

Chrysalis 581

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 581: Attack on the eight-legged

Our second outing is less experimental and much better planned than the first. Ants spread throughout the surrounding terrain in a spiral pattern, mages burning bright flames that illuminate the area and chase the shadows back, exposing the creeping spiders that seek to approach from the dark. Just as it did when I was fishing for monsters with Tiny and Crinis, the hated light brings down more creatures who seek to extinguish the painful spark and before long the surrounding area is filled with hissing and spitting. From the shadows all around and overhead, the arachnids come running, their eight claws click-clacking on the surfaces they crawl on. Without the benefit of striking from the shadows, the ants see them coming and respond like the well-disciplined troops that they are. Barrages of acid and magic wound the enemy from range, slowing them enough that nimble scouts and soldiers can easily duck in and out, biting and tearing with their mandibles before darting away.

Always fighting, always moving, that's the way Vibrant likes to do battle.

My pets and I stay on the ground, but we strike out from the main group. Every now and again I flare a bright blast of fire into the air in an attempt to draw away a portion of the monsters descending on the ants and into our own monster blending apparatus. Crinis has detached herself from my back, for once, and joined the others on the front lines to help deal with the onrushing horde of skittering beasts. The spiders and scorpions come in all shapes and sizes, some of them clearly tier one, but strangely, many more are higher. I suppose the weaker are either killed off quickly or ascend once we get this deep.

[Invidia! Scorpions on the left!]

[*I sssseeee them a!!!!*!]

A barrier snaps into being just as the damn pinchy beats unleash another salvo of their damned spines. The projectiles hurtle through the air with incredible force, whistling as they pierce the space between us. They crunch into the demon's barrier with a sound like fracturing glass and I'm genuinely not sure if it's the barrier or the spines that have broken. The damn things hit *hard*. Not hard enough to break through my splendid carapace, of course, but hard enough that the impacts sent a shudder through my body.

If they hit Tiny? They'd rip through the muscle bound idiot. The poison wouldn't really matter once his soft, tender flesh was taken into account. Ah well, good thing he has Invidia backing him up and a kind, diligent master to pick up after him.

Eat flame throwers!

Twin jets of blue flame burst out from before my mandibles, roasting the damned arachnids where they stand. The creatures clack their claws and try to run, but I keep the fire trained on them until they collapse to one side, cooked to perfection. Of course, the sudden flare of light only brings more of the damned things down on our heads, but it's all fun and games.

[You have slain level 24 (III) Sagitta Scorpionem.]

[You have gained experience.]

A little bit of experience never went down the wrong way. Going to take a heck of a lot more to evolve if all I get to fight are tier threes though. I'm fairly confident there are much higher tier monsters above our heads right now. Maybe a few fives, perhaps a six? No more than that, though. I doubt a seven could manage in the mana here, certainly not at peak condition.

The skittering menace is really starting to mount up at this point. Dozens of the sneaky beggars are angrily snipping their fangs as they scramble down through the coral and leap from their webs. Normally I wouldn't worry about these sorts of numbers, but we have to be cautious due to the venom they possess. Which means we need to deploy excessive measures.

[Tiny! Invidia! Let's see the light show!]

[HHHURRRRRRAAAAAAAAA!]

[*I'll take their soulssssss!*]

[... Can you actually do that?]

I don't get a response from the little demon as he's already focused on unleashing his special combination attack with attack. I say special, really it's just the two of them going nuts with the largest power output they can manage in a short time frame. In practical terms, that means Tiny unfurls his wings and leaps into the air, lightning crackling all over his frame with such intensity I can barely stand to look at him. After charging up the voltage for a few seconds, he lets it rip and unleashes twisting ribbons of sizzling electricity in the air around him. The bolts seek to ground themselves through the nearest monsters, who quickly find themselves attracting far more lightning than they'd like to see. As he does this, Invidia begins to do what I haven't let him do since I reconstituted him, which is charge up his eye laser. Explosions rock the stone around us as the envy demon weaves his magic of destruction, all the while his one eye grows more and more bulbous and luminous. It isn't long before it starts to feel as if we have a bright green lamp of extreme power beaming out into the dark. Being the crafty little demon he is, Invidia lines up the maximum number of spiders he can before he finally unloads the spell.

It's just as destructive as I remember, shredding through stone, spiders, scorpions and everything else that happens to get in the way of it. Invidia himself delights in the destruction, wiggling his stick-thin arms over his eye and his too-small wings flap and flutter to keep him aloft. Between the two of them, we manage to clear away the swarm of monsters that was descending on us, but naturally the incredibly bright nature of their efforts, we've only called down another wave.

[Crisis, time to go to work.]

[Yes, master!]

Hey bubbly, chipper tone completely at odds with the grisly nature of her fighting style, Crisis begins to unfold herself even further, extending tentacle after tentacle out into the gloom around us. The descending spiders find themselves caught in an altogether different sort of web, one that coils and twists, that grips and squeezes. If that were all it did, it wouldn't be so bad. But no, after that point the barbs come out, followed by the tearing and grinding. Mere tier three creatures have little hope of standing up to Crisis, not unless their numbers were truly absurd. I still need to unleash the odd jet of flame, usually at monsters coming toward us from across the ground, but Crisis takes care of the majority of the monsters above over the next five minutes.

Even though I can't see everything that goes on up there, I can hear the spiders start running away in terror, so I can take a guess at what it was like.

[Uh, good job, Crinis.]

[Thank you, master!]

So saying, she gathers herself into a blob of pure darkness once more and drops down onto my abdomen, glomping onto my carapace once more and making herself at home.

[Oof! Alright then. Let's start a slow retreat back to the group and see how we all went.]

With my pets in tow, I begin to retrace our steps back toward the agreed meeting point. There are still many monsters about in the darkness and we deal with them as they appear. A lot of precious Biomass is left behind as we do this, but I'm hoping that we'll be back to collect it before it dissolves back into the Dungeon. It's more important that our little strike force get together and assess our progress than spending time gobbling down food. There'll be plenty of time for that later!

Before long, I run into Vibrant and her group, already running through the numbers and assessing the situation. Well, her generals are doing that. Vibrant herself is running around between groups of ants, checking everyone is well, asking if they need help and generally sticking her antennae into everyone else's business.

"Vibrant!"

"Eldest! Hi-hi! How'd you go fighting the nasty things?!"

"Uh, well, I suppose. How about you and your team?"

"We did good! Really good!"

Somehow I doubt she has the numbers to back that statement up.

"Alright then. Let's go through it...."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 582: The great working pt 1

Deep beneath the surface, under layers of rock and stone, burned a flame that had never been seen on Pangera before. No ordinary flame, this. It did not burn, yet its heat was unbearable. Had no colour, yet glowed bright with the light of molten steel. Made no sound, yet contained the ringing of a thousand hammers on a thousand anvils. The flame of insect industry had roared to life within the Colony of Formica Sapiens and its intensity grew day by day such that should it continue unchecked, it would consume all the world.

The Eldest had commanded his siblings to look upon the humans, on their sciences, skills and craft, and learn from them. The Colony had done, as they always did, their utmost to comply. No effort was spared, no question left unasked and every observation was discussed, disseminated and dissected so that every kernel of wisdom would be extracted. The blacksmithing trade was one that the Colony had initially dismissed. What need had they for tools? Their mandibles could dig better than any spade! Cut rock better than any pick! Not only that, what need had the ants of swords, spears or axes? Their bodies

were not soft and weak, like the humans were. The opposite was true! Where the humans sought to compensate for their sagginess with more solid materials, the ants were already armed and armoured from birth! What need had they for metal?

Yet, there were other concerns. Many valuable minerals could be found in the Dungeon. If the Colony learned to extract and refine them, trade became possible. As knowledge of construction grew, the ability to manipulate metals became more valuable. As Skills at finer manipulations were uncovered and levelled up, more detailed metal work was possible. Suddenly the ant smiths were called upon to make brackets, fittings, moulds and pins for any number of widgets. Yet the initial assessment still rang true within the Colony: they did not need smiths to forge arms nor armour.

The crafter startled from her torpor and began to drag her antennae through her elbows for a clean, still feeling groggy. Ever since she'd evolved to tier four her rest just hadn't been the same. Antennae clean, she began to pick over herself in the way that only insects would recognise. A fastidious need for cleanliness was born into all the ants of the Colony, and it never left them, no matter how intelligent they had become. Her first task of the day complete, she stretched all six of her legs and then, slowly at first, began to crawl out of the chamber she shared with her sixty two roommates. At least this time she hadn't had to sleep whilst clinging to the roof. That was always a less restful torpor.

Entering the tunnels, she felt the ever present messages of the Colony waft into her antennae. "Go this way for such and such", or "go that way for things and stuff" none of it was relevant to her, yet it always helped invigorate her. She felt immediately connected to the larger organism, the super-organism, that was the Colony itself. Her chamber wasn't far from where she performed her work and she was eager to return to it, so she made good time through the tunnels, the twists and turns as familiar as her own legs.

One more left turn and she was in her element. The temperature rose with each step and the ringing sound of metal impacting on metal filled the air. Every chamber she passed was part of the great machine the Colony had built within its nest. A powerful production line that took raw ore at one end, processed it, refined it, blasted it in a crucible and produced ingots of strong metal at the other end.

She herself had been part of developing that project, the frustrating days of experimentation, of trial and error as the detail obsessed carvers iterated on what they'd learned from the humans, always seeking to improve by even a fraction of a percent. She was aware that those tests continued still, elsewhere in the nest. Waste was inefficient and inefficiency was not something the Colony was prepared to tolerate. Thus they strove to improve their processes. Every ingot that formed with impurities was an indictment on the entire carver caste, an insult that burned inside their carapace and drove them to do better.

But she had long graduated from that more menial labour. Her Skills at handling the refined metals had grown at a prodigious rate, such that she had been given a new task. Entrusted with the finished product of the long refinement process, her new task was the final and most important of all: smithing.

She came to her own chamber and eagerly leapt inside, ready to begin. A fresh stockpile of ingots lay waiting, delivered as she rested, as they always were. Now brimming with energy, she rushed to her station and began preparing it for work. Enchantments were activated, the fire primed, the air circulation hummed to life and the quenching stations were meticulously examined for faults. As she busied herself preparing, she was interrupted by a somewhat unwelcome visitor.

"The materials consumed by your project are becoming a drain," the message wafted around the chamber, disturbed by the airflow that was necessary for the ants to work in such hot environments.

With a sigh, the crafter turned to the entrance and came face to face with what humans would consider a 'boss' or 'supervisor'. Such roles didn't really exist within the Colony. Each ant was given responsibility that best suited their abilities and inclinations. This particular carver had a talent for organisation and an excoriating eye for detail. Giving her responsibility for managing the resources of the foundry made perfect sense.

"My Skills continue to improve day by day." the crafter defended herself, "I'm confident that the next rank up will be crucial in unlocking the techniques I need to complete the work."

"How many levels is your blacksmithing skill from its next rank up?"

"Three."

The newly arrived crafter's antennae twitched as she envisioned the amount of raw materials required to provide enough metal for those three levels.

"I know I don't need to remind you, there isn't much enthusiasm for your project within the caste. Some have even begun to suggest you are being selfish by pursuing such an unneeded piece of equipment."

"Selfish..."

That stung. To learn that her own caste, her own contemporaries would say such a thing about her... did they really have so little faith in her abilities? Nameless she may be, but it was no conceit to say that she possessed the highest Blacksmithing Skill in the Colony, at Expert Blacksmithing (III) 17, so close to the fourth rank. She'd been working with metal longer than almost any other ant. Did they really think she would be pushing ahead with a project such as this if she wasn't firm in her resolve?

She shook her antennae. It mattered not. Only results mattered.

"I have utmost belief that I will produce results. All that is needed is time."

The other crafter nodded.

"I will give you as much time as I can. Though you burn through ingots like none other in the Colony, it's also true that you level up faster than anyone else. Hard to think that you'd be in the wrong."

"I ... thank you."

Without another word, the ant departed, leaving the crafter to her own devices. Unwilling to waste any time, she began to renew her preparations. Her mandibles and legs were busy, but her mind was focused on something different. Ever since she'd been introduced to the concept, she couldn't help but be captivated by it. The idea of an ant, bedecked in armour, a steel insect juggernaut, had possessed her. Should she succeed in creating it, an all-new type of soldier would be born, one with an entirely different sort of strength!

Her heart ablaze with passion, the ant grasped hold of the first ingot in her mandibles and put it to the fire. Her last prototype had failed, but she had learned much, and her Skills had grown. Perhaps this time, she would break through.

Chrysalis

Chapter 583: The Great Working pt 2

The crafters of the Colony were an interesting and formidable bunch, to be sure. The first time I worked with them was when I had heard they were willing to provide certain materials, namely processed mana infused woods, at near cost. Being an engraver and enchanter, such a ridiculous drop in price was far too tempting to give up, even if it meant dealing with an occupying force of monsters. If my competitors were to take advantage of this new supplier and I didn't, they could price me out of the market instantly! In many respects, I didn't have a choice, and, I'm a little ashamed to say, I wasn't pleased at being forced to deal with the 'monsters' at the time. I saw this move on their part as a way of forcing the city to become reliant on their help. Since the gates were closed and Dungeon delving banned, we didn't have anywhere else to go but to rely on an ever dwindling stockpile anyway.

So, steaming on the inside I swallowed my pride and took part in a trade mission. The ants and their human associates were extremely accommodating, which did little to dull my distrust, and led the group of similarly disgruntled merchants and crafters to the closest nest. Our safety was impeccably managed. Not once in my life had I experienced such a peaceful journey through the Dungeon. What was more surprising, was that the ants and their associates were more than happy to speak on the nature of this trade agreement, and their honesty was almost disturbing to a long-time businessman such as myself.

They were open about the reason for the low price they demanded for their goods. They simply had little need of money and were harvesting the materials at a rate faster than they could consume them. When I pointed out that they were processing the raw materials themselves, couldn't they then go ahead and complete the final product, they admitted that the number of ants in the Colony dedicated to creating such things was limited. They didn't see a need for wands, couldn't operate bows in the classical sense, were insulted by the idea of a stave and used stone for almost all their furniture.

(The idea of insect furniture was quite startling to me at the time.)

From the description I was given, I began to think of the crafters in the ant community as short sighted, lacking in appreciation for their craft and quite possibly stupid. How wrong I was. The crafters of the Colony were INSANELY dedicated. Their attention to detail was inhuman, their work ethic, unparalleled. When they showed us the chambers where the raw woods were cut and shaped, the workers were industrious to the point of obsession. A single poor cut was intolerable to them and every one of them was fanatical in their pursuit of efficiency. When next they showed us the area in which the mana grains were examined and refined, I almost couldn't believe my eyes. Row after row of ants sifted and organised the cuts of wood before meticulously examining each one. Not a single one faltered in their concentration for even a second in the hour I was there.

I was beyond impressed. Refining the grains is mind-numbing, headache inducing, incredibly detailed work. Highly qualified workers that could perform this task were almost impossible to find and worth their weight in gold, simply because almost no sane person could endure the job and its exacting standards. I came away sure in the knowledge that Colony, for as long as it existed, would become the centre of industry in the area. Who could hope to match that level of production?

As I worked with them more, I came to see that the only real weakness of the ant crafters was their lack of imagination. They could grind through tedious tasks like no sapient creature ever could, but when it

came to making bold leaps of creativity. They were the definition of 'by the book'. I was certain that this would come to be a lasting advantage that we held over them. How disappointed I was to learn that it simply wasn't true for all of them. Even within an ant Colony, remarkable individuals could emerge that completely upset their dynamic.

-Excerpt from the journal of an unknown bowyer of Rylleh.

The crafter laboured tirelessly, firing and shaping the metal without pause or rest. It consumed all of her attention, to the point the ant who delivered her Biomass was forced to physically drag her to the food before she would eat it. She made fine rings and riveted them together, she made solid plates that overlapped with cunning joints, she made fine scales and layered them, she made and made and made. Small test pieces, larger scale prototypes. She burnt through all of the knowledge the System had granted her on the working and shaping of metal, desperate to find a solution that would meld what she knew about armour with the reality of Formica Sapiens biology.

She didn't stop for three days, until she was dragged unceremoniously from her chamber, still trying to work the bellows and fire another ingot.

"No! I'm so close to the next level!" she cried out, straining against the firm pull of the three ants tearing her from her work.

"You've already skipped one mandatory rest period," one of them scolded, "any more and we'll be forced to block you from entering the workshop for three days."

Three days?! She couldn't bear it! Filled with indignation against the Eldest for their regulations, the crafter allowed herself to unceremoniously dragged through the tunnels and deposited back in her rest chamber. She resisted the urge to try and sneak back in, that hadn't gone well for her the last time she'd tried. They'd be on the lookout for a repeat offender like her anyway. There was little choice but for her to accede and get some rest. But first...

She moved through the chamber, careful not to disturb the torpor of the others in the room as she made her way to the back corner. Once there, she used her mandibles to lift a strategically placed stone to reveal a small steel container buried in the dirt. Slowly, so as not to make any unnecessary noise, she lifted the box up with her mandibles and opened it to reveal a small collection of materials and cores. The rainy day supplies!

She couldn't possibly rest yet, her vision hadn't even begun to fade! So instead, she continued to grind away in secret at her second passion: enchanting. She'd only recently reached the third rank in her enchanting Skill, quite a ways behind her blacksmithing, but with the limited time and resources she had, she considered it quite the achievement. She felt that she would never be satisfied handing her work off to another crafter to complete. Imagine, when she finally managed to complete the first, perfect ant armour, only to give it to someone else to stuff up the enchanting work?! The very thought was enough to make her grind her mandibles.

To prevent such a travesty, she spent the next five hours tinkering with the cores and metals, testing different combinations until her mind felt dull and fuzzy. Only then did she pack away the box, conceal it once more and allow herself to fall into torpor.

It wasn't long into her next shift that the magical milestone came to pass.

[Expert Blacksmithing (III) has reached level 20, upgrade available.]

Elated, she raced into the menu to confirm the selection.

[Expert Blacksmithing (III) -> Basic Metalsmithing (IV). Cost 1 sp. Imbues the Skill user with more detailed knowledge of metalworking, guiding them to more accurate and finer shaping. Also grants advanced knowledge of metalworking patterns.]

Yes, yes, yes, YES!

She mentally smashed the confirm button and almost swooned as she felt the knowledge begin to trickle into her mind. New ideas, new methods, new instincts all blossomed in her thoughts as the System poured the knowledge into her head like a cup being filled with life giving water. When it was done, she remained perfectly still, digesting, thinking, feeling out exactly what it was that she had learned. She remained that way for an hour, before she realised she had yet more to do with her menu.

Once more she opened the interface and mentally tabbed through it, this time checking for new Skills. Had her advancement unlocked anything new? A speciality? A more specific, in-depth Skill? Almost in a frenzy, she ripped through the menu until she found something.

[Armour Smithing (I)]

Finally! Weapon smithing was also there, but she ignored it completely. Here finally was the Skill she'd been hoping for! Maybe with this, she'd have the knowledge necessary to make her vision a reality! Just before she confirmed the Skill purchase, yet another caught her eye.

[Enchantment forging optimization (I)]

What was that?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 584: The Great Working pt 3

As much as the crafter wanted to leap into further work, to practice each and every new pattern she'd learned to tease out all of the little morsels of information that could only be learned through application, she knew she couldn't. She was the first Blacksmith to reach the rank four Skill and therefore the first to unlock the new Skill specialisations, which meant she had certain obligations to the Colony.

She packed away her tools and shut down her workstation before stepping into the tunnel and hunting down the organiser. The ant turned to her with a quizzical tilt to her antennae.

"I didn't expect to see you out of your room. I suppose you must have ranked up Blacksmithing?"

The crafter nodded.

"I did," she confirmed, "and I have a few new Skill options to report."

"Excellent news. I'll fetch the brood tenders."

She scurried off, leaving the crafter to wait. Thankfully, it wasn't long before she returned with a pair of eager brood tenders who took over the moment they entered the chamber.

"Is this the crafter? How wonderful! Well done, sibling, we're very proud of you! The very first in the Colony to unlock these new Skills, a truly meaningful contribution."

"And new Skill unlocks as well! We'll have to go through your status in detail to ensure we can pinpoint the conditions. We have a lot of work to do!"

The crafter sighed as the two brood tenders fussed over her as if she were a new hatchling. It was only natural that the tenders took responsibility within the Colony for studying and documenting the System, since they were the ones most involved in teaching it, but their mothering nature slowed the process down significantly. It was several hours later before the crafter, near her limits, was finally able to return to her workshop, exhausted, but brimming with excitement. She threw herself into her work, determined to unravel the secrets of her new Skills and push them into the next tier.

For three whole days she forged without rest, her fire burned unending and the ring of clanging metal sounded again and again as she worked in a fever. Her mad spree was only brought to an end when a team of five workers forced their way into her workshop (she'd barred the door) and dragged her away as she cackled with mad delirium.

After a full day of observed rest, during which she was restrained by an earth mage, the crafter was allowed to return to her workshop to inspect the fruits of her labours. The last day and a bit was little more than a blur in her memory, so she was quite surprised to see the sheer volume of different patterns and pieces she'd produced. Her two new Skills had even made it to the second rank! Something was beginning to synthesise in her mind and she couldn't wait to get started!

Except there was something standing in her way.

"You're running out of time," the supervisor told her.

"What?" the crafter was shocked, "I'm closer than I've ever been before!"

"And the amount of resources you're consuming has increased, with nothing to show for it."

With a flick of her mandibles, the supervisor indicated the sheer amount of armour bits and pieces that littered the small workshop.

"It's becoming harder and harder for me to source materials for you. If you want to continue this project, then you need something to show for it, and soon. The voices of those who are displeased by the waste are growing louder by the day. Inefficiency isn't something the Colony is willing to tolerate."

"But how are we supposed to develop something new without experimentation and failure? How am I supposed to push my Skills forward without practice?"

It was generally accepted in the Colony that to develop Skills and uncover new branches of knowledge it was necessary to test, test and test again. Hundreds of ants had been committed to sub-optimal Skill and mutation builds in an attempt to unearth new fusions or combinations. Yet, they accused her of waste?!

"Your case is somewhat unique," the organiser told her, "because the products you produce in your practice have no value to the Colony, yet to mine and refine the metal you use costs a huge investment of energy. Furthermore, many are convinced that what you are trying to make is something with

fundamentally no value. I've heard several say that the most talented blacksmith in the Colony is wasting her talent. Only results will still their voices."

With that stark warning, she left the crafter alone to consider her path. In the mind of the crafter, there was pressure, concern, and not a little anger at the short-sightedness of her fellow crafters, but not a single iota of doubt. She knew, KNEW, that what she sought to build was close to being within her grasp. The ant armour would be realised! She would forge it right here, with her own mandibles!

Burning with conviction, the crafter cleaned her workspace, and began to plan. As she lifted different pieces of armour, each forged with their own unique methods, an image began to take shape in her mind's eye. A powerful soldier ant, covered in gleaming metal that thrummed with enchantments. An iron juggernaut of unstoppable might. The Steel insect!

Yes! She could use moulded plates over a layer of mail for the head. And scale would be used in the joints and to cover the petiole. The abdomen would need to be flexible, of course, but also thick. The thickest plates would need to be around the thorax. She had to consider how it would attach to the carapace itself. Where to strap it? And how would the armour interact with the carapace? There had to be a way to maximise the benefit of both carapace and steel...

In her head, the full suit slowly began to take shape as she considered processes, pieces and techniques, discarding this one, modifying that one. And between the carapace and armour, an entire new layer began to take shape. One that would allow the armour to flex, yet be braced against the unyielding exoskeleton beneath. As she filled in the details, the more her understanding of enchantment played into the design. If she modified these materials, the enchantment effect would be stronger. If she connected this section to that, the magical effect wouldn't be diluted by the incompatibility of the metals.

Eyes ablaze and antennae twitching with insane energy, she fired up the forge and shoved in a mandible load of ingots. Today, she would complete a prototype that would prove the entire Colony wrong!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 585: The Great Working pt 4

"I still don't understand why I have to be the one to wear this," Leeroy grumbled.

"You know exactly why," Brendant was having none of her sibling's nonsense, "because we asked this crafter to make it to fit you, since you're the one most in need of extra protection."

Leeroy fidgeted and wiggled and the many, many different pieces of equipment were attached to her carapace by the fussy crafter, who constantly had to poke and prod the council member to get her to be still.

"Stop your fidgeting," the crafter scolded, "the point of this armour is to keep you alive."

"That's why I don't like it," the soldier muttered.

"What was that, Leeroy?" Brendant demanded.

"Nothing! Nothing at all."

"You've been warned any number of times to adjust your attitude," Brendant told her wearily, "you aren't a hatchling anymore, stop acting like it. It's your responsibility to fight, yes, but also to do

everything you can to preserve the investment the Colony has made in you. Do you think everyone is given complete core evolutions like you? Does every ant in our family receive the personal education of the Eldest? You need to stop being so selfish."

Leeroy endured this lecture in dignified silence, she'd heard the same thing many times before. At times she wondered if she was just built fundamentally different compared to the rest of her siblings. She just couldn't see things the same way they did. But the Eldest had spoken, and everyone appeared to accept their word. All Leeroy could do is continue to secretly plot and plan her own glorious contribution to the greatness of the Colony. Something that this new armour would actively seek to impede!

Already she hated it.

"There are five cores powering the enchantment matrix," the crafter was saying, "two of those are here and here," she thwacked the metal with an antenna to indicate the locations, "which help to regulate the weight of the heavier plates."

The crafter moved toward Leeroy's head where she finished tightening the straps for the helmet as she continued explaining.

"The other three cores are concentrated toward the front of the armour. The metals here are infused with earth mana and the cores help to enhance that stability and hardness. The idea is to give maximum protection to the vital areas, as well as preserve the mass and momentum advantage the armour gives."

As she finished her explanation, the crafter stepped back and felt a surge of joy as she beheld the completed product. Leeroy was a large tier four soldier, with a thick carapace that housed a powerful musculature. Even with the enchantments lightening the load, the full set of armour still weighed over a ton, a soldier with less physical stats would likely struggle to move wearing that suit.

Watching the process from the side, Brendant had to admit that the crafter had done an incredible job. The many various pieces of armour fit together ingeniously, clips, hooks and straps used in a variety of clever places to help hold the suit together. She didn't have high expectations for this project, but looking at the final product now, she had to admit that she was impressed. Leeroy had been transformed from an indomitable soldier to something else entirely. The helmet gave her the visage of a fearsome demon, the folds of the metal that protected her eyes cast her features into shadow. Plates of metal swept down the sides of her head and curved around her mandibles, jutting forward beneath them to protect her mouth.

Thick plates covered her abdomen and thorax, with the most attention given to the plating down the sides of her body. Virtually no protection was afforded to the underside of the carapace. The idea was to keep the body low and charge forward, allowing the armour to both protect, and add to the impact.

The shock absorbent properties of the armour were also excellent. The crafter had done an incredible job of building an internal structure on the inside of the metal. The joints cunningly inserted would allow the armour to flex whilst the inner layer would transfer force from the armour to the carapace, dispersing the impact across a wider area and borrowing the strength of the existing exo-skeleton.

"Well, nothing to do now but test it. Are you happy to proceed, crafter?"

The smaller ant did one final tour around the indignant form of her test subject, checking straps and brushing her antennae lovingly over the plating one final time. Suddenly nervous, she stepped away and steadied herself before replying.

"It's ready."

The supporting ants cleared space to allow the two big soldiers some room.

"Alright then Leeroy, I'm going to enjoy this!" Brendant laughed rushing forward.

For the next ten minutes, she charged, bit and battered her sibling as Leeroy stood and absorbed the punishment with a resigned attitude. From the side, the crafter watched intently, her heart pounding in her chest. She needn't have worried, her work held up remarkably well. With her powerful jaws and many mutations, Brendant was able to puncture the armour in several places, but was unable to do any meaningful damage to the carapace beneath, the force of her mandibles wasted on the metal.

"I have to say, it's far more durable than I expected," the soldier observed as she stepped back.

"Although carrying all that weight can't be good for your mobility."

"Certainly, only the stronger soldier specimens would be able to wear a suit this heavy," the crafter informed her, "for other castes, such as the generals, a more lightweight version would be needed."

"Makes sense. Alright then Leeroy, time for revenge, let's have it."

After enduring the attentions of her sibling for so long, Leeroy was more than ready to return the favour. Though, it should be noted that her enthusiasm was lacking. Without the threat of very real, mortal danger, she just couldn't become enthused. She shook her body to settle the armour, still adjusting to the feel of it before she set her feet and charged. Although slow to get going, she built up speed quickly, the dirt flying every time her claws dug into the soil.

The crafter's eyes shone as she watched that charge. The power, the force, the unstoppable momentum! This was it!

Mandibles wide, Leeroy dashed with all her strength, her speed much reduced but the power of that charge was undeniable. Brendant braced herself as best she could, but it was for naught. When the fusion of steel and insect that Leeroy had become collided with her, Brendant was instantly bowled over. Unable to stop her own momentum, Leeroy charged directly through her sister and smashed into the wall of the tunnel, cracking the stone heavily and burying her head in the dirt.

It took several minutes to extract the soldier, but the crafter was elated. This model of the armour was merely the first. In her eyes, it was a crude and brutish thing, lacking the elegance and with only a fraction of the raw strength that she envisioned. Even so, look at how well it performed!

"Well," Brendant said as she picked herself up, "that's quite the thing, isn't it?! I've got a crack in my carapace! I don't think she even bit me! I'm impressed! What do you think Leeroy?"

A little dazed, the other council member staggered over with a depressed air.

"It works really well. I feel almost un-killable in this."

"So why do you look so unhappy?"

"I feel almost un-killable in this."

"Ah."

Ignoring her idiot sister, Brendant turned to the crafter.

"Congratulations. Although it has a huge cost in resources, this armour does appear as if it will have a use. We can create and maintain a small number of these to begin with. I presume you have revisions? Smithant?"

The crafter started.

"What's a Smithant?"

"You are. You've got a lot of work to do. I think I might be recommending the Eldest pay you a visit as well, if they get a chance. I'm sure they'd want to see what it is you've done. Good job!"

Chrysalis

Chapter 586: The delegation pt 1

It would be an understatement to say that Enid was nervous. The first time her husband had taken her into the Dungeon, she'd been nervous. When smuggling Karak shells from the blue desert, she was nervous. Marching into the heart of the Colony's nest? She was *distinctly* nervous. When representatives had approached her about the ants wishing to engage in further cooperation with the refugees living on the surface, she'd nearly fallen out of her chair. It was true that the people had grown more comfortable in the presence of the monsters, even Enid herself had experienced a profound shift in attitude toward them, but she'd felt that the ants were more or less uncaring of the humans who were their neighbours.

Certainly, they were curious. Even now members of the Colony, almost exclusively mages and crafters, wandered through the town, observing, questioning. It was hard for a craftsman to go a day without having a giant insect poke its antennae through a window and start asking about this or that. Some found it intrusive, but the ants certainly did more than their fair share of work around the place. Whether it was tilling fields, sourcing construction materials, extending the irrigation system that they themselves had built, the Colony did a lot to help a group of people they didn't really owe anything to.

She stepped carefully as they continued to tread through what must be close to sacred ground to the ants. They'd trudged through the Dungeon for many hours to make it to this subterranean nest. The town council had been more than a little apprehensive about journeying this deep, in the frontier kingdoms there were very few people who were able to venture to the second strata safely. Aarran the Bowyer had been amongst the most hesitant to venture down, yet the Colony had managed to make the trip almost boring.

Being escorted by a full hundred monsters seemed almost extravagant, but they'd done a remarkable job. Enid didn't think she'd even *heard* a monster during the entire trip, a ridiculous thought under normal circumstances, yet the sheer numerical strength of the Colony made the impossible possible.

"I still don't believe what I'm seeing."

Enid rolled her eyes and looked at Isaac as he gazed with wonder at the intricate carvings that adorned every wall that they'd passed. She herself had been shocked at the quality of the work. Her mercantile

spirit had ignited at the sight of the intricate details. Work of this quality would have high demand in several markets that she could think of. She'd have to see if she could track down the artist during her visit.

"Try and focus, Isaac. We're here representing Renewal as members of the council. Stop gawping at the walls and try to project a little dignity," she snapped wryly.

The guard captain did straighten up, but it didn't last long. Five minutes later he was staring idiotically at something else. Enid went to rebuke him again, but Arran cut her off.

"Leave him be, Mayor. I can hardly keep my mouth shut myself. If you'd told me something like this existed in the Dungeon, I'd have called you a liar to your face."

She turned her glare in this new direction, but the grizzled old craftsman was as immune to her ire as always. He merely shrugged and went back to carefully placing his feet as they navigated the tunnels.

[Are there any problems?] the slightly alien voice of her guide rang in her mind.

She concentrated on the connection and replied.

[No, nothing wrong. I think my people are just a little surprised at how far your family has progressed in such a short time.]

She could feel the ant's pride radiating across the bridge. Enid had noticed that the best way to compliment an ant was to praise their family.

[Yes, we have worked very hard to apply the concepts that we have learned from the Eldest.]

[Didn't you learn them from us?]

[It was the Eldest's idea to do that,] the mage shrugged.

That was another observation that Enid had made. They were almost incorrigible in their determination to assign credit and or praise to Anthony, often for things that he himself wouldn't agree had anything to do with him. Indeed, after considering the value of the artworks that she'd seen, her second thought had been how hilarious the 'Eldest's' reaction must have been the first time he'd seen it.

Rounding a corner they came to a large central chamber. Its size and perfectly uniform shape was enough to impress the visitors, but the elaborate carvings on the walls, when viewed alongside the truly massive carving of Anthony in the centre, were beautifully illuminated by glowing orbs placed around the base. The walls and floor of the room bristled with ants, climbing over each other as they darted in and out of the many tunnels that branched from this probably central area. Enid sucked in a breath at the sight, there must be thousands of Colony members around them at this moment in time.

"Ah! Welcome! Glory to the Colony!" came a call from their left.

"GLORY!"

Startled to hear another human voice in this nest of monsters, the delegation turned to see a group of robed figures approaching them after having exited a nearby tunnel. At their lead, as ever, was the one armed priest, Beyn.

"I was wondering when you were going to show up," Enid greeted him, "you've been down here this whole time?"

"I have," the priest's eyes were almost glazed over with joy at living in such close proximity to the ants and Enid averted her gaze from the disturbing sight. "The Colony - "

As he said the word, the figures behind him erupted in a unified shout of "Praise their wisdom! Praise the Colony!"

Beyn waited for them to finish before he continued. "- have been very accommodating. It seems that they were impressed at how useful my comrades and I proved to be during the siege and now wish to engage in a deeper partnership!"

The mayor of Renewal was shocked.

"You were *useful*?" she could hardly believe it. "I thought you'd all end up getting in the way before dying in a comical and stupid manner after making fools of yourselves."

Beyn's expression turned hurt.

"Really now, Enid. You surely wouldn't expect that the Colony -"

"PRAISE! PRAISE!"

"- would let us just die? Especially after asking for our help!"

Enid noticed that he didn't even attempt to protest the likelihood of them making fools of themselves, just that the Colony wouldn't let them die for it. With Beyn and his followers here, there were a total of thirty-five humans huddled together amidst the mass of insect life that boiled with activity around them. She tried to draw closer to Beyn.

"Have you any idea what they want us for?" she muttered, "look at what they've been able to achieve in just a few months! What can we actually *do* for them?"

The priest's eyes glittered at her praise for the Colony. He'd observed the softening of the mayor's attitude toward the ants over time, and was mighty pleased to see that it continued.

"I can only suppose," he whispered back, "that they want us to act as a face for their interests. During the siege, I was used to negotiate with the city and I think they want you and a few others to represent them in further talks."

Her business mind instantly understood what the Colony was driving at. By bringing along other people who had lived peacefully and prosperously under their 'rule', the ants would be able to start to allay the fears of the people in the city. They would *also* be able to make use of Enid's sharp negotiating skills when it came to matters that they themselves likely didn't understand. Although it was an imposition on Enid herself, it isn't like she would say no. Her responsibility was to the people of Renewal, and a deeper relationship with Anthony and his family could only benefit them.

[It is nice to see you all gathered here together,] a new, powerful mind reached out to Enid and spoke to her. Judging by the heads swivelling around her, the rest of the gathering was able to hear this new voice as well. How'd they worked *that* out?

A large ant pushed forward from the crush of insects around them and dipped its antennae in greeting.

[I am Coolant. Mage Ant and representative of the council here to welcome you to our main nest. It is nice to see both members of the town council,] she used one leg to gesture to Enid and her group, [as well as Priest Beyn and his acolytes who proved so useful at Rylleh. Come, let us move somewhere a little more private.]

A pause.

[I do ask that you be careful as we walk. We are moving to a room quite close to the brood chambers and security is very tight, as I'm sure you understand. Sudden moves or noises would make the guards jumpy and they take their role *very* seriously.]

With that warning, Coolant turned and began to stride through the press of ants, who began to clear a path and move around the humans as they started to shuffle forward. Enid herself could barely breathe as she turned to look with a face full of dread at the idiot acolytes trailing behind their leader. Those idiots were supposed to be quiet?!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 587: The Delegation pt 2

It took ten minutes for the ants to herd the humans into a side tunnel and from there into a small but comfortable room, complete with chairs and at which they could sit. Enid herself had no eyes for the furnishings, instead her focus was laser sharp on the ants around them who definitely appeared more tense and alert than they did a moment ago.

Antennae twitching, mandibles flexing, sudden, jumpy movements were all indications of nervousness that she'd witnessed in the ants and all of those signs were present in those watching them at this minute. All except Coolant, that is. The powerful mage was as her name, relaxed and comfortable as she asked for the humans to sit and took her place at the head of the table on a strange, ant shaped seat.

It slowly dawned on Enid what it meant to be so close to the brood. She knew how the lifecycle of the ants went. The larval ant monsters demanded a huge amount of Biomass before they could weave their cocoons and mature to full grown members of the Colony. Somewhere nearby, a literal army of flesh eating grubs were being served mountains of monster remains. In the back of her mind, she almost felt as if she could hear the sound of thousands of mandibles tearing into meat and crunching bone.

She felt sick.

Beyn on the other hand, was totally elated! He was so close to the heart of the Colony, he could practically hear the heartbeat thudding in the walls. It filled him ecstasy, yet also humbled him. What was one, pathetic life next to the majesty of the Colony and its children? Thousands of young miracles were being reared nearby, angels of the System. What could one such as him do in comparison to that?

The rest of the council looked nervously to Enid for leadership and she laboured to pull herself together. It wouldn't do to shame herself or the proud people of Renewal here! Come on Enid, pull yourself together! She reprimanded herself harshly and rallied her spirit, chasing the gnashing sounds away.

[Thank you for accommodating us here, Coolant,] she gestured to the seats and table, [it's clear you went to some trouble to make us comfortable.]

[Oh, it's nothing. The furniture is but stone and wood, things we shape easily enough.]

Aarran harrumphed quietly at this insult to his profession, but Coolant either didn't notice or ignored the man.

[We thank you anyway,] Enid continued as she kicked the idiot craftsman under the table, [though I must ask, why bring us so close to the brood chambers if it makes you uncomfortable? I, for one, am happy to relocate to another place if our hosts will be more at ease.]

Please let us leave!

[That won't be necessary,] Coolant replied, dashing her hopes, [the Eldest made it clear to us that if we want to receive trust from another sapient being, then we must extend trust. This is true on an individual level, but also on a societal level. It is our intention to seek greater trust from you and your people, so it is necessary that we display trust towards you. For that reason we have brought you here, next to our heart.]

The mage turned toward one wall to better gesture for her human audience.

[Through that wall and down a tunnel lies the egg-laying chamber of this nest where the Queen resides.]

This announcement was met with a stunned silence in the room. Not a single human made a sound as they stared toward that unassuming wall. None except for Beyn. The priest's eyes bulged in their sockets and a strangled gargling sound croaked out of his throat as he desperately tried to hold in his jubilation. So intense was the war of feeling within him that his face turned a deep shade of red and he was forced to bring his hand to his throat to prevent his roars of praise escaping his soul. This bizarre demonstration quickly drew the attention of everyone in the room, including Coolant, who had no idea what she was looking at. To the humans, it appeared as if the priest was actively trying to choke himself to death.

Enid wanted to leap across the table and knock the idiot out, but at her age and with her stats, she wasn't likely to succeed. The closest to Beyn were his acolytes, who insisted on sitting behind him, but they were just as lost to religious fervour as their leader, either silently praying with frantic energy or actively in the process of fainting. Before Enid had a chance to rectify the situation, Coolant went and made things worse.

[It was our intention to bring any who were willing to meet the Queen down into the chamber once our discussion was complete...]

Coolant sounded ever so slightly hesitant as she took in the strange mix of reactions she was getting. Nevertheless she pressed forward with the Colony's most generous offer of hospitality. Holding the mind bridge in so many divisions was taxing, even if she had help, and interpreting human responses was difficult at the best of times. When the two different groups were presenting her with such divergent expressions, she didn't know what to make of it.

When Beyn heard those words, a piercing shrill escaped his mouth, like the scream of a dying eagle, which caused him to clamp down on his throat even more vigorously, cutting off that noise and strangling it down to a low croak. By this time his eyes were completely bloodshot and his face had begun to darken its shade of red to verge on purple. He desperately needed oxygen but he wasn't willing to risk it. He couldn't! What if he disturbed the Queen?! What if he were to startle the larvae as

they grew?! No, better that he do what he must to prevent such a travesty from taking place. Better he were dead!

The rest of the acolytes were in little better shape as they each battled to contain an entirely new, even greater wave of exultation. As if their previous dam had been able to contain the waters of their joy, but this new flood, so soon after the first, was just too much for their reinforced banks to withstand. First one, then more, began to sway on their feet and collapse to the floor.

Beyn himself continued to hold on, though it only appeared he suffered more for it. The town council watched with horrified fascination as Beyn continued to croak and gurgle with his one remaining hand locked in a vice grip on his own neck. Wild eyed and trembling, the priest began to foam at the mouth as his eyes rolled up in his head and for the first time in months he wished he had his other hand back. The better to strangle himself with.

There was a profound silence in the room as the addled priest finally slumped from his chair, unconscious.

[I am uncertain what has happened,] Coolant said.

[Erm,] Enid stammered, [p-perhaps we might say that the honour of meeting the Queen was too much for Beyn and the acolytes. They felt that they were unworthy.]

The massive ant considered that for a moment before she nodded.

[It is well that they hold such respect. The Queen is the progenitor of us all and deserves such consideration.]

Enid breathed a sigh of relief as she inwardly damned Beyn and his idiot followers. They'd come so close to disaster thanks to these morons! Ironically, if they'd been any less devout, things would have been much, much worse!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 588: The Delegation pt 3

The talks themselves were the most straightforward negotiation of Enid's life. Coolant was calm, intelligent and without guile as she spoke clearly and directly with the human council.

The Colony wanted them to assist with negotiations going forward into the future, was this possible?

Yes, it was something they could do, indeed, there would be many who would be happy to volunteer to assist the ants, beyond the passed out fanatics on the floor.

In exchange for the assistance, the Colony would be prepared to expand their efforts to assist the town in its development. Including a wide ranging search campaign for more refugees.

Fantastic, this help would be most welcome.

And it was done. From start to finish it took less than five minutes for them to reach an in-principle agreement, and then a further five were required for Coolant to outline exactly what the oncoming talks with the Dungeon city of Rylleh would entail. Enid was able to gather, from the things that the mage said, that the Colony didn't really know what to do with the city, nor had any real interest in extracting

anything from it. The city had presented a threat, they neutralised that threat, now they just wanted to ensure that the city went along, doing its own thing, whilst not building any gates.

Coolant seemed to feel that this was an entirely reasonable position for the ants to take, and from their perspective, it was. Enid was quite certain that the people of the city wouldn't quite see it that way, what with their access to the broader Dungeon society being completely cut off. The list of complaints they'd bring to the table would be staggering, of that she had no doubt. But that was now her problem to deal with as much as it was the Colony's, that was her agreement.

With the generic talks completed, the moment that each and every member of the council had been dreading had arrived. Coolant was almost cheery as she brought it up to the delegation.

[With the more unpleasant business out of the way, I would like to now, as a gesture of trust, invite all of you to meet the Queen in her chamber. You will be heavily under guard, of course, but this is the deepest gesture of openness that we can offer, apart from allowing you to contact our young, which we aren't comfortable doing at this time.]

Such a direct and well-mannered invitation! Enid glanced at the rest of the council and sure enough, each of them was already sweating bullets. They managed to hide it well, but the widened eyes and frozen expressions on their faces told of the inner struggle taking place as they sought to find a reasonable excuse to turn down this visit. As if such a thing could be allowed. Imagine if the ants were to extend this invitation with open hearts, only for every visitor to refuse it. The mayor wasn't sure how the ants would take it, but in sapient societies, such a rejection would be seen as a massive slap in the face. She wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of coming face to face with such a monster, but she refused to insult the Colony in such a way.

[If you don't mind, Coolant,] she led with, [I'd like to accept your gracious invitation on behalf of the council. I would not want to disturb her majesty overmuch with our visit, I alone will be sufficient representative of Renewal.]

The palpable relief on the faces of her fellow council members was a disgrace and Enid turned a hard glare of contempt at the lot of them. They didn't even have the decency to look ashamed! Next time the elections came up, she'd have to make sure that more capable members of the community were persuaded to run. If this was the best that their people had to offer then they were doomed to begin with.

She turned back to Coolant.

[Though it would be nice if Isaac could join me in case I trip. I am very old for a human you understand.]

The giant ant tipped her antennae in acceptance even as Isaac released a disgraceful whimper, his face a picture of wounded betrayal.

[This is acceptable. I'm sure the Queen would prefer to not be crowded. Though I must ask, what is the term 'your majesty' referring to?]

Enid faltered.

[It's uh... a term used to refer to royalty.]

[Who is royal?]

[The Queen?]

Coolant stared at her for a moment, uncomprehending before she replied.

[But the Queen is not royalty, she is *the Queen*.]

...

[Of course.]

Enid and an openly weeping Isaac were escorted out of the room and back into the adjoining tunnel. Isaac managed to pull himself together after Enid whispered 'Morrelia' under her breath, which fortunately occurred before they reached a downward slope that they could see opened into a larger chamber.

The two humans steeled themselves before they descended under the watchful eyes of the massive insects that loomed over them, watching their every move. At the bottom of the slope, Enid closed her eyes for a moment as she braced her aged heart and then stepped forward into the chamber.

The Queen both was, and wasn't what she had expected. She was, by far, the biggest ant that Enid had ever seen, towering over the humans as she turned to stare at the two intruders with mild curiosity. Massive mandibles, a gleaming, thick carapace, her legs reached as tall as a house roof before angling back down to the ground. But where she'd expected a bloated, pulsating creature that was barely able to move under her own power, the Queen was instead powerful, sleek and mobile. Only her larger rear segment gave hint to the different nature of her species.

More than that, the presence of two *other* Queens was quite a shock to the system! Not as large as their mother, the two younger ants stood behind their larger parent as they goggled at the humans who had tread into this, the most private of all chambers. Indeed, other than Enid, Isaac, Coolant and the guards they'd come in with, there were no other ants in the chamber, making it the most peaceful and unpopulated room in the nest that they'd seen.

[I'll handle the mind bridge connection,] Coolant announced, [just give me a moment.]

An awkward silence descended between the two sides as they stood looking at each but unable to offer comment. Isaac had managed to take hold of himself quite well utilising deep breathing exercises and imagining Morrelia's excited face spattered in gore during an intense battle. Even the site of these truly intimidating insects wasn't enough to blow away the ardour he felt towards his goddess.

[Done,] Coolant announced, [Mother, this is Enid, Mayor of the human settlement on the surface and Isaac, some sort of soldier.]

The giant Queen brought her antennae toward each of them as they were introduced, getting a sense for them.

[Welcome to the egg-laying chamber, guests of my family. I must admit, I did not expect that any would accept the offer to visit this place, but I welcome you.]

The Queen's voice was deep, and warm. Not at all harsh or domineering as one might expect of a mighty monster of the Dungeon. Enid could feel a connection to that voice immediately. This was the voice of a matriarch, of someone who placed family above all. That was something she could relate to. She took a bold step forward and addressed the Queen.

[I... We are most pleased to be her, Queen of the Colony.] Manners never hurt anyone, it was one of Enid's dictums. [I have to ask, why did you think nobody would come here?]

Initially she'd thought that the Queen was assuming they'd be too frightened, but when she thought a little more, she doubted that was true. The Queen wouldn't think that anyone would be afraid of her, why would they? If the Colony had said they would be safe, then they would be safe. That's the end of the matter. And why would anyone doubt the word of the Colony? As far as Enid was aware, not one ant had lied even once in all of their dealings and conversations with humans. She thought something else must have gone on in the mind of the Queen, and she was interested in knowing what it was.

The Queen pointed toward Coolant with an antenna as she explained.

[I have a small understanding of human society. Of 'mayors' and 'rulers'. Individuals in charge of things. I am not such a figure in the Colony. I am the mother of many, but I am not a central figure now that we have more Queens.]

[Mother! That simply isn't true!] Coolant protested.

THWACK!

The Queen whipped one of her antennae down to crack it onto the head of the mage ant in a move that brought nothing to mind so much an impatient mother rapping her child on the head with a wooden spoon. The image was so comical that Enid near laughed out loud.

[You and your siblings' continued insistence on something that I do not see as real makes you near as frustrating as the troublesome one. Accept what I say.]

[Yes, mother.]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 589: The Delegation pt 4

Though the Queen probably wouldn't describe herself this way, to Enid, she was quintessentially a grandmother who was tired of her children and grandchildren fussing around her. To the elderly mayor of Renewal, this was something she could immediately empathise with.

[It's irritating when they don't take your word at face value, is it not?] Enid asked.

The Queen nodded, a dip of the antennae, in ant body language.

[I am frustrated when they claim on the one mandible that they have the utmost respect for my wishes, and on the other they go behind my back to circumvent me at every turn.]

[I wouldn't put it that way, Mother!]

The antenna twitched and Coolant fell silent, again.

[I wouldn't have been able to participate in the siege of Rylleh had Vibrant not told me about it, something I assume that she was specifically told *not* to do. This is exactly the sort of thing I'm referring to.]

The Queen's gaze was calm and still, yet Coolant could do nothing but wilt in the face of those implacable eyes. This was the ant who had raised the Colony up from nothing, literally by herself. Where it not for a quirk of fate, the respect afforded to the Eldest would instead fall on this individuals shoulders. There was little the Council could do when confronted by their mother directly, which is why they tended to scheme behind her back in an effort to keep her from harm's way.

Enid found herself feeling sorry for the poor mage and stepped in to redirect the Queen's attention.

[It can be frustrating, that is true,] she sympathised, [I have experienced the same thing myself, many a time. I do find that it is important to remember that their concern comes from a place of love. They do not wish for you to come to harm, because they care for you.]

The mayor shot Coolant a glare before she could pipe up again and get herself thwacked. Where had the intelligent and calm negotiator gone? Enid could only lament. It appeared that being exposed to their mother turned all of the ants' brains to mush. The Queen, for her part, only looked confused by what had been said. She absentmindedly raised her forelegs to clear her antennae as he pondered it.

[I do not understand,] she said finally, [if harm were to befall me, the colony would only suffer in the sense that the egg production I provide would need to be replaced. This is something that our family has the ability to do. Hundreds of my children come to harm every day, if what way am I more special than them?]

Although she was talking to Enid, the Queen's soft gaze drilled directly into Coolant's carapace. She wasn't sure how she'd come to adopt this role of conflict resolution between the ant council and their parent, but Enid found herself enjoying it immensely. If Anthony were here, would he squirm just as badly as Coolant? She had to wonder just how often it was necessary for the Queen to knock him back into line. If she had to guess, it would be a frequent occurrence.

Coolant adopted a pleading stance toward Enid and the old woman once again stepped in on her behalf.

[It might be possible that this idea of emotional attachment to an individual is new in the Colony, but it is quite common amongst all the Sapient races, not just humans. It is also natural for most organisms to feel a bond to their parent, just as a parent feels a bond towards its children. I'm sure you would agree, Queen, that you care for your children and wish the best for them. Likewise, they care for you and wish the best for you.]

The Queen flicked an antenna in dismissal.

[Then they should stop fussing about and let me serve the Colony as best I can. I will not be prevented from performing the work I deem best suits my abilities. Doing such a thing is not *ant*.]

[I would also suggest that your children do a better job respecting the wishes of their mother.]

Coolant sank into the floor as both the Queen and the human mayor turned against her so suddenly. Out of desperation she reached out for a final handhold.

[Isaac Bird, what is your view of this matter?]

The man had been standing almost preternaturally still in an attempt to avoid drawing the attention of the ants, something he'd failed spectacularly at. Whilst the Queen was engaged with Enid, Antionette and Victoriant had both, wisely, chosen to avoid that conversation and instead moved to inspect this other human who had entered their chamber. The two massive Queens had engaged in an extended bout of trying to engage the guard in conversation and poking him with their antennae when he refused to answer.

Almost glad for the distraction, he turned to Coolant and replied.

[Ah. If I told me mam what she could do, she'd fair whack me on the head. I don't try and I'm happier for it.]

Not really what the mage ant had wanted to hear, but she sagged in defeat. The next time this sort of thing happened, she'd be sending the generals along, she thought bitterly. Sloan and Victor were the main culprits when it came to schemes that revolved around mother, yet they always managed to avoid the blame. Actually, that gave her an idea...

[I understand you mother, and I am sorry that we have caused you frustration. In truth, it is Sloan and Victor who make decisions regarding the members who are to be deployed in battle. If you wish to avoid further incidents in the future, I suggest you speak to them directly.]

It was difficult for Enid not to burst out laughing. Did she really just watch a giant ant monster *dob on its siblings to its mother?! What was the world coming to?* If she were to describe this entire conversation to Beyn later, she wasn't sure that he would believe it. Heck, if she'd told her past self just ten minutes ago how this chat would go, she'd have called herself mad.

Yet she could only stifle her grin as a messenger was summoned, presumably through pheromones, and then sent scampering away to fetch the two generals who would no doubt receive a strongly worded dressing down from the irritated Queen. As they waited, Enid continued to converse with the giant ant and found her to be every bit the proud matriarch she appeared to be. They each boasted of their children and the accomplishments of their families, though Enid had to concede her own brood hadn't *quite* measured up to the Colony, but the Queen was prepared to make allowances for her humanity holding her down in that regard.

In fact, when the Queen discovered that humans required an entire nine months to bring a single baby to term, she'd been quite shocked. How where there so many humans then? It just didn't make sense!

[Have you tried eating more?] the Queen asked, concerned. [I know it isn't the same between you and monsters, but I feel that such a length of time just can't be healthy.]

Unfortunately, Enid didn't manage to explain human biology to the Queen's satisfaction by the time she had to leave, but she did feel as though she might have made a friend.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 590: Free from webs

[Damn spider! Get down here and face me!]

The house-sized arachnid, safe in her hole in the wall ringed with poisonous strands of webbing as thick as a car waggled her fangs at me in derision and pointed one leg at the hundreds of ants standing next to me.

[Oh? You'll come out if they go away? Somehow I doubt that you eight-legged coward!]

The spider clacked her fangs and by waving her front four legs managed to convey the message that I was an invading, leg-deficient fool who couldn't be trusted and I may as well scuttle away with my stupid pets and fellow ants because she wasn't coming out to fight. I think she also insulted my mother.

[COME DOWN HERE AND SAY THAT, BUG!]

I was so mad I was hopping on the coating of stone and dirt we'd covered the webbing in, causing trickles of the material to fall into the cavernous space below.

"Eldest, why are you so upset?" Emilia asks.

"She insulted our mother!" I roar back.

The smaller general's aura turns dangerous as she stares up at the giant spider.

"Oh did she..."

The ants within smellshot pass the message along and within moments all of the ants are flinging scented insults up at the spider who gleefully waggles her legs back at us. The rage is rising to a fever pitch when another mind cuts through my emotions.

[Isssss bait. Thissss creature wantsssss death. Not for itssssself, but for you. Denyyy it.]

Invidia's eye glowed with insight as it stared up at the looming mother spider. I brought myself back under control and told the ants to stand down. It wasn't like us to lose control of our emotions. Actually, it was totally like me. It wasn't like my *siblings* to lose control of their emotions. This dastardly spider might be more clever than I've been giving it credit for.

[Fine, you stay up there you bloated sack of schemes. Just keep this in mind, there's going to be an army of ants marching through here at some point, and if you're still around, I'll *personally* feed you to my mother. Clear?]

I aggressively snap my mandibles at the spider matriarch before turning around and leading our strike force away. The ants are reluctant to leave, unwilling to leave the insult unaddressed, but when I firmly turn and walk away, they follow along as I head back to base camp, my pets trundling along in my wake.

It takes a long time to traverse the vast web back down to the ground. It's taken a full week of campaigning to get to this point, but the expanse has been basically conquered. Obviously, we did discover the presence of a powerful spider who was laying eggs in here, but it took a long time before we were able to pin down the location of her lair. It was also quite a project to neutralise the blasted webs. Once we worked out that we could treat the webs much the same as I treated that damn slug's goo all that time ago, it was a lot of work to haul the dirt and soil necessary to create our superhighway through the ridiculous net of mega-webs that cover this expanse top to bottom.

Once we did though, it was all over for the arachnids. Turns out that the spider brood wasn't nearly as cooperative as the ants. Such an inferior species! Gweheheheh. With hundreds of cooperative ants working together with our advanced tactics, the hidden super squad and my pets and I, they never had a chance. Even so, there were so many of the darn things in this huge expanse that they took a whole week to wipe out! I've been biting so much, my mandibles hurt!

The haul in experience and Biomass has been worth it, not really for me, but for Vibrant and her squad, it's been super valuable.

"Hey-hey! Welcome back! How'd you go with the big one?! Was it big? Was it tasty?! I bet it was!"

Speaking of whom, the hyper energetic soldier comes bouncing along the web from a separate corner of the expanse.

"Find anything on your side?" I ask her.

"Nope-nope! It's all been cleared out! We left the spawn points alone though, just like you said. It's so empty here now, it's almost weird!"

I nod. Leaving the spawn points alone will let this place regenerate into a nice hunting ground for the Colony. Unless I miss my guess, the fat spider will move out and into a different territory. We've wiped out her army and cornered her once, if we come back with more ants, I don't care what sort of traps she has tucked away up that cave of hers, it won't be enough. A monster doesn't get to tier six or seven without developing enough of a brain to work out when they're outmatched.

"I suppose we better continue our recon mission then. Gather everyone up and we'll head out into the tunnels. We've got a lot of ground to cover and we spent a lot of time in here."

"We got a lot of levels though! My friends have never been so big before! Soo many evolutions!"

Wait a sec...

"Did you just say friends?" I ask her.

Vibrant tilts her antennae in confusion.

"I suppose so? Is that bad?"

"Ah, not really? I think? I mean, do you even know what friends are?"

"Yup-yup! Just like Crinis and me! Buds for ever!"

A tentacle extends from my back and reaches out to Vibrant to give the inky tendril of darkness a quick 'slap!' in the air with an antenna. I guess that's a high five?

[You two did hang out a lot when you were little, didn't you, Crinis?]

[We did. And Vibrant helped me a lot when you went missing. We even ate humans together.]

[I see. Well that's good then.]

...

Hang on, WHAT?!

Ah, forget it. Do I even want to know? Not like they were eating ants. Nope, the Colony has a strange respect for the dead, at least, the same respect that a normal ant Colony has for its dead. They take them out of the nest and watch them, much like normal ants remove bodies and place them a distance away so they don't invite fungus or disease into their home. In this world, it goes a little farther. They don't eat the Biomass, nor do they harvest the cores from the deceased ants. In what might seem like a tremendous loss of efficiency, they let them return to the dungeon, dissolving into pure mana before they vanish. I've seen a few such... I hesitate to call them ceremonies, but they do feel quite impactful, in their own way, since I've arrived. I'd rather not see any more.

The real haul for me personally has been the ongoing development of my Skills. Nothing helps pump up those levels like combat experience, even against weaker foes. Thanks to having a decent group of ants around me, my brains have been able to churn out battle magic non-stop. The day of elemental fusion is drawing ever closer! MUAHAHAHA!

I'm so close to the avatar state I can almost feel the arrow on my forehead. Watch out Dungeon! I'm coming for you!