The Workers

Two leaf cutter antsare standing by one of the entrances to their nest.

It’s enormous, their nest.

Absolutely enormous.

But it’s all underground.

So it’s invisible.

Invisible to us, I mean.

Invisible, apart from a few small entrances.

And our two leaf cutter ants have just come out of one.

One of these leaf cutter ants is a young ant.

An ant who is new to the world outside the nest.

The other is a much older ant.

An ant who has worked outside the nest for a long time.

We can listen in to their conversation.

If you like.

Tutor: Hello.

*Student: Hi.*

New out here, are you?

*It’s my first day.*

Different, out here!

*It’s so bright!*

Lovely, isn’t it!

*It’s scary!*

They’ve asked me to show you the ropes.

*Oh. Good.*

OK so far?

*Well, it took me ages to find my way out.*

I know what you mean.

*There are so many tunnels!*

You’ll soon find your way about.

*I come from way down in the nest.*

And we go even further down every day.

*Really?*

Us leaf cutters travel miles, you know.

*Miles? Really?*

No, not really. Not quite miles.

*Oh.*

But we do have to run a long way every day.

*How far do we have to run today?*

Well, there’s a good tree only about 50 metres away.

*Only 50 metres!*

Yes.

*Sometimes you run more than 50 metres?*

Sometimes the best trees are 90, maybe 100 metres away.

*That’s miles, for an ant!*

Yes!

*When do we start?*

Right now, if you like.

*Where are we going?*

To a mango tree.

*To cut some leaves?*

We’re leaf cutter ants.

*Oh.*

It’s what we do!

*There must be a lot of us out here today.*

Mmmm…

*How many do you think?*

Oh, I don’t know. Maybe a million.

*A million! A million ants!*

Maybe two.

*Two million?*

Give or take.

*It’s so bright out here.*

Nice!

*It’s always dark in our nest.*

Well, of course.

*There’s always ants running to and fro.*

Our nest is busy.

*What they’re all doing I don’t know.*

All useful stuff, whatever it is.

*Some run down carrying bits of leaf.*

That’s what we’ll be doing.

*Some run along carrying eggs.*

Looking after our young.

*Some have rubbish in their jaws.*

Keeping the nest clean.

*They all seem to be working hard.*

Important stuff!

*Ummm. Excuse me. Ummmm. Can I ask you something?*

Of course. Go ahead.

*There’s this enormous ant right behind us.*

Him?

*He’s ten times my size.*

He’s OK.

*He’s running along right behind us.*

Don’t worry.

*He’s there all the time.*

No problem.

*He’s enormous.*

Yes, he is.

*He keeps looking at me.*

It’s his job.

*Is it?*

He’s a soldier ant.

*A soldier ant?*

He’s one of us.

*Is he?*

All soldier ants are big.

*Are they?*

He was specially fed to make him grow.

*Really?*

When he was a baby.

*Really?*

That’s how he came to be so big.

*Oh.*

He’s one of us, though.

*He gives me the creeps.*

We’re much safer with him there.

*How come?*

His job is to make sure we’re safe.

*Oh. A bodyguard.*

Yes.

*He looks dangerous!*

But not to us.

*They told me I was a worker.*

Out here there’s only workers and soldiers.

*Do workers cut leaves all day?*

Well, yes – we’re leaf cutter ants!

*Have you done this all your life?*

Ever since I was a nipper.

*What will you do when you retire?*

Oh, we never retire!

*Never retire?*

When I’m older, I’ll work underground.

*Oh?*

Lighter work down there.

*You mean you’ll be underground forever?*

I’ll probably be making mulch.

*Mulch?*

For the fungus fields.

*Sounds disgusting!*

Oh, it’s OK.

*What is mulch?*

Chewed leaves.

*You’ll chew leaves all day?*

Into mulch.

*What is it for, though?*

It’s for the fungus.

*Like compost?*

Exactly like compost.

*How do you make mulch?*

Well, you clean every leaf.

*Really?*

To make sure there are no nasty bugs on them.

*Oh.*

Then you chew them up into a mulch.

*And feed it to the fungus?*

Yes.

*Oh.*

Deep down in our nest there are massive rooms.

*Really?*

We grow fungus there.

*Why?*

We can’t live off leaves.

*Oh. Why not?*

We can’t digest them.

*We can’t digest the leaves we cut?*

No, but the fungus can.

*So we grow fungus on mulch.*

And we eat the fungus.

*We farm fungus, in fact.*

That’s right.

*So, really, we’re fungus farmers!*

Yes.

*Fungus is delicious.*

Mmmm…

*You said it grows in special rooms.*

Massive rooms.

*Oh.*

We call them the fungus fields.

*I’ve never seen them.*

No?

*They must be a long way down.*

5 metres, 6 metres maybe.

*Right down at the bottom of the nest!*

Not quite.

*Oh?*

At the very bottom of our nest there’s a rubbish tip.

*I’ve never seen that either!*

Probably not.

*How far underground is that?*

7, maybe 8 metres.

*Wow!*

It’s where we’ll all finish up.

*Where we’ll all finish up?*

When we’re dead.

*Dead?*

When we’re dead, someone has to carry our body down to the dump.

*We finish up on a dump?*

Down at the bottom of our nest.

*Oh.*

That’s where we finish up.

*Look!*

What?

*Ants are coming back towards us, with bits of leaf.*

They’ve just cut them.

*They’re holding them like umbrellas.*

Yes.

*Smart!*

That’s what you have to learn to do today.

*Right.*

Follow me.

*Right.*

Climb up the tree and find a leaf.

*Right.*

Then cut a nice big piece.

*With my jaws?*

Now lift it up over your back, and start running.

*Back to the nest?*

Yes.

*Smart!*

Now follow me.

*What do we do when we get back?*

Take our leaf down to a mulch maker.

*It’s like a maze down there.*

It is complicated.

*I can’t find my way around the nest.*

You’ll be OK once you’ve learned.

*Mmmm…*

I’ll show you the way.

*There are so many tunnels.*

Hundreds.

*And some enormous rooms too.*

Our nest is enormous.

*There are miles of tunnels.*

Our nest is maybe 30 metres across.

*30 metres!*

Big nest!

*And we’re going 5 or 6 metres underground.*

That’s right.

*To hand our leaf over to a mulch maker ant.*

Right.

*To farm fungus.*

Yes.

*This is amazing!*

I suppose it is, really.

*How does the nest produce young workers?*

Well…

*There are lots of workers out today.*

Maybe a million or two, yes.

*Where have we all come from?*

The queen.

*The queen?*

She’s produced every one of us.

*I’ve heard ants talking about the queen.*

We all do.

*About this huge ant who lays eggs all the time.*

That’s all she does.

*Just lies there laying eggs?*

Yes.

*I’ve heard about workers who look after her all day long.*

Yes.

*And the eggs.*

I saw them once.

*Really?*

I got lost.

*You got lost?*

I found myself in a huge room.

*Wow!*

In there was the biggest ant I’ve ever seen.

*Wow!*

Enormous, she was.

*The queen!*

And all she did was lie there and lay eggs.

*Just lay eggs!*

There were workers cleaning her, feeding her, taking her eggs away.

*What happens to the eggs?*

Workers look after them, of course.

*They say she can lay thousands of eggs a day.*

She can.

*Do you know what happens to them?*

They are taken to different rooms and fed.

*By workers?*

Yes. Some are fed loads.

*Of fungus?*

Loads of the best fungus.

*And?*

They grow to be very big.

*Like that soldier ant?*

Yes.

*So ordinary worker ants are just not fed as much as soldier ants?*

That’s what they say.

*That doesn’t seem very fair!*

Well, I reckon it is.

*Oh?*

Our nest has 10 million, maybe 12 million ants in all.

*10 or 12 million ants?*

And there’s a lot of different kinds of work to be done.

*So we need different ants to do different jobs?*

Yes. No good if we were all the same.

*I suppose not.*

Well, no.

*I wouldn’t be able to fight like a soldier ant, that’s for sure.*

I don’t think either of us would.

*But we’re just right for cutting leaves.*

And there’s all the rubbish to take down to the dump.

*I suppose there is.*

We have to keep the nest clean.

*I suppose so.*

10 million ants make a lot of rubbish.

*Yes. I suppose.*

And the fungus needs looking after.

*Yes.*

There are teams of very small ants, doing that.

*Really?*

Called minims.

*Minims!*

They’re the real fungus farmers.

*I suppose.*

Live underground all the time.

*I suppose they do.*

I reckon our job’s the easy bit.

*More interesting, too.*

We get to see the world.

*I suppose we do.*

I’ve travelled far and wide, I can tell you.

*I suppose you must have done.*

Seen the world, I have.

*I bet you have.*

So have you, now.

*It’s enormous!*

But here we are back home.

*So we are.*

Stay close, or you’ll get lost.

*Wait for me!*