another, one brush stroke at a time, felt like the correct method to approach this process. It also helped me to glimpse the pure artistry of the Sophos.

I firmly believe that their fantastical pets are created by taking pieces of one monster and combining it with pieces of another. I originally thought that perhaps they had monstrous willpower, able to force hundreds of changes to a core with ease, but now I suspect that they possess monstrous willpower, and they demonstrate godly skill when combining cores, taking pieces from two separate, disparate painting and combining them to create a coherent picture that is completely new.

My mind filled with thoughts of Formo and his brethren, I descend beneath the Queens chamber, past the off shooting tunnels that lead to the farming complex and into my own personal space. Within I find the twenty hatchlings already assembled, their various shapes and sizes filling the small room. Another ant has also made an appearance I see.

'Hi-hi! How are you Senior!'

"Vibrant! Been a while. What happened to your posse?"

The hyper active ant that I'd known ever since she was a grub has now grown into a powerful member of the colony, complete with her own squad of loyal goons who help her when she goes out on quests for the colony.

"They're in torpor, of course! Can't be go, go, GO, all the time!"

Are you sure? You've been non-stop since before you were born! I'm a witness!

Actually, hang on a sec...

"You're looking a little different these days, Vibrant. Are you larger? Not to mention, somewhat more aggressive looking? Did you evolve?!"

"Yup! What do you think?!" Vibrant cheered as she leaped about with excitement.

Finally reached her third evolution! From superior hatchling to some variety of soldier to whatever she is now, it's been a rapid rise for Vibrant, even if she did have my help over the first hurdles. Now she's just as evolved as I am! That can't be right! I'm going to have to get busy in order to make sure I stay at the head of the pack.

I refuse to be the inferior ant! They need to continue to look up to me, their Senior!

Speaking of my Juniors, they are shifting about uneasily as Vibrant continues to dominate the space with her new size and sheer energy.

"How are you all hatchlings?" I greet them.

"We are well, Senior" they respond.

"Although, we aren't hatchlings anymore, not even superior hatchlings" Mendant the healer is at pains to point out.

"You'll always be hatchlings to me Mendant. It was I who taught you from the time you were hatched, after all!"

Several of them wave their antennae in despondent circles, unhappy that I continue to treat them as if they were fresh out of their cocoons. I can't really help it, they've only been out of their cocoons for only a week and a bit! If they were humans they'd still be unable to lift their heads off the floor. In terms of life experience they have nothing going for themselves.

"Okay then. I wanted to talk the group of you about a few things that I regrettably neglected to mention when I was teaching you. This may happen again, by the way, since it's possible I forgot to mention a heap of other pieces of critical information."

Many heads sink toward the floor in despair, a dense feeling of frustration rose into the air. Sorry guys, I'm not perfect! But I'll do my best!

"So, the human village. Let's have a quick chat about that, just lay a few ground rules and all that jazz. Rule one that I would like to propose is this: No killing and eating the humans in the village. Are there any questions about that one?"

Twenty sets of antennae are raised into the air.

"Dang. Alright. Can someone volunteer their query?"

It's Bella, the core shaper who steps forward, her smaller size is dwarfed by the looming physique of Vibrant but her eyes glitter with intelligence as she speaks.

"Those 'humans' represent a copious amount of experience and Biomass that would help fuel the growth of the colony. What benefit are they to us unharmed?"

Many antennae wiggle with agreement around the chamber. I sighed.

"Look, I understand the short term gain that the colony would enjoy were we to harvest the humans of the village and feed them to the Queen, I get it. What you don't understand is the benefits of mutual cooperation between two societies. You are the amongst the oldest of our species, technically, but you've been alive for such a short time."

I turned to point one leg towards the village through hundreds of metres of stone.

"They have the benefit of thousands of years of history, study and development! Far more valuable than a bumper crop of Biomass and experience, is knowledge. You would throw away the thing that our colony needs most for the thing our colony needs least! Experience and Biomass will come, time is all we need. The expertise of the surface races, amassed over time, is there ready for us to access. Knowledge of the Dungeon, of evolution, of language, art, construction, forging, weaponry, armour, enchanting, farming, education and more! That is why we shouldn't attack them."

"I agree with Senior" Vibrant declared, "the humans have helped us fight off the waves on the surface. Without them we would have lost many more workers. They've never attacked us either!"

"Good point there Vibrant. So, are you starting to see the bigger picture regarding the human village?"

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 286: Scouting repor**

The idea of peaceful cooperation between nations or even species is quite the foreign concept to these ants and I shouldn't be surprised. They are Dungeon monsters after all. I may have made them smarter but their fundamental nature as ants is to serve the colony to the exclusion of all else. Convincing them not to throw their lives away in pointless sacrifice was hard enough of a chore, diplomacy and trade may be a bridge too far!

It seems that Vibrant at least has begun to grasp the greater picture here.

"Nope!" she chirped brightly, "I just think we shouldn't eat things that are willing to help us! There are toooons of things that want to kill us that we can go eat."

Well... Good enough.

"Vibrant does raise I valid point" I declared to the others, "during the wave we have a near infinite supply of food spawning in the Dungeon below us, most of the Biomass is going to waste as the monsters battle and feed on each other, only to die and be fed on in return. How long until we are ready to start sending hunting parties into the Dungeon in numbers?"

It's Antionette the Juvenile Queen who stepped forward to answer this time.

"The third hatching since the change of species occurred several hours ago and are for now awaiting the commencement of their training, which means we have more than four hundred of the new workers as well as the numbers we sustained during the wave. The colony has a total workforce of just over one thousand now, but a large proportion of those are not battle ready."

Over a thousand?! That's great news! We lost a lot of workers over the journey and to finally reach this tipping point is a wonderful moment!

"It shouldn't take too long to get them up to speed surely? How did you go with the first two hundred?" I asked eagerly.

The twenty shifted slightly in their places.

"It was, challenging" admitted Advant the soldier, "drilling into them the basic concepts of self-preservation was extremely difficult and due to the sheer number of them it took some time to accrue the required Biomass and experience to allow all two hundred to evolve."

"Wait" I gasped, "does this mean all two hundred have undergone a maxed out first evolution?"

That would be insane!

The second Juvenile Queen, Victoriant, coughed. "As you are aware Senior, we don't have the resources to allow each individual to absorb a special core. We did as best we could, each ant evolved with a core, maxed out mutations and having absorbed all of the cores we could supply. To do any better we would have had to delay their evolution for too long."

I nodded. That made perfect sense, they did the best they could with the resources that we had available. I can't complain too much since I was only too happy to hand the task over to them.

"So what sort of evolutions did they choose? Did we get another even spread like with you guys?"

Theressant smoothly broke in before anyone else could speak. "As it turned out almost half of them chose to be soldiers, the remainder were mostly workers, with a few artisans mixed in. They are all still in the juvenile stage and it will be some time before they are ready for their next evolution. Our hands are very busy since we already have another two hundred hatchlings to tend to, and another two hundred coming in three days."

In three days?!

"Just how quickly is the Queen able to lay eggs right now?" I demanded.

"Oh, we get spikes in Biomass every now and again, the creatures spawning in her chamber supply a steady flow but things have slowed down now that so much is being funnelled into the hatchlings. We project that the Queen will be able to lay one clutch of two hundred eggs every four days at the moment. Mostly thanks to Vibrant and her team bringing up so much from the tunnels."

Hearing herself praised like this, Vibrant suddenly turned bashful.

"Aww, it's nothing! Just doing what an ant can do!" she giggled.

Two hundred every four days?! With most of the food going into the hatchlings!

"So if we were to start sending hunting parties into the Dungeon in, let's say a week, what sort of speed would we expect to see?" I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

The general, Sloan, was the one to answer this question.

"If we are able to get the first batch of two hundred up to their second evolution and then take them into the Dungeon for hunting missions, presuming we are able to achieve this in the stated time frame, I expect that the Queen would be able to hit her production limit of two hundred eggs per day."

TWO HUNDRED PER DAY?! That's six thousand in a month! We could be ratcheting up to that kind speed in just a week.

Without thinking about it, my head turned toward the two juvenile Queens in the room.

"Yes" Sloan noticed my look, "if that were to occur then developing Victoriant and Antionette would become our highest priority. After one more evolution they'll be able to begin producing eggs and one more evolution after that before they can match the Queen's output. We forecast it would take just over a month to get to that stage."

So that would be six hundred eggs per day, and eighteen thousand workers per month...

Just. Hold on a moment. I knew that ants could have large colonies, obviously I knew that! Being faced with this sort of growth and these kinds of numbers is rather shocking to me!

"That's ... good?" I managed to say, still somewhat shocked.

Just how much Biomass are we going to need to fuel that sort of growth? How many cores will we be able to harvest?

"Do we need to expand the farms again?" I ask nobody in particular.

It's Cobalt the Carver Ant who answered, "we have a team on farm expansion pretty much constantly. Whilst this period of endless spawning continues we need to take everything we can get."

We sure do. Hold on, constantly expanding the farms?

"So how many farms are we up to?" I asked the smaller, delicate looking worker caste.

Cobalt thought for a moment. "Around thirty? I haven't checked with them today, I apologise, Senior."

Yikes! This is all snowballing rather quickly. I should have known that when I turned the management of the colony over to ants they wouldn't stuff around! These guys mean business!

It's a good thing really. I want our family to be successful and prosperous, to dominate the Dungeon and seize it's lands for the glory of our mother, I just didn't think it would start to happen this quickly.

"Well, I mean, that all sounds great! I guess, so long as we are clear on the not killing the humans, or any other sapient society we happen to encounter, I'll just get back to exploring and ... eating?"

It sounds kind of lazy now that I've said it out loud...

"Actually" it's Burke who broke in at this moment, "we've been doing some preliminary scouting over the surface and it seems like something is going on to the north. There's been smoke, seen at long distances from immense fires, and more humans have been fleeing this way."

"Indeed" Wills picked up where Burke left off, "the situation on the surface is beginning to look dire. For the time being it seems as if the threat from below has abated, but we feel that only you, Senior, would be able to safely determine the nature of the situation on the surface right now."

Massive fires? More refugees?

"What is going on up there?" I wondered out loud.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 287: Surface Situation**

There must be something serious going on up there for there to be all of this smoke and noise, but what could it be? We haven't had an attack for a few days now, perhaps there is another one massing? Someone definitely needs to go and check it out, and I can't deny that the best person for that role would have to be me. There's only one major problem.

"I'm happy to go and scout on the surface, but due to my core strength if I spend too long up there then I'll start to run dry. I can manage a few days up there, perhaps a little longer, but if I'm being super active the amount of time I can last could diminish beyond that."

"We are aware of the issue regarding the drain of mana on developed cores, we were able to consult with mother about the problem" Burke assured me, "our scouts have made it a priority to discover any pockets of concentrated mana and sniff out Dungeon entrances in order to alleviate the difficulty. We've been able to find a number of such locations and mark them heavily with pheromones, as well as create a few trails you could follow."

That news brightened me up a little.

"Well that sounds a lot better. I didn't realise you'd been able to put together such a competent scouting operation in such a short time."

Wills wagged his antennae dismissively.

"It's nothing special right now. When we have more dedicated scout caste soldiers it will be one hundred times more efficient. Not to mention we've barely begun to map out the skill and mutation paths best suited to scouting. Burke and I are expecting to have completed our preliminary investigations next week, which is when we expect the first wave of scout caste evolutions to complete."

These guys are for sure keeping busy. Look at 'em! Making plans and thinking things through! This is why the colony needed them!

"That sounds great! Well a few other points I wanted to bring up. I've possibly discovered another source of Biomass for the colony, talk to mother for the details. I'd like to speak to the Core Shapers for a moment after we are done here and then I'll take Tiny and Crinis to go and check out the situation on the surface."

There was little shifting when I mention the possible Biomass source but otherwise the first twenty hatchlings of the new breed are happy to break of our meeting there, only Bella and Ellie the core shapers remain behind. I take the time to explain to them my newfound understanding of fusing cores together and they communicate with me the tests they have conducted, and the various skill combinations they are experimenting with in order to perform their role.

Ultimately the core shapers are intended to create specialised pets for members of the colony. That doesn't necessarily mean that they will use the cores that they design for themselves, but it could. Since the two of them are here, we spend a little extra time discussing their role and what they can contribute to the colony, since they themselves aren't exactly sure what their purpose is.

To give some scope to the power of Core Shaping as a discipline, I tell them about the Sophos, an entire race of powerful core shapers who depend upon the creatures that they craft and design for their safety. In particular I tell them off the powerful worm that Formo rode, to this day the most powerful monster core I've seen.

Ellie and Bella are immensely excited by this news. When we are done they sprint out of the chamber to continue their skill drilling and to expand their plans. To think that core shaping and pets aren't important. What nonsense! The Formica Sapiens species wouldn't even exist without those skills! Not to mention how useful and powerful pets can be. Look at Crinis and Tiny! They've paid me back more than ten times the cores and Biomass I've had to spend on them. They might give me a few headaches every now and again but it's worth it.

Speaking of Crinis and Tiny.

[So, it looks like we'll have to go and do some scouting on the surface, team. We all ready for that?] I asked them.

Tiny looked glum at my words.

[Surface. Bad.]

[I get it champ, not a huge fan of having my core leaking either, but there seems to be something big going on up there.]

The big ape just grunted, his displeasure clear on his bat face.

[I'm sure we'll be fine, Master] Crinis chipped in, eager to please as always.

[You will be] I grumbled, [you're one evolution away from suffering from the lack of mana like Tiny and I.]

[That isn't my fault] the ball of indefatigable hunger protested primly, [I'd be ready to evolve if we'd spent more time out hunting.]

[That's true. Now is your chance. Even though we'll be up on the surface, we are likely to run into some Dungeon monsters doing things and going places that they shouldn't. Come on then, no time like the present.]



We all have a decent chunk of Biomass that needs to be spent but I feel there isn't any harm in putting it off for a while. Whatever is happening up there sounds important, we can mutata when we take a break travelling.

So it was that not long after returning from our brief expedition, we find ourselves leaving the nest once again, this time to travel across the surface, something I hadn't expected we would be doing again.

Before we leave for the north, back into the ravaged lands of the Lirian Kingdom, I decide to check in the village. It's only been a few hours since I managed to avert the consumption of most of the population over there after all. If Enid is back from her hunting trip then I'm certain there is going to be a few questions she might have. Smoothing things over before I leave would be the sensible course of action.

[I'm coming too.]

...

[I'm sorry, what was that?]

Morrelia looked down at me, her features set into her customary fierce expression, a mood only reinforced by her combat attire, leather armour and swords belted to her hips.

[I want to come with you. If something is going on like you say then I think it would be a good idea for someone from the village to investigate also.]

Not long after we arrived in the village I bumped into Enid and Morrelia, only just returned from their Dungeon delve. It didn't take long to explain what the scouts had reported, as well as brush off any 'special announcements' they might have heard about. It was after Enid passed on my words to Morrelia that we began to have a problem.

[I mean, it isn't as if I would withhold information from the village. I've been very cooperative with you, surely you can agree?] I protested.

For whatever reason this only caused the warrior woman to frown with even greater ferocity.

[That's true] she admitted, [but I want to see for myself what is happening. Perhaps my father is involved. At any rate, it's past time I went to lend my hand to assist any survivors. The village will be fine if the rest of my squad stays to help train the people here.]

[Gah!] I croaked, flailing to think of some reason why she shouldn't tag along. This lady is trouble! I'm not sure I could take travelling with her all over the north! [We monsters can move quickly and for long distances. Do you really think you can keep up?]

She smiled at me, I'm sorry to report that it didn't make her look any less fierce.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 288: Deflec**

Couldn't keep up eh? The monster kind is supreme, huh? We can faster, further, longer! Morrelia must have been laughing up her sleeve whilst looking down at my stupid, fat face. After we left the Village, giving Morrelia a short period of time to inform her squad and pack her essentials we set off, leaving a

concerned looking Enid behind as we journeyed to the north, heading back towards the ravaged lands of the former kingdom of Liria.

My budding attitude as a monster supremacist has been thoroughly crushed by the leather armoured, dark haired woman. With Tiny lumbering at my side and Crinis riding on my back we departed at a run, sprinting away through the trees, clods of dirt flying behind us as we employed our dash skills, drawing on our reserves of stamina.

I'd been so confident!

What a fool.

When we stopped to rest after thirty minutes of solid dashing, Tiny and I both huffing and puffing, pushed to our limits by the physical exertion, I turned to find Morrelia standing behind me, a quizzical frown on her face. She wasn't even sweating!

I'd been so startled to see her, my eyes had almost bugged out my head. I can only give thanks that she can't read my facial expression. Impatient, she'd tapped her gloved finger to her forehead, indicating that she desired a mind bridge in order to communicate.

I sighed and wove the spell, irritated at myself for opening my fat mandibles.

[Why are we stopping?] blunt as always.

[Just ah, sussing our the situation, making sure we don't stumble into any roaming monsters. Not exactly easy to scout whilst running at top speed now is it?] I deflected.

That caused her to raise one eyebrow in query.

[That was your top speed?] she asked.

[Of course not! How could I, the ant known as the Diamond Speedster, have such a low running pace? When I get serious I am naught but a blur! The eyes of mere mortals are not enough to - yes, yes that is as fast as we can dash I'm sorry.]

Pathetic.

Halfway through my empty boasting my façade cracks and I immediately come clean, all resistance shredded by those piercing eyes.

[The Diamond Speedster eh?] her tone is carefully flat, not mocking in anyway, which only makes it worse.

[No. Not at all. The fastest ant in the colony is Vibrant. I'm a distant second] I confess, no longer holding any desire to try and deceive this damned amazon of a soldier.

To my fortune, she gets distracted.

[Vibrant? I didn't realise you had names. Do all of you have names?]

[No, not all of us. I've handed out a few names here and there but certainly not to everyone in the colony. My name's Anthony by the way.]

So grateful am I to be spared any mocking I hand over my name without even considering it, eager to keep the conversation away from my foolishness.

[Anthony?] Morrelia has a puzzled expression on her face, as if not quite believing that she is having this conversation, learning the name of monster in conversation. [I suppose, it's nice to meet you Anthony. I guess I can't call you 'Monster' anymore.]

I shrugged my antennae.

[Call me whatever makes you happy. It's no chitin off of my carapace. Since we are doing introductions, the giant bat faced ape is Tiny, and the little ball of tentacle death on my back is Crinis.]

Morrelia looked at my two companions in turn as I named them. She acts far more wary of the two of them than she does of me to be honest. I can't really blame her. Tiny is visually impressive, his gigantic, heavy frame, rugged silver fur and potent fists speak with great clarity about his prowess in battle. Crinis looks harmless, an inanimate little ball without a discerning feature, but anyone who had seen her in action would know enough to be afraid of what she can do.

[I didn't realise you had named your pets. Most don't from what I understand.]

[I didn't and still don't really know what I'm doing with the two of them] I admit, [I'm just sort of working things out as I go along.]

She turned back to look at me once again.

[Are they able to communicate as you do? Using mind magic?]

I shake my head.

[Not even a little bit. I had to take a skill that allows mental communication with pets to chat with them, they don't exactly have pheromone glands built it like the ants do.]

Morrelia nodded thoughtfully at my words, looking down at me with a somewhat changed light in her eyes. I'd chalked the conversation up as a win, since she hadn't brought up my attempt at leaving her back in the village due to her supposed lack of ability to keep up.

When it comes to running, the woman is more of a monster than I am!

If nothing else, our excursion out in to the field has given me an opportunity to better familiarise myself with this berserker soldier. Morrelia appears to be in her twenties, perhaps late twenties, although I could be adding years due to her stern attitude and there's a good chance a life lived in the wild battling monsters has done little to flatter her. Without looking stout or over muscled she manages to look solid. As if she were a rock capable of resisting whatever forces come her way.

She wears simple leather armour that leaves her arms bare, with wrist guards strapped to both forearms. Her twin swords sit on her belt, like the rest of her the sheaths are unadorned, simple, functional and practical.

In terms of appearance, she looks fine, I suppose. I'm finding it difficult to tell human features apart the longer I spend in my new body. I'm becoming more capable of distinguishing ant features though, which is a plus.

Her eyes are a piercing blue, like ice, which contrasts quite sharply with her dark hair, which is pulled back severely and tied into a short ponytail like... thing. Perhaps she'd look more appealing if she didn't wear a permanent scowl on her face. I'm not sure I've ever seen her look cheerful. Although, every time I see her she is having to talk to a giant ant monster, sooo .... It could just be me.

Unwilling to try and strike up conversation, Tiny and I rest for a few minutes before we continue our journey at a more reasonable pace this time. At least I managed to squeak out a level in dash.

My antennae waving with furious energy as we travel, I'm able to detect the scout trails pointing to various places of interest. The scent fades over time and more complex messages become harder to determine as the words start to blend into each other, so the scouts have worked to keep their signals simple.

"Dungeon tunnel, small", "river", "buildings".

The last one is what catches my attention. Some form of human settlement but the scouts themselves don't know enough about human society to be more specific. Is it a farm house? Perhaps a small village or town?

I decide to follow that trail. The mana in my core is slowly bleeding out at a constant rate, but I'm not too worried at this stage. Heaps of gas left in the tank and we are only a few hours from the nest right now. The point of no return is a long way off yet.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 289: The impac**

It takes several more hours of hard travel before we make it to the first group of building we've seen on our journey. A small cluster of farmhouses built close to each other, a family holding perhaps or a collection of folks gathering together for protection and company.

We spot the buildings a long way out. The tall, pointed roofs of the barns poked themselves above the tree line letting us know well in advance we were close to our destination. But even from a distance we could see the damage that had been done. Jagged edges ran down the side of the barn where smooth lines were expected, open holes in the thatch work and the lack of smoke from the chimneys spoke to what we could expect to find when we arrived.

I hardened my heart and continued to run forward. I couldn't help but glance toward Morrelia the closer we got. Her eyes were tight with emotion, whether worry or anger I couldn't be sure. I hope she doesn't get too angry when we get there. Going on an anti-monster rampage might be understandable when surveying their wreckage, but in her present company it might make things a little awkward.

Our steps were inevitable and it didn't take long to close in on the buildings, their condition exactly what I had imagined it would be. Crumbled walls, smashed doors, claw marks on the ground, the stones, the trees ... claw marks pretty much everywhere.

It was obvious that monsters had run through here, destroyed this small settlement and moved on. The most unfortunate thing were the clear signs of a struggle. A twisted pitchfork lay on the ground between two sturdy tables that had been braced against the door of the largest stone house. To one side I

noticed an old, rusted sword, snapped in half. On closer inspection, the indentations of powerful teeth could be seen on the blade, a sign of where a creature had bitten the sword to pieces.

It was horrible to imagine, a group of farmers, gathering together to try and hold off a swarm of creatures from the Dungeon below, something they didn't know much about, something they would never have expected to see. How would they have felt during that final struggle?

Most chilling of all is the complete lack of any sign of the people who had fought here. No remains for burial, no torn limbs, not even a blood stain.

As if a monster would ever leave Biomass behind.

Crawling over the buildings, up the walls and over the shattered ceilings, hit me hard. This was what the refugees were fleeing from, this was the fate of the thousands, tens of thousands of people who hadn't made it out. Perhaps they hadn't heard in time, perhaps they'd underestimated the danger, perhaps they just didn't believe it could happen. Whatever the reason, it had cost them dearly.

Against my will, horrible visions of returning the nest, only to find it destroyed and despoiled fill my mind. My siblings vanished, eaten by our hated foes, the Queen, my mother in this life, left a lifeless shell in her royal chamber. All signs of the brood would be gone, no eggs, no fat, squiggly larvae, no future for my kind at all.

Terrible! Unforgivable! I would be heart broken, filled with anguish and rage should such a thing come to pass!

Which is exactly why I'm avoiding Morrelia...

The leather clad berserker stomped around the sight, her tension rose with sign of futile combat we uncovered. Her fists clenched and her neck muscles grew taught until I was concerned her head would snap off from sheer pressure.

Even Tiny can see it and despite his normal, fight happy attitude, he doesn't appear to want to draw the attention of the dark haired warrior right now. I suspect he just doesn't want to be a punching bag since he's able to recognise that Morrelia is an ally and he wouldn't be able to fight back.

Finally, unable to restrain her anger any longer, Morrelia exploded with a guttural roar of fury and smashed one backhanded fist into a barn wall. For moment the only sound is the echo of her rage as she stood, breathing deep, before the barn wall collapsed, crashing into the ground and bringing the roof down with it.

...

Nice punch...

After a few more moments to gather her thoughts, Morrelia started looking about and I had a sinking feeling she was looking for me. Sure enough, she managed to spot me in my totally obvious resting place behind the chimney of another building. After waving to indicate I should join her on the ground level, she taps one finger to forehead, a frown creasing her face.

Not very patient are you?! Sorry if I can't wave the mystical fibres of this world into a universal translating mind joining bridge of sparkling complexity that would put a hundred spider webs to abject shame!

The nice thing about having multiple minds is that I can quite comfortably weave my spells whilst complaining internally, plenty of spare brain power to go around.

[You ok over there?] was my tentative opening line.

My concern only served to upgrade her frown into a glare.

[I'm. Fine. I want to move on, find some monsters to kill.]

[Of course we would have to move to find those, since, there sure isn't any of them here! Ha! Ha! Haaaa.]

Please don't berserk and kill me crazy lady.

Morrelia only snorted at my words.

[Where are we going?]

[Well] I wondered, [I suppose we keep heading north, find the nearest town. If we come across any fresh looking monster tracks, we could follow them, try to track down any bands of wandering beasties. Are you good at tracking?]

I'm sure not.

[I'm a fair tracker] Morrelia assured me. [Let's get going. I don't want to stick around here any longer.]

[Fair enough.]

Leaving the depressing ruined farm buildings behind we continue on our scouting mission, three monsters and one human berserker. Our steady pace ate away at the distance as we moved further away from our allies and deeper into unknown territory.

The ant trails were starting to go cold this far out from the colony, the scouts unwilling to travel too far from the nest, which is only fair enough. Morrelia seemed to have an excellent idea of the lay of the land in what used to be southern Liria, so she guided us toward the closest town. Hopefully what we find there isn't the same as what we just left behind, but on a larger scale.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 290: Colony Building**

Not long after the Eldest had departed the colony, Cobalt stood in the Queens chamber watching the small Aphid Queen amble about under the watchful eye of his mother. Another ridiculous, unheard of practice, brought to life with a seeming absence of effort at the hands of the first of their kind.

The Eldest puzzled the Council of twenty, as the first hatchling of Formica Sapiens were beginning of think of themselves. Respect and deference was due to the Eldest by the simple nature of seniority, not to mention the conditioned fear that had been beaten into them over their whirlwind 'training'.

Even so, the Eldest puzzled them. So often engaged in thoughts and actions that seemed to have no place within an ant mind. Supposedly the twenty were of the same species, but they would never have dreamed of engineering an entire breed of ... cattle?

And yet it was such an elegant solution to a problem they hadn't even realised they had. A sustainable, constant source of Biomass which they could completely control. The colony would determine how many aphids were created and the colony would deploy them as they wished. The only limiting factor was the available space within the expanse below them.

It wouldn't be a problem for long, Cobalt felt confident the colony would soon extend their grasp out to encompass further expanses. If those others included sufficient plant life for the aphids to feed on then their population could be grown to allow the harvest to continue in those places also.

Lost in his thoughts, Cobalt didn't notice the young aphid Queen approach him. With a start he realised the small green insect was looking at him appealingly, its antennae waving to tap into his own.

"She's hungry" the Queen's voice sounded from above and Cobalt turned to see her looking down on him.

"Mother, it's wonderful to see you so cheerful" he said.

By a strange twist of the Dungeon, the Queen was no longer the eldest of their kind and thus technically no longer the leader of the colony, a position reserved for the Eldest, who didn't seem to want it, except when they did. Irrespective of this, the Queen, as mother to all the members of the colony, received the devotion and adoration of every worker. To see her tending her new pet with such cheer brought joy to every ant who saw it.

"Thank you child" she said, warmth overflowing in her words, "I must admit I quite enjoy having a pet of my own. Obviously my children bring me the greatest happiness, but they must work for the colony and it can be sometime between visits."

It was true. Even the ants in the Queen's chamber were rotated on a regular basis in order for her to be always protected by rested and prepared ants.

"If you were to ask for them to visit you then they would" Cobalt pointed out.

The Queen waved one antenna dismissively. "We must all do our work for the colony, child. I would never stand between a member of our family and their task."

Cobalt could only nod. It was true. An ant should live for their work just as they worked to live. The soldiers were busy training, scouting, planning, getting ready to commence their hunting forays into the Dungeon. The young queens were helping with the training of the current crop of hatchlings, along with the mages and healers. Already the training process of raising hatchlings to their first and second evolutions was undergoing refinement as the colony learned of more skills and mutations that would assist the ants as they prepared to take on their more specific roles.

Even the Core Shapers were busy, engaged in demanding practice of new skills they had uncovered and utilising the inspiration the Eldest had gifted them with to push their understanding of their role to greater heights, Even if they weren't able to craft pets for the colony yet, it was only a matter of time as

they improved their techniques every day. When more shapers were added to their ranks they would have a clear path of progression established for their new initiates to follow.

Whereas the Carvers...

Cobalt sighed heavily.

"Why so glum, child?" the Queen enquired, as she noticed his sombre mood even as she directed several workers to feed her pet.

"I am feeling confused, Mother" he mumbled, "I am unsure of my purpose within the colony. What exactly is the work that I am expected to achieve? I have thought and thought but I am still unsure which tasks I have been created to achieve."

The Queen pondered briefly before responding. "There is always work to be done child, an endless supply. There is digging, teaching, tending to the brood, hunting. For what reason are you unable to fund a task?"

"It isn't that I can't find a task to do, Mother, but rather what task is for me alone. When the Eldest designed our siblings it was clear what work they were needed to accomplish. My comrade Tungstant and I find ourselves at a loss. Look at me."

Cobalt used his front legs, thinner, more mobile and articulate than those of his siblings, to gesture at himself.

"Too small and defenceless to fight on the frontline, without the skills and mutations to fight on the backline. I have not the Will for spellcraft, not the tending instincts for brood rearing and not the healing gland for restorative magic. The advantages of my own evolution seem almost pointless."

"What are they, child? What are the advantages of your form?" the Queen urged.

Cobalt thought on it for a moment.

"I'm smaller than most others, but not faster. My forelegs are more mobile and I can move them like this" this was demonstrated by raising them in front of Cobalt's face, giving a clear view of the three claws that tipped each leg, arranged in a triangular formation.

Cobalt had only recently made note that the ability to rotate the claws wasn't shared by Cobalts' peers. When viewing the humans for the first time, the connection between this strange anatomy and humans wrists and fingers became apparent.

The Queen watched Cobalt demonstrate his dexterity for a moment before questioning again.

"And what else, child? I doubt that these claws are the full extent of your gifts."

"It pretty much is mother" Cobalt groaned, "I have a very high Cunning stat, but I don't know what I can do with it."

Cobalt couldn't be a general or a mage. What use was all of this brain power?

The Queen looked down at Cobalt thoughtfully, before turning her eyes to upwards to the stone and dirt above.



"The nest is getting quite haphazard, don't you think?" she enquired, almost to the air.

Cobalt frowned. It was true. The rapid expansion of the nest had been done too fast, with not enough thought given to proper planning and aesthetics. The whole place was turning into a horrid mess of tunnels and chambers, no foresight, no beauty at all.

"I believe someone should take control, before it becomes a problem. Perhaps you could take on the responsibility? Until you find your purpose?" the Queen suggested.

Cobalt barely heard her, mind already spinning with ideas, plans and designs for the layout of the nest. There's the farms, the brood chambers to accommodate of course. The above ground portion of the nest would need to be expanded, no doubt about it. Head buzzing and the previous concerns forgotten, Cobalt went to find Tungstant and rope the other Carver into this task. Two minds are better than one after all.