

Chrysalis 591

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Chapter 591: Exploration and sweet, sweet skills

Another expanse conquered, the great web has been brought low. Vibrant and I lead our group back out into a new section of tunnel as we prepare to launch the next leg of our advance party scouting. The first item on our list of jobs is to retrace our steps, filling in our Tunnel maps and checking that nothing has passed us by during our battle. After climbing through the Dungeon, we reconnect to the point we entered the expanse and find a group of three scouts sneaking about on the roof.

With a quick salute, they report that no changes have been reported to the main nest at this stage. The scouting and expansion mission goes on in all directions around the main nest. The two new nests are under construction, new Queens almost ready to move in. Sounds like great progress is being made on all fronts! There's some news regarding Leeroy and a new squad being sent to fight and level up in the second strata, which is a bit surprising.

A squad with Leeroy in charge? Sounds like a bad DC movie with a band of mildly super-powered criminals banding together. I hope the generals have some idea what they're doing. If I get up there and Leeroy has managed to get herself killed, I'm going to be super annoyed. I've spent a lot of effort keeping that ant alive and I refuse to let all of it go to waste! I'll make a sensible damn member of the council out of her yet.

With all of the news being positive, we pass our update to the scouts so they can return it to the Colony and resume our mission. The time for the next meeting of the council isn't far away and we probably should head back, but since there isn't any major news, I feel comfortable extending our search to the nearby tunnels. Levelling up is one of our objectives, checking for signs of an approaching force is the other! Plenty of the first has been done, but not much of the second.

In terms of powering up Vibrant's squad, we've been an unmitigated success. Every last one of them has reached tier four and are well on the way to maxing out their mutations. There were even plenty of cores to soak up in there, meaning that a lot of them have solidly reinforced their internal gems.

I'm becoming certain that a larger core does more than simply increase the maximum amount of mana that can be stored. The more sensitive my mana sight becomes, the clearer I can detect the flow of mana in my fellow monsters and it's clear that larger cores equate to more mana moving throughout their bodies. It's difficult to examine myself, but my pets are clearly circulating a great deal more energy throughout themselves.

As I continue to think about the nature of monsters and mana (without getting anywhere) and practice my elemental magic, the group spreads out through the tunnels seeking signs of habitation or a force on the move.

[Blue fire magic affinity (IV) has reached level 40, upgrade available]

[Advanced Blue Fire magic affinity (V), cost 1 sp. Enables those who possess skill access to more advanced manipulations of the greater flame. Concentrating heat to finer points and generating greater heat at the point of ignition are key elements of this skill.]

So I can what... create a blowtorch? Whatever, gotta buy it anyway. As I confirm the choice, the usual trickle of knowledge seeps into my brain, drowning out the endless chatter that streams out of Vibrant for a precious few seconds. This is the first of my basic elemental magics to reach rank five, a cause for celebration! Although I can't dwell on it for long. I can almost feel my sub-brains sigh wearily as they whip up a new construct, releasing the fire mana converter they've been holding for several days now. Water next, I suppose, go with the opposite, just to keep things interesting.

I regret going for the rank five fusion. It takes sooo many levels! I've been grinding away at these damn elemental Skills for weeks! I mean, that's rapid progress compared to what most would be capable of, due to my Vestibule and multiple brains setup, but it's getting more than a little tiresome. At least fire is done. I can cross that off the list. Another thirteen levels of ice, and that'll be in the cooler too.

"Hey-hey senior! The scouts think they might have found something! Over here, over here!"

Before she's even finished talking, Vibrant has zoomed off, leaving me to trail along in her wake, as usual. When I do finally catch up after ten minutes of solid running, I find the scouts have indeed managed to find something interesting. In a wider tunnel, already cleaned out by Vibrant's squad, we find clear signs of civilisation. Built into the wall appears to be some kind of way station. A solid, curving wall that tucks the door tight against the wall, concealing it from casual monster investigation is all that can be revealed from this side, but from the size of the entrance, it doesn't seem as though too much would fit inside there.

Perhaps this is a kind of resting point for delvers? Giving shelter and a place to resupply? I haven't seen any such thing before, but that certainly doesn't mean that they couldn't exist. How else would soft humans get around down here? At least the Golgari have the common sense to cover up their spongy flesh with something approaching a carapace.

"What are you thinking, Vibrant?" I ask the hyper-excited ant.

"We crack it open and take a look! Why wouldn't we? Right?! Don't you want to know what it is? I do!"

"But what do you think is going to be - aaaaand she's gone."

Without waiting for me to finish my no doubt boring sentence, Vibrant leaps forward to engage her loyal squad.

"Open it up! Let's gogogogo!" she cheers.

The ants salute, snapping an antenna to their heads and in less than a minute the wall has been chomped and magicked out of the way to reveal, much as I suspected, a rather small open area with space to lay out a few bedrolls, tightly packed shelves set into the wall with neat packages and jars. There you go, what a nice little design. It's almost like an igloo carved into the wall. A little safe haven for those who need a break from the rigours of the Dungeon. I can imagine how it would feel, for a delver, to make it to this place. Drained, tired, arms heavy and burning after hours of fighting. The horrors of the Dungeon behind you, for just a moment, you crawl through the narrow entrance, muffling all sound, for even here you aren't truly safe. A comfortable meal, a restful sleep. Must be worth more than a person's weight in gold, that sort of rest, down here.

Then imagine that peaceful rest being interrupted by an army of giant ant monsters tearing into the shelter and exposing you to open air. What sort of look would you have on your face?

Turns out, I don't need to wonder about that, since I'm staring at two examples right now. A naked pair of strange furred humanoids stare out at us in utter terror, shock and perhaps embarrassment, before they pass out. Prisoners! How convenient!

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Chapter 592: Gathering once more

Thankfully, this awkward moment is resolved in the best way possible when both of the humanoids collapse to the ground, passed out. My siblings around me react with general confusion before they shrug their collective antennae and grab the two prisoners to take back to the Colony for questioning. I do step in to ensure that we take their supplies back with us, which a few soldiers and scouts step forward to do. I imagine these two are going to want some clothes when they wake up.

A detachment of thirty return to the nest while the rest of us continue to make our sweep. The monsters are densely packed here in these tunnels and even with our mage ants teaming up to firebomb the hazardous corals, webs, seaweed and various other deadly things that fill up the space here in the second strata, it takes time.

It's taken me a long time, but I'm finally starting to get the hang of this place. It's always freezing cold, which isn't ideal for us ants. There are many species of ant who hibernate in the winter, we aren't fans of low temperatures at all. Fire magic provides some relief, the ants huddle around flames that burn constantly around the mages when they need a little warmth. Apart from the cold, the dark is the second issue. It's oppressive, and every ant who's come down here has been drilled to train their mana sense, regardless how poor their mental stats may happen to be. Relying on our completely rubbish natural eyesight would be a recipe for utter disaster!

I know that some members of the Colony have been experimenting with different mutations for vision. Rather than doing as I've done, and just brute force quality mutations to try and bring back something akin to human levels of focus from a compound eye, they've been switching to infrared, or hyper-sensitive movement detection, or vibration vision.

Almost all of which sound cooler than what I chose. Not being able to see was a real point of stress for me after I spawned in the Dungeon! I needed that comfort!

After spending another half day poking deeper into the Dungeon, sweeping out tunnels and expanding our map, I decide to pull the pin and drag Vibrant back to the nest. We profited a lot in terms of experience and Biomass, I even managed to force the secret squad to level up, which is a hidden bonus, but we failed to detect any sign of the coming invasion, and meeting aside, I don't want to get much further away from the rest of the family in case the invasion sneaks past us.

So back we go, it takes a while to retrace our steps, we pushed a fair way down, but after a nearly a day of climbing, we make it back home to the nest.

"What. In the name of heck. Are you wearing?" I say to Leeroy.

"Armour."

"But... why?"

"To keep me alive."

"I get that... Just... I mean, has it worked?"

"Extremely well."

She sounds miserable admitting that.

"And there's a group of you that wear this?"

"Five of us now."

That's is literally tons of metal being forged to make that much armour...

"So this is the Leeroy squad then? Your team? What are you called?"

"I didn't want us to have a name," Leeroy hedges.

"But someone came up with one anyway?" I press her, "surely a team with this many resources poured into them has got a name. The council *loves* naming stuff."

They seem obsessed with it these days.

"Maybe someone did..." Leeroy mutters.

"Out with it Leeroy," I demand, "it can't be *that* bad."

"... The Immortals."

"Oof. That's rough, Leeroy," I try to comfort her. I know that the idea of being immune to death would be a miserable situation for her.

"Do you really mean that, Eldest?" she perks up.

"No. I hope you live for a thousand years before you finally die in a tunnel collapse or something. Stop being stupid." I reprimand her. "You're not a hatchling anymore, you need to live and work."

"I suppose so," she says, but I can see her heart isn't in it.

"Look on the bright side," I relent, "now that you have this armour and a group to work with, odds are the generals are going use you on the frontline in the upcoming battles. You'll be right in the thick of the danger, where the fighting is hottest! That doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

"I suppose not..." I can see the gears turning in her head. There's absolutely no chance the generals will send her in without some plan to extract her out again, but I can let her dream a little I suppose. I'm too soft dammit!

"By the way, Eldest, you were supposed to pay a visit to Smithant at some point soon, she's really excited about it."

There's a hint of ill feeling in Leeroy's pheromones as she mentions the name, but I don't recognise it.

"Who's this?" I ask.

"Smithant, the crafter who came up with this idea," she raps her helmet with one antenna for emphasis.

"You mean it wasn't Tungstant or Cobalt who came up with this?" I'm genuinely shocked.

"No, they hated the idea. This one nutter was obsessed with it and now I'm stuck with this."

Fascinating!

"I'll definitely pay her a visit!" I tell Leeroy as she turns to leave. She waves a weary antenna back at me and I continue on my way deeper into the nest.

The place is absolutely jumping with activity. Even more crowded than before, the many layers of pheromone trails have been overlain with all new scents. Construction teams for nests two and three, resource transportation and storage trails, even a tea room!

Hold up. A team room?! I have to see this. So thinking, I turn from my path toward the council chamber and scuttle along, following the path around the many twists and turns of the nest until I come to an area on the outskirts of the nest. The tunnels are thinner and more narrow here, to the point I just barely squeeze in, my legs pinched up against my sides. The chambers are smaller too, with doors on them for some reason. When the heck did we start making doors?

When I make it to the end of the trail and stick my head into this so called 'tea-room' I realise exactly what this area is for. Inside, I find Enid, Beyn, Torrina and Corun engaged in conversation, seated in comfortable wooden furniture, replete with cushions, around a dainty table. The entire room is bedecked with all the trimmings of a fine human home, with cupboards, fine china and a tea pot lovingly wrought in the shape of an ant's head.

After a moment of whipping up a mind mana construct, I intrude into what was clearly a cosy conversation.

[You lot are all looking very comfortable. Any work getting done around here?]

They've seen me already, hard not to notice such a shiny head poking through the open door, not to mention my size.

[A great deal of work, in fact,] Enid snaps back, a little waspish. [*Some* of us have been negotiating on behalf of your Colony for the entire day against stubborn, greedy, idiotic merchants and over-privileged morons.]

I twitch my mandibles in surprise. It's unlike Enid to be so rude!

[Ah, thanks Enid. How'd it all go? The Colony brought you in to do all the talking, I suppose. Wasn't my idea, you can't blame me.]

The old mayor sighs and raises a hand to massage her brow as Torrina and Corun sip their tea, content to observe rather than contribute.

[I apologise, Anthony. The talks have been glacially slow, and it doesn't help that I have to explain the details in excruciating detail to the ants immediately after I finish haggling with the damn delegates.]

I can imagine my siblings are quite interested in learning about this sort of thing. Negotiations between rival powers aren't something the Colony has had to deal with in the past. Come to think of it, no ant would have had to deal with these issues in the history of Pangera.

[If they're being difficult, surely there's a few things we can do to hustle the dialogue along?]

She thinks for a moment before a slow smile dawns on her face.

[If you have the time, I'm sure we can work something out...]

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Chapter 593: Advisors

After chatting with Enid a little more, she finishes her tea and heads off to rest. The next day of talks will prove to be an eventful one, I'm sure, given what we've discussed, but for now I have two expectant looking Golgari to deal with.

[Been a while, Anthony,] Corun greets me coolly, [how were things down in the Dungeon? Anything interesting happen?]

Torrina is looking at me with her usual deadpan expression, but I can tell that she's a little more frosty than usual. It's easy to see that something is up with these two.

[Alright then, what's gotten into you two? It's not like you guys to skirt around the subject, goodness knows Granin wasn't even physically capable of holding his words in.]

That got a slight smile out of Corun, and perhaps a mild release of tension around the eyes for Torrina. Even so, they still took a long glance at each other before Torrina spoke to me.

[Anthony, why do you think we are here?]

Well, that's quite the question, isn't it?

[I suppose because Granin thought I had potential to become an ancient and he wanted you two to keep an eye on me and record my progress for history? Make note of my successes and failures so that you can implement the knowledge better for future subjects?]

She shakes her head.

[Not exactly. We're supposed to be here, not just as some sort of supervisors, but as guides and assistants. We are willing and able to take on a much more hands-on role than you seem to have envisioned for us.]

[What do you mean,] I protest, [I haven't told you what you can and can't do at all. As far as I'm concerned, I trust you guys and you're free to do what you want concerning your mission and myself. I just recommend you step lightly around the family, they can be a bit touchy sometimes.]

Neither of them blink at me describing a growing civilisation of thousands of murderous ant monsters 'a bit touchy' which shows me that they're acclimating pretty well to life around here. Murder ants are the norm in the nest!

[I thought this might be the case,] she sighs, [you think you'll just leave us to our devices and we'll work things out? That's not exactly how we want to operate.]

[Well, how *do* you want to operate? My time amongst the Golgari wasn't exactly a happy memory, you know. I'm aware that it wasn't your fault, but the Cult of the Worm's way of doing things isn't exactly something I'm willing to invest in, you know?]

[I understand your frustration, I just want you to hear ours a little.] She gestures to herself and Corun, [we can help you a lot more than we have been able to so far, we just need you to trust us, and bring us along. When you dive off into the Dungeon for a week at a time and leave us behind, or when you take us to the surface and then vanish back underground without us, it makes it hard to be able to help.]

[Sooo, you want to tag along a bit more closely when I'm moving around?]

[In short, yes] she nods.

Uuuuughhh. Another member of the entourage? I've got more than enough people following me around as it is! Corun appears to sense my reluctance, and jumps in to back Torrina up.

[Look, we don't need to get in the way, and we certainly don't need to be up front and fighting or anything. So long as we're in the general area so that we know what's happening, and can approach you when we feel we have something to contribute. That doesn't sound too bad, does it?]

I think about it.

[You know what, that sounds pretty good. You've got a deal.]

I extend an antenna through the door and they both shake it solemnly before returning to their tea. I excuse myself and get back onto the pheromone trails. Things to do, ants to see! Back into the bustling tunnels and my first port of call is the industrial district. The crafters have turned this section of the nest into their own empire. The mining efforts of the Colony have expanded to cover hundreds of square kilometres of Dungeon by now, and every scrap that is extracted in the field is brought back here for processing.

Tons of material are hauled into this section of the nest each day and the fires burn all day and all night, melting down the slag, extracting and purifying the metals. It's hot, hard work, but the smallest caste of all is more than up to the task, using tools and ingenious devices, even magic, when their frames aren't up to the task. Buried deep at the end of this maze of workshops I find the remarkable ant I was told to find.

"Smithant, I presume?"

A relatively large crafter, obviously tier four, is busy in her own private workshop working on several things at once. With one leg, she's poking and prodding at her forge, manipulating whatever she has heating in there, with another she's working her pulley hammer, pounding a sheet of heated steel into shape, using her mandibles to grip and bend the material, whilst *also* using magic to inscribe runes onto yet another, finished piece. I've heard about working hard, but this is insane! More to the point, she doesn't seem to realise that I'm here.

"Hello there? Everything alright?"

Without pausing in her work, the ant snaps at me.

"I had a rest two days ago! You mandatory rest enforcers are getting more insufferable by the week! I can't be asleep, *and* fulfil the order the council has placed for armour at the same time now, can I? So shove off?"

"Two days eh? Sounds like someone is well overdue for a nap."

"I TOLD you.... Oh."

Finally dropping her work to face the doorway fully, Smithant finally sees who has come to visit and the realisation is written all over her face.

"When we're done here, you're going to sleep. No arguments," I warn her.

She deflates a little.

"Yes, Eldest."

"I've seen your work, the suit you made for Leeroy? Amazing! I'm told you also enchanted it yourself?"

"That's true..." full of fire only a moment ago, the crafter seems quite shy when it comes to taking a compliment. "But that suit is nothing," she fires up, "complete garbage compared to what I can make now. My enchanting and smithing keep levelling and the *refinements* I can make will improve the durability of the metal and the efficacy of the magic by fifteen, maybe even twenty percent!"

"That's not a small amount."

"It's just the beginning," the more she talks about her work, the more animated she becomes until her passion is burning just as hot as the forge behind her. "The more we expand, the better quality ore we find and as more time passes, the better we get at processing it. I feel like the metal I get improves every day I crawl into my workshop. And the better the metal I work with, the faster my skills climb! I've even heard that there's a team of crafters working on a more efficient anvil and hammer design."

She pats her still glowing anvil with her claw.

"Much as I love the old thing, it's hard to keep up with demand."

I'm a bit surprised.

"Aren't there more crafters who can work with you? At the very least support you?"

The usual solution the Colony attempts to employ is to throw greater numbers at the problem. Generally works out okay, I don't see why this situation would be any different. Smithant clacks her mandibles in irritation.

"Most of the crafters still don't see the need for armour on ants. We have a carapace after all."

"But even the council seems to find it useful!"

"They still haven't ordered anyone to assist me, and until they do, I don't think anyone will bother. I'm the only one working on armour in the entire Colony."

What nonsense is this?! The most talented smith in the entire colony, slaving away on her own without support?! This is worse than madness!

"That's going to change," I tell her, "anything that helps to keep our people alive is something that needs to be explored. A carapace isn't going to be enough for the fight that's coming. I'll put the word out that this is to become a priority. I don't think every ant needs a full set of armour, but defensive enhancement is something I want every frontline soldier to have. After I next evolve, I'll get you to make me a set as well."

Time for the antdustrial revolution to reach an entirely new phase!

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Chapter 594: The simplest way

The centuries following the event that came to be known as the Descent, when the System applied itself to the peoples of Pangera, remain shrouded in darkness. The Cataclysm that came afterward destroyed almost all records, but those scraps we have access to speak of great upheaval, followed by an age of enlightenment before the Dungeon opened on the surface.

Like most things that fall into a civilised society's hands, the System was quickly seen as a weapon that would give a tremendous advantage to those who were able to master it first. This is largely conjecture on my part, but it is highly likely that the people of that time engaged in the same sort of questionable practices that were seen in the post-Rending era, when people sought to recapture that which was lost.

In that time it was unheard of to die of old age, not just because of the many conflicts, but allowing a person to pass away naturally would waste a tremendous resource. It was common for children to execute their parents as they lay on their deathbed, so that they could inherit the experience gained for the kill. Compared to other atrocities, that practice could be considered mild. Slaves were forced to endure unimaginable horrors in the name of experimentation, all to secure an edge over their competitors.

Many hoped that the storied 'golden age' would re-emerge after the age of suffering and secrecy, but in many ways that veil still remains. Knowledge of the System is hoarded between societies, faiths, even members of the same delving teams have been known to withhold what they've gleaned of its inner workings. Builds, classes, fusions, any piece of information can lead to a competitive advantage.

And that is meaningful. The System allows a person to rise to unbelievable heights. With the power of mana, and the knowledge of how to wield one's inner strength, incredible feats become possible. Firing blades of light from your weapons, weaving the elements or even bending light with one's mind. Those few who managed to scale the heights and achieve the pinnacle, the highest level, the most powerful classes, all had a deep, lasting impact on Pangera. Many founded their own kingdoms, others destroyed empires that had existed for centuries.

In the pursuit of that sort of power, people will do almost anything. The question I have is, how this conflict was managed during the 'golden age'? The only answer that seems plausible, is that someone so powerful arose that they were able to enforce their ideals on the entire planet. If that is indeed the case, what happened to them?

- *Excerpt from 'A dissertation on the consequences of the Descent and its impact on modern society' By Innirit the heretic.*

It's a shame that I had too much on my plate to participate myself, but the other members of the council were more than capable of running such a simple mission. Enid's idea to simplify the negotiation process was simple and ingenious. It hadn't taken her long to realise what the problem was, what exactly was causing the talks to be so painfully slow and make the natives of Rylleh so intractable. The people in charge were wastes of space.

They weren't stupid or anything, at least, not in her opinion, they just existed in very comfortable circumstances and didn't want to see that change. For the most part, they were born into those circumstances, inheriting their positions as descendants of those intrepid delvers who managed to gather enough wealth and power that they were able to carve out their own independent space which eventually grew into the city of Rylleh.

So how to deal with these well-to-do leeches? Simple. Under the direction of Sloan, and working with Wallace on the inside, the Colony abducted each and every one of them, moved them to Renewal, dropping them on the doorstep of Beyn's church like lost lambs. While they were at it, the ants looted their mansions and broke them down to rubble, carting away the precious materials watched by, oddly enough, the cheering masses. Generations of discontent erupted once people got wind of what was happening and in a dramatic shift in public opinion, the Colony became the champions of the people in one night.

Not to say that there wasn't unrest, you can't simply uproot large family units unilaterally and expect everyone to be happy about it. The ructions in Rylleh were largely overshadowed by the outpouring of goodwill the Colony experienced, a worthy trade. In Renewal, the once noble class were now destitute and dependant on the support of an ant worshipping community. It only took a day before they gave up trying to convince people to take them into the Dungeon in exchange for promised riches. The next day they banded together to launch an expedition of their own. I'm told they made it about two hundred metres outside the town before a detachment of scouts chased them back. The next day they took up farming.

With the talks on hold until elections could be arranged in Rylleh, a much more cheerful Enid spent her time drinking tea and chatting with myself, Corun and Torrina, and occasionally Beyn, when we managed to stop him wandering around the tunnels.

For my part, I had to meet with the Council, minus Sloan, to try and work out what our next steps were. We gathered once more in the somehow even more luxurious council chamber, the ant chairs now lined with soft fabrics and the table topped with a beautifully carved wooden surface instead of the rude stone we'd had before.

What the point of the fabric is, I've no idea. We're ants! We have a skeleton on the outside of our bodies! Although it does mean there's less chance the stone will scuff my diamond carapace...

It can stay.

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Chapter 595: Where the hell are they?!

As the Colony expands and grows, it's becoming increasingly difficult to get the Council together. The members are needed all over the place. Victoriant and Antionette have their regular egg-laying duties, which takes the bulk of their time. When they aren't laying, they usually have a ridiculous amount of Biomass they need to consume, as well as accruing experience from the monsters the Colony brings to them for last hitting. Evolving the Queens is still one of the top priorities of the Colony after all.

Needless to say, Burke and Wills have covered an unbelievable amount of territory over the last week. I don't think I've ever seen either of them look tired, but their legs are definitely hanging a little lower as they rest on their chairs. Coordinating the scouting expeditions throughout the literally thousands of tunnels and branches in every direction must have come close to frying their brains. Turns out when your territory is largely spherical, it's harder to manage than a nice flat piece of land.

The Soldiers have all been fighting in the many, many battles of expansion taking place all throughout the second strata as we strive to soak up as much space and resources as we possibly can before the attack begins. Chief amongst those resources is Biomass and experience. Our troops need to be fighting fit and as strong as they can get, as fast as we can get them there. Needless to say the Generals have been heavily involved in this activity. Organising the logistics of it all must have been a nightmare.

The worker classes have all been busy running support in the meantime, not to mention the constant research and development that goes on. Nest building, manufacturing, testing, experimenting and pushing the boundaries of possibility in all areas. They are the scientists and engineers pushing the Colony forward. Which reminds me of something.

"I understand you had something of a breakthrough recently?" I ask Ellie and Bella, the two core shapers as they settle into their chairs.

The two of them perk up immediately, delighted to talk about their work.

"Oh, we sure have! We've been testing with that core combination technique you brought back to us from the Sophos, geez I'd love to meet them. Anyway, since we've evolved to tier four, along with many of our fellow researchers, we've been making a lot of headway in utilising the technique. Our first 'folded' pet core design was completed yesterday!"

"Oh? What did you manage to fuse?"

"A centipede and a garralosh infant..."

Holy heck. I do NOT want to see that.

"How on Pangera did you manage to get those two to go together?"

Their antennae twitch wildly.

"It ... wasn't easy. Extensive modifications were made to both creatures before the cores were able to merge. We don't believe the resulting creature will be useful, at all, but it's an important milestone!"

"Agreed... you didn't actually reconstitute one of these did you?"

"We did not."

Phew. Such a monstrosity should not be called into existence, even in the name of progress.

"This is really good news. Keep it up you two! I have high hopes for you. If we can develop more powerful and useful pets, it can have a positive impact in all aspects of the Colony."

The two core shapers happily salute me and prepare for the council proper to begin. I sincerely believe what I said, the Sophos have shown the raw power that pets can hold. The core shapers have already proven that their pets can be useful, but with time, and as their Skill levels rise, their creations will become more and more deadly. The Colony will be able to pour enough resources into those pets that they can become truly powerful.

"Alright then," I address the gathered council members, "where the hell are they?"

"What do you mean, Eldest?" Victor asks.

"We're expecting an invasion from multiple fronts! Where are they?! Have they just given up and gone home? Are we safe? I mean, has anyone seen any sign of the golgari invading us?"

There's an awkward moment around the table as the ants look at each other.

"We haven't seen anything," Burke admits, "we've been expanding our zone of control in every direction and our scouts have pushed hard toward golgari territory, but so far there hasn't been any sign of them."

Wills backs her partner up.

"It's true. We've set up relays of scouts to bring word as soon as they spot anything approaching through the tunnels. Right now, we just haven't found evidence of the invasion."

"That doesn't mean they aren't coming though," Advant warns the table, "we are still expecting a large enemy force to approach us, possibly from multiple directions."

"Our expansion has been going according to plan," Tungstant chips in, "the next two second strata nests are active and we've begun to develop surface nests to complement them. The new Queens are in place and the Biomass has begun to flow."

"Egg production has reached a new high at a touch over five thousand per day. It's going to put a strain on the academy as we attempt to graduate these larger classes. Our territory will need to continue to expand if we want to secure the experience and cores necessary to ensure our standards are met," the Brood tender, Florence informs the table.

"Also, we estimate that the total number of members in the Colony at around a hundred thousand," she adds.

"Five thousand a day?! A hundred thousand?!?!!" I shout.

THWACK!

"Eldest! What was that for?" Leeroy complains.

"Sorry, I was shocked there for a second."

"But I didn't do anything!"

"You have a helmet on, you probably didn't even feel a thing. Shush."

"That's right," Theresant affirms, "it's become quite stressful, trying to keep up. A problem which will only get worse when the hatchlings from the two new nests emerge. We actually want to take this opportunity to ask for more resources to be dedicated toward the academies and rearing the brood."

"Done," every member of the table immediately agrees.

Regardless of the situation, the Colony does not hesitate to invest in the next generation. Sacrificing the future to preserve the present is not a trade any ant is willing to make. Everything is for the brood.

"I suppose that means that we need to rush the construction of the surface nests in order to provide training grounds," Cobalt muses. "That might mean the defences for the new nests are left unfinished for longer than we anticipated."

"It might be necessary," I say, "if the war against the golgari drags on, we'll have time to shore up our defences, but those hatchlings will be necessary reinforcements down the line."

A heavy silence falls around the table as the council is forced to confront the idea that a protracted fight will leave many ants dead. It's not something that the Colony has had to deal with so far, extended war against a superior foe. Which leads me to believe that there's another thing I need to say which they may not have considered.

"We need to think about what will happen if we lose this fight," I announce.

Each member of the council goes perfectly still, their antennae frozen with shock as they process what I said.

"We don't know what is coming, we don't know when they're going to get here, and we don't know that we'll be able to defeat this enemy. In the event that we lose, there needs to be a plan that will allow the Colony to survive. They'll try and hunt down every one of us if we can't push them back, so we'll need to be clever, hide Queens in faraway places, build disguised nests on the surface and place tier one and two ants there who can rebuild from scratch, given time. It's important that our family carry on, even if we should fall."

The council digests my words for a few long moments. I can tell they aren't happy about it, but they know it makes sense. No matter what happens, the Colony must survive.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 596: Creeping doom

In this world.

All things.

Flow.

To the Colony.

- *Spoken by Cobalt at the seizure of the lightning mines of Al'Razza.*

The plan has to have a name, of course. What is it with these ants and their insistence on stupid names?! I shoot down a few of the more obnoxious ones, like "Omega Seed Shield" and "Phoenix Ant Flames". I mean... why?! What the heck does flames have to do with anything, even if there are phoenix flames? That's just stupid and I administer a phew THWACKS to drive the point home to these thickies.

In the end, I manage to sell them on "Slow Grow".

"There's a chance that through some unknown magical means, the enemy may be able to interpret our pheromones," I tell them, "so any reference to seeds or phoenixes may lead them to uncover the plot and immediately know what it means. From this point, Slow Grow will be used to refer to this concept, and any pheromone messaging related to it will be scrubbed as thoroughly as possible. Acid wash the whole room if you have to."

The council agreed immediately. No measure is too extreme when the survival of the Colony, and indeed, our entire species may be on the line.

"Make this a priority," I inform them, "for my part, I'm going to get myself back out into the tunnels, scouting and fighting. I'll make sure not to get too far away, and I'll keep a scout relay between me and the nest at all times. Vibrant, you should get your team back out into the field as well. Skills and levels are going to win us this war, we need to get 'em."

"Are you sure you don't want to go with Vibrant again, Eldest?" Sloan asks, "your last expedition was very fruitful as I understand. The expanse you conquered is certainly one of the largest we've yet seen."

"Be careful in there," I warn her, "the big spider mother in there wasn't defeated and I get the feeling she holds a grudge. She's a sneaky so and so, don't take any risks. If she's still in there, we'll need an extensive digging project to get her out."

Leeroy looks like she's about to volunteer something, but her fellow Soldier, Brendant, puts a claw on her back and she quiets. Sending her and her squad after a large, powerful monster would be exactly the sort of thing she'd be looking for to enact her 'glorious sacrifice' plan. That's not happening.

"That reminds me. I've seen the work that Smithant has done for Leeroy and the group and after talking to her, it's become clear that she isn't getting the help that she needs. It seems that most carvers don't feel that making armour is worth their time."

Both Tungstant and Cobalt shift in their seats, uncomfortable with the topic.

"It's true that there isn't much enthusiasm when it comes to creating armour or weapons for ants," Cobalt admits, "most of the artisans feel that it's a waste to pour their effort into making things that we get naturally. If we want tougher defences, just mutate your carapace, if we need stronger weapons, mutate the mandibles. So far, our bodies have proven to be more capable than the things we can make."

It's clear from their words that they, in part, seem to agree with this sentiment. Sheer stupidity in my opinion.

"Look, the reality of the situation is that for most members of the Colony, tier four or five is the highest they can expect to go in terms of evolutions. Particularly in the short term. If we manage to continue to expand and we exist as a stable family for the next hundred years, that'll change, but for now, it's not."

So if a soldier has maxed mutations for carapace, mandibles and whatever other organs they have which are combat related, they are no longer able to get stronger until they evolve, which may be a long time coming. How can that ant possibly improve?"

"I see what you're saying," Tungstant says, "the armour can be used in the meantime to shore up their carapace until they can evolve."

"Better than that, wearing the armour will help keep them alive until they *can* evolve. It's win-win. After my next evolution, I myself intend to order a set. I'll certainly get one for Tiny."

"If we spread word of that around, a few more crafters may be willing to lend a hand," Cobalt muses.

"Do whatever you have to do," I tell them, "just get Smithant the help that she needs. Asking her to produce enough sets to clad even a small force of ants on her own is just ridiculous. The amount of work that goes into one of these suits is insane."

I have a think.

"I think I'll go pay a visit to our prisoners before I leave," I announce, "from what I hear, we haven't gotten much out of them, so I may as well poke my antennae in and see what they have to say."

"The human, Beyn, has been speaking with the two new ones you brought in, Eldest," Mendant tells me in her gentle, soothing voice, "he's been quite excited to speak with them from what I understand."

That's just great. He'll be filling their heads with all sorts of nonsense.

"As soon as we hear anything about the enemy making their approach, we need to meet back here as a matter of urgency. Until then, continue the expansion, continue to develop our defences and networks, and put Slow Grow into action as soon as possible."

Nods all around. I make a circuit of the chamber, exchanging pheromones with each of the council members as I make my way out. The Colony is growing too large to be managed by just these twenty individuals. Perhaps not numerically, there are plenty of cities with one hundred thousand people in them who get by with a council, but geographically we are covering a huge amount of space. The two new nests are one thing, but the hunting territories around them, the various expanses that the Colony has conquered, the extensive mining operations, there's a whole lot going on. Sometime soon I'm going to have to ensure that the council is getting sufficient help, they can't keep doing it on their own.

I mean, at the rate the eggs are going to be laid, we'll be up to a million strong Colony before too long! What an exciting and scary thought! If the golgari were scared of us before, they'll be terrified of us then! Gweheheheh.

Still, as I leave the council, there's a certain feeling of stress and gloom hanging over the members as they each contemplate their roles under the threat of the impending invasion. A million things to do, but all of them will be dropped the instant one of those stone-skinned fools poke their noses into our territory.

With a shake of my antennae, I try to brush my concerns away. The only thing I can do, is try my best to do my duty as the strongest ant in the colony. Get stronger, and allow my siblings to rise up alongside

me. I'll act as their sword to drive away those that would bring them harm, and their shield to defend them as they grow and become strong.

To that end, we need MOAR LEVELS!

[Are we heading back out into the Dungeon, Master?] Crinis asks.

[Sometimes I forget you don't hear what's said in pheromone language, Crinis. I just walk around assuming that you know what's been discussed after a meeting like that.]

[I know,] she huffs, [I've been considering acquiring a pheromone sensory gland when I next evolve, but when I checked the menu last time, it was unusually expensive. I think because I have none of the sensory receptors or nerve centres required to interpret the information.]

[That'd be a waste! Just remind me and I'll be happy to let you know what's going on.]

[Then I will do that, Master,] she sounds happy.

[By the by, what level are you Crinis?]

[Only level 21 Master,] she sound sad.

[That's not so bad! Why are you down about it?]

[I'll evolve a long time after you, again.]

[I got a lot of experience fighting against big nasty monsters, Crinis. Garralosh, the stupid tournament. All of those were extremely challenging and not exactly something I would have sought out on my own, given the choice.]

[I know that,] she mutters in my head, [I just don't like when you are so much stronger than me. How can I protect you against the sorts of enemies you'll go up against at tier six?]

[Look on the bright side,] I say, [when I'm tier six, you won't have to protect me from enemies at tier five anymore.]

[That doesn't help...]

Ah well. Worth a shot. Crinis has continued to be as protective of me as always, ever since we reunited after I escaped (with help) from the golgari. She's still riding around, attached to my carapace. She's heavy, but I can't quite bring myself to complain about it to her.

[Hey Tiny, Invidia. We need to get ready to go.]

The big ape looks up, his fists clenching with excitement.

[Fiiight?] he grunts.

I sigh.

[Yes, we're going back out to fight.]

He grins broadly and lumbers toward me, slapping me on the back with happiness. For his part, Invidia materialises his haunting, toothy grin in the air beneath his hovering eye, which flashes green.

[I willll haaaavvveeee leveeeee.]

[Not too many,] I warn him, [you're still a higher tier than the rest of us. No point funnelling experience into you.]

The large eye flashes brighter as the envy demon baulks at being denied that which he desires, but I prod him with my antennae.

[None of that. We'll go check in on Jim and Sarah, pop by the prisoners, then a final check on our Biomass and Skills situation, then out to scout and take names. Let's go.]

Chrysalis

Chapter 597: Doing the Rounds

I find Jim and Sarah in a place I didn't quite expect, visiting the golgari prisoners, which is an unexpected convenience for me. As I bustle onto the scene, my pets in tow, my two fellow ex-prisoners appear to be getting ready to leave.

[Hey there you two! How've you been?]

I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing humanish reactions from giant monsters. Jim is a gigantic worm, he basically doesn't have a face, you can't even see his mouth most of the time, but I can still recognise the awkward jerking motion he makes as he reacts to my voice.

Sarah, for her part, has a much more standard face. Eyes, nose, big ol' horrifying bear maw filled with death fangs of murderising. Standard. Those huge eyes blink slowly as she looks down at me for a moment.

[Anthony? I-I didn't expect to see you here...]

[Yeah, I've been ignoring this lot for a while. Letting them stew in their own juices, as the fairly disgusting saying goes. I guess I'm not that shocked to see you here, considering how long you were... a guest of the cult. Manage to get anything out of them?]

[I'm afraid not,] she says sadly, [they don't want to open up to me. I can't get any answers out of them about what they planned to do with me, or why. I guess I just wanted to know what made them want to turn on me.]

[Self-interest,] I shrug, [isn't it always? That's why you're better off hanging with the Colony. If you ask one of these ants if they're self-interested, they'd probably slap you in the face.]

[What about you Anthony?] Jim interrupts suddenly, his tone a little sharp, [can you make the same claim? You aren't an ant like them, after all, you were human once.]

I'm a little taken aback at these words, but I consider for a moment and do my best to answer.

[I don't *think* I'm particularly self-interested, or selfish. I didn't have that many wants or needs in my past life. I mean, some security would have been nice. Physical or emotional, either one, I'm not picky. Could have used some heat in the winter actually, those last few years were rough. Perhaps *a few* less beatings? I always wondered about that, you know? They knew I didn't have any money, so why continue the beatings? I tried asking once, but -]

[Jeez, I don't need your life story. I just want to know you won't turn on us to look after yourself like they did,] the big worm jabs his ringed tail back towards the improvised 'cell' the golgari are being kept in.

I scratch my head with an antenna.

[How did you die, Jim?]

He freezes for a long second.

[I'd rather not talk about it,] he mutters.

[That's fair enough. I shouldn't have asked. I myself starved to death because I gave all my last scraps of food to an ant colony I'd raised in my room. There were so many of them, I kind of figured they'd need it more than me, you know?]

[Thank you, Anthony,] Sarah says quietly, [I think you answered his question.]

[All good,] I give the two of them a cheery wave with an antenna, [all the people from Earth who wind up in this place are a little weird. We need to keep looking out for each other.]

[Right,] the enormous bear lumbers to her feet and begins to plod down the corridor, her vast bulk taking up most of the available space.

[Come on, Jim,] she calls back, [let's go hunting.]

[Again?!] the worm is aghast. [We just got back!]

[I feel motivated. Come on.]

[Fine, fine.]

If a worm can slither in a resentful way, then that's what I witness as Jim and his many segments vanish around the corner. Those two have been out hunting? Nice! I hope Sarah managed to keep herself under control. Having an insane raging doom bear stronger than myself tearing the tunnels apart would be a slight problem, to say the least. She has Jim to help keep her in line, that should be enough.

Pushing the two friends out of my mind, I round another corner to find who I came here to see. When I lay eyes on the 'cell' the colony stashed these two in, I almost stumble over. It's clear the ants don't have any real understanding of the concept of prisoners. These rooms are done up just the same as Enid's sitting room! The damn golgari are just sipping tea and relaxing in an idyllic, well-furnished sitting room! That's not the play!

If it weren't for the team of eight mages placed about the place watching them like hawks, you'd never know they were captives.

"Just having a quick chat," I inform the guards.

"Go ahead, Eldest. These two don't do much. Maybe talking to you will stir something up."

I hope not. I don't expect them to give us any meaningful intelligence, but at the least we might be able to use them as bargaining chips. It's unlikely, given how willing their leaders were to throw lives away, but I don't want to rule anything out at this point.

I reach out with a mind bridge and feel it snap into place in short order.

[I was wondering when you would come to gloat,] Irette Plamine sneers at me.

How do you even sneer over a purely mental form of communication? Her face didn't move, but there's a definite sneerish tone to her thoughts.

[Gloat about what?] I ask, curious.

[Flipping the tables on us? Taking us captive and placing us in your control where once you were in ours?] she seems almost flabbergasted that I would need to ask.

[Oh, that. Honestly, I kind of forgot you two were here. There's a lot going on around here at the moment.]

[You WHAT?!] Plamine bursts out before her fellow triad member settles her down and turns to speak to me.

[Come now, Anthony,] she says, calm on the surface but with a simmering anger underneath, [you don't really expect us to believe that you forgot we were here, do you?]

Ahh... They seem annoyed. Might as well play it cool.

[Of course not. I've been... brooding! Yes, indeed! Brooding about... the unspeakable torture that I'm going to inflict on you, my former tormentors! Aha! What suffering... err... awaits you! Unless you tell me what I want to know!]

[You really did forget us didn't you?]

[I really did, yes, I'm sorry.]

I'm not that good at playing the villain.

[I don't think it's entirely my fault,] I say to their chagrined faces, [what with the whole threat of invasion thing hanging over our heads. The golgari who chased us were not happy, not happy at all.]

[Did they say anything about us?] Biritite Cryslas perks up.

[Not a word. Don't think they care about Shapers much, from what I gathered. No, they were mainly concerned with annihilating us.]

[As you deserve,] Irette spits at me, [a failure like you shouldn't even exist.]

[That's a lot of resentment from someone who had me locked up and forced to fight in a death tournament against my will. You seriously don't think you deserve just a little of the misfortune you've suffered? And what do you think is going to happen if the golgari *do* make it this far? I highly doubt they'll think a Colony of intelligent ant monsters kept you living comfortably and supplied in *tea*, during your entire captivity. Do you?]

I can tell that Irette is simply too angry to listen to what I have to say, but a flicker of understanding appears in the eyes of Biritite and I keep speaking to both of them, but mainly to her.

[The only chance you have of getting back into the empire of stone, or whatever you call yourselves, is to cooperate with me. There are cult members in the Colony right now, it's not like I've totally cut ties. The nutcase warriors on the way here are never going to take you home. The question you have to ask is, how badly do you want to see me fail? What price are you willing to pay?]

With that thought, I leave them to stew a little longer. I'll check in again when I get back from this excursion. Who knows? They might have something useful to share.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 598: A Strange New World

Many a recruit has been lost to the Demons of the third strata, despite the Legion's best efforts to prepare them. It provides some comfort that Delvers who belong to the Mercenary Union fall at a higher rate, which means our training does have some effect. Independents have it the worst. Without prior knowledge, or the proper mental preparations, their chances of success in that burning hell are almost nil.

Records indicate that the earliest expeditions launched by the Legionem Abyssi had similar expectations of the dangers they would confront there that most delvers hold today. The Dungeon is a place of violence and death, the first and second strata offer no comforts, every living thing, plant or animal, is a potential threat. It stands to reason the deeper you go, the more violent and merciless the strata would become.

And that is indeed, a true inclination. The third strata is far more deadly than the second, but in a much different way. The Dungeon is as cunning as it is brutal and as brutal as it is cunning. The lesser demons of the third strata swarm the plains, feasting and warring in roving bands of mindless beasts. Like swarms of vermin, they fight and kill endlessly, the spawn rate absurdly high for such a powerful class of monster.

But once they reach a high enough tier, they rise above the rabble. Above the plains tower the fortress cities of the Demon aristocracy, palaces of intrigue, wealth and guile that have entrapped so many a gullible soldier. If a Demon tells you something, it's probably true, just never in the way that you expect.

-Abyssal Legion training manual review - dated 640 AR.

Leaving the golgari Shapers to their business, I wander a few doors down to check on the newest of our additions. Not wanting to intimidate them, I leave Tiny and Invidia in the corridor. Crinis, predictably, doesn't want to peel herself off my carapace, so I give her direct instructions not to terrify the two humanoids.

[How am I supposed to know what scares them, Master?] she asks, genuinely interested.

It's a valid question, different people are afraid of different things. Not to mention the culture gap. What's terrifying to a human may be hilarious to these fur-people. Crinis has horrifying fangs, perhaps they do too? I didn't get a great look at the tooth situation, so I'm not sure how much maw they'd be able to handle.

I mean, what is it that Crinis does that's scary? The way she moves is pretty creepy, with the slithering, tentacles and inky flesh that's black as the depths of evil. I mean, the mouths are surely out, right? Unless these people are descended from sharks, which seems unlikely, given the fur, then I can't imagine they'd be pleased to see that trio of horrendous, all-consuming portals of death. The tentacles are likewise out. Tentacles in general have a weird sort of vibe, add the ripping barbs that cleave flesh and sanity like a chainsaw and you have a recipe for disaster.

[You know what Crinis, maybe just remain as still as possible and don't do anything. I can't imagine anything you might do that wouldn't be scary to most organisms.]

[Thank you, Master!]

She seems genuinely pleased by my statement and gives a happy wriggle before settling back into herself. So she wants to be terrifying? I mean, why not, right? Go with what works for you. Crinis has been scary as hell since I first saw her original form, before she was my pet. Her power has skyrocketed since that time, and she's only become more fear inducing. The memory of that horrific scream she unleashed in Rylleh pops into my head. That was something to see/hear. It didn't have that much of an effect on me, I assume allies aren't affected, but the people in the city who heard it didn't look too flash afterwards.

I'll worry about Crinis another time, for now, I need to put my best claw forward and represent the Colony to this new community we've stumbled into. Hopefully this group won't declare war on us...

The guards are relatively unobtrusive around this cell, hanging back from the door and not making themselves known. A team of mages are still present, of course, to sense the mana inside the 'cell' and react to any suspicious fluctuations.

"Anything interesting happen?" I ask them.

"Eldest," they salute, "nothing unexpected. A few tentative communication attempts were made by Coolant, but not much came of it. They've remained very quiet, haven't heard anything out of them, really."

"They sound like model guests. I'll pop in and have a chat, see if we can establish communications."

I rap on the door with a mandible before pushing it open. The ants on duty haven't bothered to lock it. Honestly, what would be the point? If someone can escape from the middle of a nest with tens of thousands of monsters flooding every tunnel, room and surface within, fair play to them, they deserve to get out.

The door, if you could call it that, is large enough to be a gate, plenty of room for the more bulky castes of ant to fit through, even so, it's a bit of a squeeze for me. I move slowly, not wanting to unnerve anyone on the other side. Having a giant pair of serrated mandibles poke through your door would be enough to upset most people.

I reach out with mind mana and find the two people within the, as it turns out, quite extensive chambers. Wherever the ants have taken their interior decorating tips from (I suspect Enid), they've really taken the style to heart. As I enter the rooms in which our not-quite-willing guests have been

stationed, I find them once again to be lavishly decorated with fine, carved wooden furniture, lush woven rugs and plump cushions on every chair.

The two ... prisoners... are currently seated on the floor, thankfully better dressed than they were the last time I saw them. Their position seems rather unusual, seated on the floor facing each other, their eyes closed and their breathing regular. Some sort of meditation?

Not wanting to intrude, I settle myself on the floor, my carapace protected from the rough stone by the rugs. Did some ant somewhere weave these? I can't even imagine that happening. As I look closer, I can see an image of myself, bravely leading a cluster of smaller ants to follow me into a tunnel that appears to rise out of the Dungeon.

Yep, some crafter has actually taken up weaving. I can't even...

I'm left waiting for a few minutes, so I use the time to examine these two new creatures more closely. They are mostly humanoid, though assuredly more animalistic in many of their features. The fur, for starters, but also their faces. Slightly more confusing are the ways the two of them differ from one another. On the left, the larger of the two, has more canid features, almost wolf-like in the shape of the jaw, whereas the other is more sleek. Not quite like a cat, but perhaps an ermine, or something along those lines?

[You know, it can be considered rude to stare.]

A gruff voice rings in my mind and the wolf-person opens a pair of piercing, golden eyes and turns them on me.

[But I must commend you for your patience. What business do you have with the Folk?]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 599: Who are these Folks?

[So your people are called... the Folks?]

[Folk.]

[The Folk?]

[Yes.]

[So... The Folk?]

[That is correct.]

[Is that like... a nickname, or a translation thing? Or is it just... The Folk?]

So far, the wolf-like guy has been placid, a cold yet calm air of dignity surrounding him. For some reason, after my repeated questions, a crack begins to show in his façade.

[Our people are collectively known as the Folk. It is a name we chose for ourselves, hundreds of years ago and it remains our name today,] he says shortly.

[Right. It's just...]

[Just what?]

A hint of anger in his eyes causes me to change my words.

[... such a cool and interesting name. Really great. I know that if I could name my community whatever I wanted to, I'd for sure, call it The Folk. If it wasn't taken, I mean. By you. What a good name.]

[You don't like it do you?]

[I think it's a bit weird.]

[I see,] the wolf closes his eyes, his face a mask of calm discipline, [your thoughts belong to you and you are worthy of them. Nonetheless, the name of our people does not change, we should move past it if our discussions are to bear fruit.]

Was that some sort of dig? Big words coming from one of 'the folks'.

[Sure. Well, I know you've spoken to one of my siblings already, Coolant would have explained to you who we are and what we're about around here?]

He nods, his eyes still sharp.

[Yes. This Coolant, was quite respectful. I enjoyed my conversations with her. For one so young, she possessed a settled and insightful mind. I had wondered if all of your kind were similar, but I see that I am wrong.]

[Oh, totally,] I agree, [if you want some more peaceful, relaxing and well-mannered conversation, you should talk to Vibrant. Absolutely the most zen member of the family.]

He eyes me for a moment as if trying to determine my intentions. Good luck trying to get a read on an ant, buddy. We don't even have a face, it's all bones on the outside. We can tell quite a bit about each other's state of mind just by watching antennae, the more subtle cues of the stance and of course scent, but I doubt this guy has managed to achieve that level of insight in a few meetings with one of us. I can't wait to see how he deals with the chattiest ant to ever exist.

[Then I look forward to speaking with this... Vibrant. I hope that the exchange will result in mutual benefit.]

[Oh, I'm sure it will. So, do you two have names, or would you rather I continue to refer to you as 'The Folk'?]

He raises a hand and I notice that his nails are long and curved, more like claws than human fingernails. The hands are also larger than what a human might have. Perhaps that's just a trait of this individual, but I suspect that it might be a common trend amongst the wolf-like folks. The girl, who has remained silent to this point, is certainly much shorter than he is, and much more delicate. Her fur is snowy white, and her features much more delicate than the harsh angles of a canid. Definitely more of a weasel type.

[We are not so quick to share our names among those we do not consider friends. Considering how our relationship began,] he pauses for dramatic effect, just to remind me that our 'relationship' such as it is, began when we abducted them in the Dungeon, [for now, you may call me Grey, and you may refer to my apprentice as White.]

As in, the colour of their fur? Seems a bit... simple? Also, she's his apprentice? Were they on some sort of teaching journey through the Dungeon?

Could it be the case that this is another community with as bad a naming sense as the Colony? I mean, it's not like my own naming sense is particularly good, just take a look at the council for an example of that. My own poor sense seems to have been adopted by them to an almost absurd degree and spread throughout my family. It's nice to think we may have some kindred spirits.

[Sure. Grey, White, nice to meet you. You can call me Diamond, I suppose.]

The two of them run their eyes over my glittering carapace and I can't help but feel proud of my splendid shininess. You could shampoo your fur every day for a year, Grey, you still wouldn't look this slick.

[First thing I'd like to do is extend an apology, on behalf of my family, for abducting you in the Dungeon. We aren't in the habit of kidnapping people... or folk... against their will and imprisoning them. We aren't intending to keep you. Once our discussions are complete, we will be happy to return you to where we found you, and repair the damage to the safe house. If it weren't for the circumstances we find ourselves in currently, we wouldn't be so quick use such harsh measures.]

The two of them nod graciously to accept my apology.

[Indeed,] Grey says, [your situation has been described to me in some small detail by Coolant. A war with the empire of stone. Your Colony will find it difficult to survive, I fear.]

[We may, but I don't think we'll be the easy food you and they seem to think we will be. I have to say, you don't seem to be quite as upset by the idea of a sentient ant Colony as I might have expected. Most people we talk to don't react quite so... calmly.]

[What would I gain from showing otherwise,] Grey replies dryly, [I would hardly be wise to announce my hatred and disgust of your kind when surrounded in the seat of your power.]

[That's... true.]

[However,] he continues, [it is true that the Folk do have a more relaxed attitude towards those such as you. Intelligent monsters are not something we are unfamiliar with.]

Well that sounds nice.

[I must tell you, the Folk have suffered greatly from the scourge of ant-type monsters in the Dungeon, much as all races have. I should also say, that we are not a nation, as you might think we are. We are a loose conglomeration of tribes without any form of central government. I would be pleased to bring word of your Colony to my people, but I cannot say what effect that news might have. Some will want to destroy you, others will seek you as allies against the threats we face, whilst others would be indifferent. There would be no consensus, and indeed, there would be no attempt to enforce one. I know that this may not be what you want to hear, but the strictures of my tribe demand that I am honest with you.]

Grey has adopted a more formal tone as he drops this bad news and as he finishes, he bows toward me and White mimics his action. Might think this is bad news, but frankly, the fact that they wouldn't all immediately want us dead is a massive win. Better than I expected!

Chrysalis

Chapter 600: Punching out the Numbers

It is no mystery to the theorists of the Colony why most of the races we encountered were initially hostile. Our kind is dangerous, it's for precisely this reason that we were able to deal with others as equals, because we were strong, a threat. Mutual destruction isn't the best stance to begin inter-species diplomacy, but it was all that was afforded us, most of the time.

The existence of other intelligent societies of monsters did help to pave the way for us. After all, the sapients of Pangera had been dealing with their kind for thousands of years. Often an antagonistic relationship, with a laundry list of broken alliances and betrayals, on both sides, but at the very least there was an established framework they could use to converse with us.

Here it was that the Eldest had the greatest effect. Whilst the attention they gave to foreign policy was sporadic at best, (though many would say that the intention of the Eldest was to raise the capacity of the Colony to handle its own problems, rather than the failing of a mighty being with a limited attention span, my own thoughts on this topic are detailed to a greater degree in my other writings), the attitude that the Colony adapted in dealings with other races was set by the Eldest very early in our history.

It was a point of view that, whilst never stated explicitly in council documents, nevertheless governed all interactions between we ants and others. The Colony was, is, and always will be, open, supportive and willing to work with any who approach us. We have worked immensely hard to bring up those who did not spurn us, raised villages to mighty cities, cities to great nations, nations to mighty empires. Aggression, war and bad faith were always met with the same, but only until our enemies were able to change their stance. Once an olive branch was extended, the Colony was always willing to accept it.

Naturally, this has caused the Colony to be on the receiving end of its share of betrayals, yet it is the opinion of most Scholars within the Colony that this was a necessary cost of pursuing a peaceful agenda. We have always been able to make the argument that we were in the right, that we dealt in good faith. In this way our reputation spread across the world, and did more work in our favour than anything else.

Our name became a byword for fairness, but also for a disproportionate response. Give the Colony a kindness, and they will repay it tenfold, do them a disservice, and they will do the same.

Too many were unable, or unwilling to heed this message and receive the Eldest's kindness. The destruction that followed in those instances is, in this scholar's opinion, both the Eldest's greatest failing, and greatest triumph.

- *Diplomacy and the Colony - A treatise by Historiant.*

My conversation with Grey and White rolls on for more than an hour. His people, the er, Folk, seem to be an interesting lot. He's quite cagey about where exactly they live, which is understandable, I suppose. As far as he knows, Coolant and I are the friendly face of what is actually a ravenous horde, intent on sniffing out their cities and consuming their young. When I tell him about the one city we have actually sort of conquered, he at first expresses some doubt that such a thing has actually occurred, but when I continue to affirm the existence of Rylleh, a city under the administration of the Colony (to all intents and purposes) he expresses a desire to go and see it for himself.

When I tell him about the existence of a village where the Colony and humans coexist, he's equally interested in taking a peek. Then it became my turn to become a little cagey. I wasn't against him looking at the village, so long as Enid didn't mind, but I didn't necessarily want him to know where it was, either. Without a more full and thorough understanding of portal and gate magic, we don't know that more advanced societies can't just pop a magic portal into existence anywhere they want.

Grey himself mentioned that sections of the Folk are likely to be openly hostile to us without denying that he himself may feel that way, so it's not as if he's necessarily a trusted agent. In the end, we part ways with a generally positive vibe. I'll leave the particulars of how this interaction is handled from this point onward to the council. I've managed to put my point of view across, I think, and I get the sense that Grey is prepared to be upfront with the Colony, which is better than I expected.

White is another story. I get nothing out of her, regardless what I try. When I direct a question to her directly, she merely turns to look at Grey and he answers in her place. When I tried to slip a sneaky question to her directly, namely: [Is this ugly guy keeping you against your will?], she stifled a giggle and shook her head. In the end, White remains a mystery. An apprentice of some kind, apparently, but more than that, I have no idea.

Heading out into the tunnel, I re-join with my pets and make our way back through the tunnels of the nest to our own private chamber. Interestingly enough, the Colony hasn't made much of an effort to decorate this space without asking me. This chamber reminds me of the original ant nests, back before I'd made them smarter. Unadorned dirt walls, a nice ovoid sort of shape. It's cozy. Also, it's nice not to see my own damn face every time I look at a wall.

[Alright gang. Get your Biomass and Skills in order. We need to crunch the numbers before we head out and do some power levelling. Make sure that you're in tip top shape!]

Each of my pets, my closest allies, react in their own way. Tiny smacks himself on the chest with both fists, excited for the battle to come. Crinis tightens her grip on my carapace at the mention of danger, no doubt considering all that she'll need to protect me from, and probably worrying about a few, far-fetched scenarios. Invidia's eye just gleams as he thinks about the Biomass and experience his victims possess, resources that he now yearns to seize.

I just shake my head and crack open my menu, ready to poke about and check on my progress.

Name: Anthony

Level: 51 (Rare) (V)

Might: 91

Toughness: 79

Cunning: 64

Will: 45

HP: 158/158

MP: 300/300

Skills:

General:

Master Excavation (IV) Level 3; Expert Grip (III) **Level 7**; Expert Stealth (III) Level 6; Tunnel Guide (III) Level 9; Iron Mind (IV) **Level 21**; Expert Stamina (III) **Level 19**; **Still Meditation (IV) Level 4**; **Snap Dash (IV) Level 5**;

Mana:

Mana Craft (V) **Level 15**; Condensed Mana (IV) **Level 7**; Finer External Mana Manipulation (IV) **Level 9**; Mana Hoarder (IV) **Level 15**; Master Mind Magic Affinity (IV) **Level 17**; **Directed Mana Sensing (IV) Level 2**; Expert Healing Magic Affinity (III) **Level 11**; Advanced Blue Fire Magic Affinity (V) Level 2; Expert Stone Magic Affinity (IV) **Level 18**; Gas Magic Affinity (IV) **Level 26**; Ice Magic Affinity (IV) **Level 31**;

Pet:

Further Pet Communication (III) Level 4; Core Crafting (IV) **Level 13**; Pet Growth Speed (I) Level 5;

Defensive:

Master Exo-Skeleton Defence (IV) **Level 26**; Expert Dodge (III) **level 19**; Expert Endure (III) **Level 10**; **Expert Grace (III) Level 5**;

Offensive:

Deadly Acid Shot (III) **Level 19**; Master Precise Shooting (IV) **Level 11**; Omen Chomp (IV) **Level 35**;

Mutations:

Senses:

Perimeter Eyes +15, Far-sight Oracle Antennae +25;

Defence:

Complete Diamond Carapace +25, Braced Healing Inner Carapace Plating +25;

Physical:

Rapid Absorption Legs +15, Mana Flooded Mandibles +25, Frequent Potent Regeneration Gland +25, Loquacious Pheromone Gland +15, Vast Hungering Stomach + 25; Hyper-Twitch Musculature +20, Instant Transmission Sub-Neural Network +20;

Acid:

Mana Binding Acid +15, Hyper Pressurised Acid Nozzle +10; Potent Acid Concentration Gland +10, Fatiguing Acid Stimulation Gland +10;

Mental:

Unyielding Coordination Cortex +25;

Mana:

Bottomless Gravity Magic Gland +15, Endless Collective Will Vestibule +25;

Species: Juvenile Colony Paragon (Formica Sapiens)

Skill points: 15

Biomass: 423

Quite a few Skills have ranked up recently and I have a ton of Biomass to spend. I really need to check and see if anything new has been unlocked recently also. Time to get busy chatting to old friend Gandalf, I suppose.