

Chrysalis 261

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 261: Another voice from the dark

As the voices of the new hatchlings ring throughout the room, and I start to wonder just what it is that I've done, another voice sounds within my mind.

[Original Species has been detected. New species type has been assigned.]

Gandalf?! What the heck are you on about?!

Is he saying that the new hatchlings are recognised by the system as a different species to mine? I did make a lot of changes...

Does this mean that the workers will attack them? That would be terrible!

Before I can process the implications of what is being said, the voice of the grey one continues to speak.

[You have been designated as the progenitor of this new species. Do you wish to align your species, and that of your colony, with this new archetype?]

Uhhhhhhhhhh.

Yes?

I suppose?

The instant I assent within my mind, there is an audible rumble around and within me. A lethargic feeling rises up through my limbs and claws towards my mind, dragging me down into the lassitude I recognise as Torpor.

[Crisis! Watch me ...]

Before I can finish the sentence, my thoughts slow like congealing grease until they move no more.

...

I'm up!

[Crisis! Crisis! How long was I out?!]

I sway my eyes across the scene around me and try to process what has happened. To all appearances, not much has changed. The hatchlings are still congregating together, shouting and arguing with each other with increasingly loud voices. Something that has changed, is the workers. Their movements are slowing, some of them are already still, and I recognise the creeping lethargy of torpor in all of them.

[Master?! Is everything alright?] Crisis asks, worried.

[Just tell me how long it's been since I last spoke to you!]

[Only a few moments, I haven't even made it up the tunnel to you yet!]

Just a few seconds? What in the name of heck is going on here?

The voice of Gandalf mentioned something about new species and I agreed to have mine changed. Maybe I should check my status and see if anything has changed.

Sure enough, when I bring up my status, my species has changed. No longer [Formica], but [Formica Sapiens].

As time passes, workers are crowding into the nest, crawling down the tunnel from below and stuffing themselves into chambers only to immediately grow still.

Wait a second!

Bursting out of the chamber, I rush down the main tunnel of the nest, passing Crinis on her way up. I ignore her confused questions and throw myself into the Queens chamber. Behind me I can see more workers making their way in from outside, crowding the entrance and crawling over each other to make their way inside the nest.

Inside the Queens' chamber I find the perpetually shifting guard of workers around her has grown eerily still. The stillness feels so strange here, in this place of motions and activity in the heart of colony.

Gently shifting the workers out of the way I find the Queen herself, silent and still.

Ooooooh boy. I hope I didn't make a booboo.

So, if I'm reading the situation correctly, the moment the new generation was born, the system recognised that a new species had been created, then gave me, the creator of that species, the right to change the entire colony to a new designation?

I wait restlessly in the Queens chamber for any sign of motion. It only took a few seconds for my species to change, why is it taking so much longer for them? Is it because I'm already quite close to what the new generation can evolve into, whereas the others aren't? What's going to happen to the workforce? Will they all change into new hatchlings? What exactly is going to happen here!?

I'm so confused!

The new hatchlings!

I rush back up the tunnel into the chamber, once again passing Crinis who was carefully climbing down, trying not to obstruct any workers entering the nest.

In the egg chamber, the twenty small hatchling haven't ceased their shouting match, even as the workers who had tended them have grown still around them. Feeling somewhat anxious about the changing situation, I don't have that much patience for them right now.

"All of you, shut up!"

"...."

That was quick.

As I bellow at them, the twenty small hatchlings turn to me, immediately quietening down. I didn't realise I had this much charisma as a leader. I'm impressed with me!

"We have a slight situation in the nest at the moment, so I need you to keep still for a second so I can sort things out."

"Okay senior!" they respond in unison.

[Tiny, I want you to guard the nest from below the Queen's chamber. Crinis, head to the top of the nest but stay within the anthill, don't let anything but workers come down, understood?]

[I understand, Master.]

Tiny just grunts.

Alright. They'll protect the colony for the time being. All I have to do is keep these twenty workers contained and wait for the rest of the colony to wake up again. It shouldn't take too long... right?

When the last of the workers has entered the nest and found a chamber to sleep in the nest becomes unnaturally still. In every chamber, workers, eggs and larvae sit unmoving, completely silent, completely still.

It doesn't take long for the situation to start to grate on my nerves. I feel like the sole survivor of some hideous disease, surrounded by the perfectly preserved bodies of their former family members. Wake up siblings! Wake up mother! I can't take being alone like this!

As I wait, growing increasingly frantic as time passes, I speak to the new generation intermittently, keeping them settled as we wait for some sort of motion in the colony.

The first one to recover was Vibrant, of course.

"Hey senior! What's going on? This is so weird, right? I was hunting down the Dungeon and bringing up some food when this powerful feeling came over me. I rushed back the nest, dropping my food on the way, how strange is that, right? Then as soon as I got here I just took a nap and now I have a different species. Isn't that strange? And who do we have here? New hatchlings! They're so small, what's that all about? Are they sick? Undernourished? I've been bringing so much food lately, it's impossible they haven't had enough to eat! Have you been eating? You're looking stressed. You aren't hungry are you?"

"Oh my god! STOP!"

"Okay!"

Sigh.

"Every member of the colony is having their species changed. I don't know how long they are going to be out so try and help me keep watch on the colony. Can you do that?"

"Oh, sure! Not a problem!"

"Okay. If you are doing that, then I might as well get started teaching these new workers. No time like the present I suppose. Not like I can do anything here to help."

"Alright senior! Have fun!" Vibrant waves an antennae cheerfully as I gather up the new hatchlings and take them towards the farms.

Nothing is ever simple around here.

Chrysalis

Chapter 262: Training day

"Ok. Let's try this again. The enemy is down there. We can see them, we are in a superior position where they cannot fight back. All of the advantages are ours. So, what are you going to do? What is your strategy?"

The twenty hatchlings and I are positioned in one of the original four farms, clinging to the ceiling out of harm's way. I lured a monster out of the towards the edge of the open space and tied it down with a gravity bolt. The poor creature is labouring on the ground beneath us, barely able to move, whilst I try to teach these hatchlings how to fight.

The particular young worker I've been trying to teach twitches a little as I focus my attention on them fully. I'm not sure exactly why but these workers seem a little cowed by me. Perhaps it's just that I'm older and larger.

"Well, I see the monster down there."

"Right."

"I know that I have numerical superiority."

"Right!"

Maybe this time I'm getting through to them.

"I also know that we have a positional advantage here, and the ability to attack our opponent when they can't fight back."

"Yees?"

Here we go!

"So, I will charge down to engage the enemy, forcing myself into its jaws so that by my sacrifice my fellow workers will be able to attack without being harmed!"

DAMMIT.

Immediately the rest of the hatchlings respond positively.

"Ooo, that's a good idea!"

"Curses! I should have thought of that."

"That has to be the right answer. It's flawless."

The worker who suggested it is now staring at me like a puppy waiting to be praised. Almost wiggling with joy as the praise of his fellow hatchlings rings in his ears.

Ugh. This again.

"WRONG!"

Thwack!

Swinging an antennae down hard I slap the worker on the head.

"How many times do I have to say this?! You. Are. Not. To. Die!"

"Ohhh right" the workers chorus.

I feel a splitting headache coming on.

"In none of the plans that you put forward are you allowed to act in a suicidal way. You should always act to minimise the loss to the colony to as great an extent as possible. It is possible for you to resolve this situation without any losing any workers, easily! So you should!"

The hatchlings look at me as if I'm speaking a different language.

This is infuriating. It's almost as if any plan in which they don't die is in some way unsatisfactory. I've been trying for thirty minutes to get them to value their own lives, to think of own safety as something that is important, but it just isn't getting through.

Not only do they not care about their own lives, not dying seems to be like a personal failure on their part. They burn to sacrifice themselves for the colony, to win something in the exchange and go down in a blaze of glory.

Maybe I'm thinking about this the wrong way. It's clear that they aren't going to value themselves for their own sake, but perhaps I get them to value it for another reason.

"Listen to me, all of you!" I declare.

Twenty sets of eyes and antennae focus on me with laser like focus.

They're so earnest, it's quite cute.

"Do you wish to serve the colony?" I ask.

"Of course!"

"Yes!"

"I'll die before this day is done for the colony!"

"Ok whoa, slow down there. So I take it, you also wish to serve the Queen?"

"Naturally!"

"Mother is the heart of the colony!"

"I will throw my life for the Queen before wakes!"

"Alright, you there, to the side, just chill out there. Sheesh!"

I take a moment to compose myself.

"Now answer this question for me. Can you do more to benefit the colony, can you do more to serve the Queen, when you are alive, as opposed to dead?"

"...."

They are thinking. They are seriously thinking. In any other situation this would be ridiculous but the fact that they are thinking at all is a massive win!

"What if...." one of the hatchlings pipes up dubiously, "we were to serve the colony for a time, and then die in dutiful service to the colony?"

"Would you be able to do more for the colony whilst still alive? Especially after you've taken Biomass and experience that could have gone to others? Are you selfish?"

I say the word selfish as if throwing up vile poison and the hatchlings with respond with horror and disgust.

"Selfish?!"

"NEVER!"

"Be accused of selfishness?! I would rather die! Unselfishly ... "

I nod sagely.

"That's right. If the colony has invested resources in you, it is your duty to repay the colony with dutiful service, NOT pointless death."

I lean closer to them.

"Not to mention, the other thing to consider. Which colony is better, one with one hundred workers, or one with two hundred workers?"

They think and mutter amongst themselves for a moment before deciding that yes, more workers is clearly superior to less workers. The ant logic of strength in numbers is strong with these ones.

"Exactly. Now how is the colony supposed to increase its numbers if you die so easily?"

"..."

Oooh that hit them hard. Time for the final strike!

"In fact, to strengthen the colony, isn't it your duty to stay alive as long as possible? Wouldn't throwing your life away for personal glory actually be an act of ... SELFISHNESS?!"

Their faces are pure masks of shock. Glorious sacrifice for the colony? Selfish?! It sounds like madness, but the logic is so clear! It sounds like heresy to them, but I've laid out a strong case. The war of ideas in playing out on their faces as I watch them.

Maybe I have them now. Please, let me have them. I really didn't think that the first order of business I would have when trying to teach these hatchlings would be to convince them not to throw their lives away at the first opportunity.

I put so much work into getting to this point. Did they really think I'd let them waste it all?!

I really hope we don't have to do this with every new worker that hatches, seriously.

Slowly, the light of understanding has begun to dawn amongst a few of the hatchlings. I decide that there is a slight chance that some of them may be able to give me a non-stupid answer so I indicate one of the quicker ants to come forward.

"OK. Let's try again. Your foe is there below us, we are here. How do you approach the situation?"

The hatchling considers the question seriously. I can see the cogs turning as it thinks about what I've said, what its instincts say, and tries to resolve the two.

"So ... I don't ... Throw myself at it and Die?" it says hesitantly.

"OBVIOUSLY!"

THWACK!

"It's so simple! Get your hunting party together and attack with acid from range! You can damage your target without it being able to threaten you. With enough acid being applied, you might even defeat the enemy without them coming close enough to hurt you! See?! Then all of the workers survive, the hunt is successful and the colony benefits! HOW CAN YOU NOT UNDERSTAND THIS?!"

They all nod and exclaim "Oooh!", as if they've finally understood. These damn idiots!

Finally, I snap.

"RIGHT! Line up! Two rows of ten. I said ten! Now on my signal you will begin firing acid at the target until you run out. NO QUESTIONS, put that antenna DOWN. Make every shot count and focus on your skills? Ready? FIRE!"

Nothing happens.

They watch me.

I watch them.

Slowly I bring my antennae forward to rub at my temples.

"The signal to shoot is when I say 'fire'. Ok?"

"Ooohhh."

I'm dying here. I'm seriously dying.

"Fire..."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 263

After a couple of hours I was able to get the hatchlings to operate in a reasonable way. The first few enemies we defeated with acid and then let the little workers chow down after I'd dragged the Biomass clear of the farm. They ran out of acid quickly though and I was forced to incapacitate the prey before letting the young ants swarm it, training their bite skills and gaining experience.

We repeated this process until the farm was empty, then I had them drink their fill from the water before we moved into the next farm.

I'd only had to stop them from throwing themselves into the fight and embracing their own certain doom a few times! Progress!

Despite having intellectually understood my point that by living they would be able to contribute more to the colony than they could by dying, the urge to throw themselves in harms way to protect their fellow hatchlings was overpowering.

At one point a new monster had burst out of the farm wall whilst the hatchlings were eating. I'd known about it of course, but before I could deal with it, one of the workers had already leaped at the enemy, screaming "I'll slow it down with my congealed blood! Attack from the flanks!"

Luckily I'd been quick enough to Dash in and knock him aside before crushing the offending monster with a savage bite attack.

Naturally I'd then thwacked the offending ant on the head and launched into a lecture about appropriate crises response no necessarily including immediate sacrifice. Maybe they one day would be in a situation that demanded sacrifice, but this sure as heck wasn't it!

After instructing the ants to spend the Biomass they had accumulated and handing out a bit of advice (none of them so much as twitched by the way), we moved onto the next farm to repeat the process.

I need to stuff these hatchlings full of experience and Biomass as fast as possible. There isn't long until the next wave will be born and then we'll have two hundred of the little pests to deal with!

"We stick to the same plan as before" I inform my class of diminutive workers as we cling to the ceiling of the next farm. "We begin with acid bombardment of the target until ammunition is expended, then we move bites. Remember to focus on the skill you are using! We want to see some juicy level ups. Anyone who hits level five is banned from taking more experience, we need everyone to hit five as soon as possible."

"Yes senior!" they shout.

In this way we continue to rush through the farms at breakneck speed. With twenty of the little workers we are able to push through the farms at a fairly rapid clip as they team up to devour any available Biomass in record speed and I defeat the monsters we encounter with ease, tying them down with gravity bolts.

When we hit the third farm, the first worker reached level five. By the fifth, most of them had reached level five and were ready to form their cores. By the sixth, they all were.

"Excellent! It's been a great training session troops! Plenty of Biomass absorbed, skills developed and levels gained. It's time now to form your cores! Let's return to the nest and find a safe spot."

"Roger!"

Dutifully, the little ants follow along behind me as we retreat to the nest proper. Just to make sure they are looked after I take them down into my own personal chamber at the very base of the nest where Tiny sits on guard, munching on the last thing to try and leap out of the walls at him.

With a bit of encouragement, the ants settle in and spend their levels, condensing their cores. An exciting moment for any young ant!

Whilst they do that, I hustle up the main tunnel, the awkward stillness still reverberating through the nest, to check in with Crinis.

[Nothing has been happening, Master. After the last of the workers returned it has been very still.]

[Ok. You keep looking out and make sure that we aren't attacked. I'm counting on you to defend us if we get into trouble.]

[Of course Master!] Crinis declared confidently, [I will allow no trash to desecrate our home.]

Well.... Good. My greatest fear is that another wave of monsters will attack us over the surface whilst the workers are out of commission. In which case it would be up to Crinis and myself to hold them off for as long as possible and hope that the workers would start waking up.

Vibrant is already awake of course and it doesn't take her long to find me as she darts from chamber to chamber, checking on the workers.

"Hi-hi! How are things going with the new ones?" she asks, not even pausing as she rushes by me.

"It's going well so far, I think they'll work out.... Ok?" nope, she's gone. At least she's keeping an eye on all of the chambers like she promised.

Time to head back down.

The workers having their species changed is unexpected and I don't know how long they are going to be out of action. It's already been a few hours and so far only Vibrant has awakened. It had better not take much longer, it's really stressing me out.

When I pass through the Queen's chamber I take a moment to check in on her. The massive ant who is the mother of all members of the colony appears to be slumbering peacefully. Her body is totally still, sunk deep into torpor.

I really hope Mother wakes up soon. The colony just isn't the same without her calming presence. Perhaps it's just me hoping too hard but I swear I saw her antenna twitch as I turned away to head back down into my chamber. I'll tell myself it was real for sure. Shell be up soon!

Whilst the ants finish forming their cores I dig out my own core supply and start fusing together a few special cores. I'm going to have a happy surprise for these little fellow when they wake up!

Ah, the joys of being a mentor. It's tough watching them grow up so fast!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 264: The waking monarch

Sensation returned to the Queen in increments. A leg twitched, then one of her antenna crackled into life, overloading her fuzzed mind with sensory information she wasn't ready to process.

As she drowsed, the feeling of change, of difference, rose within her. Even without being fully alert she knew that she was not the same as she had been when she'd gone to sleep. Her thoughts continued to

swirl in languid circles as her body came to life piece by piece. It was always thus for her. She knew that the workers did not enter torpor as she did, her rest was longer, deeper and took longer to emerge from.

For this reason she tried to rest as little as possible. If something were to happen to her family as she rested, how could she forgive herself? An idle thought stirred vaguely in her mind, if her noisy child were to find out about her lack of rest, surely she would be pestered into sleeping more. It was of vital importance that she conceal her tiredness.

The sensation of change grew stronger as she continued to wake. It was difficult to say exactly what it was, whatever had occurred, had happened within her body, it wasn't easy to feel the difference when the changes were applied to one's own mind.

However, a picture was taking shape. The Queen was able to feel her own thoughts moving faster than before. Even half awake, she could sense the change. Her mind felt agile and quick as thoughts moved quicker and things that had seemed complex suddenly seemed simpler, more manageable.

When she had finally awoken, she shifted her body slightly to ensure her body was alright. Then she tried to find out what was happening in her chamber. Her loyal guards tended to her needs and protected her in this space from spawning monsters, it would be horrible if she were to move too quickly and crush them by mistake. The Queen was under no illusions just how much stronger than her children she was.

It was a good thing that she checked before shifting herself, her loyal guard were still here with her, except that they were all resting. All of them! Some of them were even deep in torpor on her back. It was hardly unusual for her children to climb on her back, ensuring that she was clean and defending her from threats spawning overhead, but for them to sink into torpor without first moving to another chamber was unheard of.

What exactly was going on?

Curious, she brought up her status and stared with surprise at the new species listed there. Formica Sapiens? What exactly had happened?

Her antennae twitched slightly with exasperation. This had to be the work of her meddling child. Always with grand ideas and strange plans that somehow worked out, the family would be in a far worse position if not for that one's meddling. It's a shame that the smartest of her children would also prove to be the most frustrating.

What had they done this time?

"Good! The cores have been formed well and we've reinforced them. Don't look at me like that, special cores are a rare resource for us, don't be so ungrateful. A little discomfort/extreme pain now, but you'll be thanking me when you evolve!" a voice echoed from below, followed by several weary groans.

Who do all of these voices belong to? The Queen didn't recall hearing them before. Other than her meddling child of course.

"Let's go back to the farms. We need to get back to level five as soon as possible. Before the day is done you'll have completed your first evolution, that's our schedule. Up and at 'em. Gogogogo!"

At the noisy urging of her meddlesome child a sorry looking cluster of young ants climbed into her chamber from below at what she guessed were the entrances to the 'farms' that she had been told about.

She wasn't sure she liked the idea of spawning so many monsters so close to the nest but she had to admit that the Biomass supplied had been more than expected. The repeated harvesting had given her enough Biomass to push for the second set of two hundred eggs as quickly as she had.

"Wait a moment children" she called out, causing the young hatchlings to turn towards her with surprise.

"Mother? You're awake!" they cried and rushed forward to stand before her.

"What?! Mother?!" the meddlesome one yelled and rushed into the chamber, brushing aside the much smaller hatchlings effortlessly before fussing over the Queen, pestering her with questions.

Internally, the Queen smiled, touched by the obvious concern being show by her meddlesome child, externally however.

THWACK!

"Ow!"

"What have you done this time, child? The workers, even myself, have been dragged into torpor. My species has also changed. Can you explain?"

Chastened, the meddlesome child rubbed at their head with an antenna whilst attempting to placate the Queen.

"Well, things worked very well in the plan to create smarter, more capable workers. The first twenty have hatched and I've started training them up. They've already formed their cores and are well on the way to their first evolution with complete +5 upgrades and fully upgraded cores" the unmistakable note of pride was resonating in that voice which had taken on a lecturing tone.

The Queen was also proud of what her meddlesome child had achieved. If what had been said was true then these twenty young workers were advancing rapidly and would be a great aid to the family. However...

THWACK!

"Ouch!"

"And the sleeping?"

"Right, the torpor. Well, Mother, it turns out that when these hatchlings were born, the system decided that they were a new species. As the 'creator' of the new species, I was given the option to convert our existing colony over to the new type. I selected yes and everyone fell asleep, including me! I didn't know it was going to happen! I promise!"

The Queen slowly nodded. It made sense. Her own species had clearly been changed after waking up, and in her opinion, changing the species of the entire colony was the best option. Different species of ants went to war, this was something she knew instinctively.

Reaching down with her antenna, gently this time, she patted her meddlesome child on the head.

"You have done well child. Now give me a moment to speak to my new children."

Visibly pleased to be off the hook, her meddlesome child hopped to one side and began herding the smaller hatchlings towards her.

The Queen looked down on her new children carefully. The twenty hatchlings were clearly smaller than those born before the change, but there was something different about them. A glimmer of light in their eyes, the way they looked about the chamber taking in information and thinking. The Queen was slightly disturbed to see that sort of behaviour from her children. She had come to expect it from the meddlesome one, but were these new hatchlings ants as she understood them? Or were they something new?

"How are you children?" she asked gently.

The twenty hatchlings perked up at her words, but were clearly suffering.

"We are well Mother!"

"Absolutely fine!"

"Never better!"

The Queen smiled down at them, their bravado fooled no one.

"I can see that you are in pain children. Do you require rest?" she enquired.

Rest was not something workers, nor the Queen, generally indulged in. Part of her was genuinely concerned to see her children suffering, another part was testing their response. She wanted to understand her new children, how were they similar to those who had come before? How were they different?

"Rest?!" the twenty spat in unison, sounding almost offended at the suggestion.

"I require no rest, not for another hundred years!" declared one scrappy looking hatchling close to her right foreleg.

"I will not rest in this lifetime! Death before rest!" cried another.

The others took up the chant.

"Death before rest! Death before rest! Death before rest!"

The Queen's heart lifted in her thorax. These were ants, down to their very hearts.

"Always to the death with you lot. Stop shouting at the Queen!" the meddlesome one interrupted, shouting louder than the other twenty combined.

"Sorry to disturb you Mother" the meddlesome one continued, "I should get back to training this bunch. Apparently I need to add a lecture on the necessity and importance of rest!"

As the meddlesome child glared at the hatchlings, the Queen shifted guiltily. Rest was important It just felt like such a waste.

"Very well, child. I hope you children continue to serve the colony into the future."

The hatchlings waved at her vigorously with their antennae as they responded.

"Of course Mother! We will work tirelessly for the family!"

"Indeed, our efforts will never falter!"

"I'm honoured to bare this pain for the colony!"

"Me too!"

"Alright, alright, get into the farm already, we're on a schedule here!"

The meddlesome one herded the young hatchlings back down towards the farms and out of sight as they continued to declare their boundless commitment to the colony. The Queen couldn't help but feel warm inside. The future of the family looked bright. Perhaps soon there would be another Queen and they would truly start to expand as her instincts demanded that they should.

Conflict would follow, it always did in the Dungeon. The Queen was still young but she had learned that lesson early. Still, she welcomed it. Her family wouldn't be found wanting against challenge, she firmly believed that.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 265: The new colony takes shape

After speaking to the Queen I took my class down into the farms for further instruction. I honestly can't say what Mother was thinking when I spoke to her, she seemed a mix of happy and mad. I have to say, I was quite nervous talking to her. I mean, how am I supposed to know how she would feel about having her species changed?! She might have been very attached to it. I don't know!

Having her species changed by the acts of one of her own children as well. I have to say, being the whole 'creator' of a new species is sounding ominous to me. For some reason I feel extremely confident that this is going to have further ramifications for me down the line. The system doesn't like to advertise when you unlock something, but surely creating an all new species in the Dungeon is something major? Maybe it isn't, maybe new species pop up all the time and those that create them are as mediocre and ordinary as me. At least I hope so. If this blows up in my face and turns into some sort of big deal, then I'm going to be super annoyed.

The hatchlings are still excited after their meeting with the Queen, their fervour has once again been ignited. Thankfully, the buzz has helped push the pain and discomfort of their newly maxed out cores to the back of their minds. Now we can push through the training even faster!

Gweheheheh. Thanks for the assist, Mother!

My plan for the first twenty has always been to push them as hard as possible and give them as good a start to their lives as I can. That means doing for them much the same as what I did for Vibrant. Helping them to evolve with special cores from the get go, maxing out their mutations and with my improved knowledge I can also provide some guidance in regards to skills and progression.

To maximise their potential I'll also get them to choose the Superior Hatchling evolution. Judging by Vibrant, I suspect that the superior hatchling allows for improved stat growth for evolutions following after and will hopefully allow her and these twenty to grow into the powerhouses of the colony, allowing me a comfortable retirement, tickling larvae grubs and boring hatchlings with stories from 'back in my day', in the future.

Ahhh, the stress free life surrounded by family and taking my ease. I never got to experience it in my old life, but now I have a chance! To that end, I'm going to work these twenty little hatchlings to the bone! By the time I'm done they'll be super ants the likes of which the Dungeon has never seen.

"Line up you little bugs! Let's get into formation! I'm not going to baby you as much this time, we are going to see some real combat!"

Their eyes light up as if a burning flame has suddenly exploded within and I hastily cut them off before they can speak.

"Absolutely NONE of you is going to throw yourselves into harms' way, dammit! The first ant to leap at the enemy in a stupid way is going to spend the rest of the training being carried around by the others and fed experience without contributing like a selfish piece of trash!"

"Gasp!"

I may as well have told them that the offender would be condemned to an eternity of burning hellfire. Not do any work? Be a burden to others? Selfish?! These concepts are simply not part of their lexicon. I may as well have told them I'd change their species from ant to duck.

"As you say, Senior!"

"We will obey your instructions!"

They all assure me they'll behave. I'm sure one of them will crack if the situation gets even a little bit tense but it'll do for now.

"Just like we practiced last time. We'll enter the chamber and quickly get into formation, remember to position yourselves so that the business plaza is facing the foe but you still have line of sight to the target."

"I thought it was the commercial district?"

"Same thing! You'll never make it if you just get hung up on the small details. Go! Now! Now! Now!"

With the sort of coordination only a swarm insect could possibly arrange, the hatchlings and I burst into the farm and quickly take up our positions on the ceiling, raining down acidic death on the fiercely battling monsters below. I'm cheating of course. The tougher looking and most uninjured monsters are the first targeted by own, more powerful and restrictive acid. That should make the next stage easier.

"Report when you're out of ammo!"

"I'm out, Senior!"

"Out here!"

"Out! Shall I hurl myself at the enemy to secure our escape?"

"I've already warned you twice! There won't be a third, understand? The enemy is weakened, form up and advance. We shall engage in melee!"

Moving into a box like formation with me at the helm, the hatchlings and I advance from the roof, down the wall and then onto the floor, moving into combat with the closest monsters.

I've instructed the hatchlings to purchase the different bite skills as they become available and train them in unison so that they level at close to a pace. This'll allow them to get the fusion at tier three as soon as possible. I continue to hold out for the tier four fusions though, it'll be interesting to see what the difference is.

I can see the hatchlings snapping and biting with their tier one bites and chomps. The damage they deal individually is minimal, but no ant was ever meant to fight alone. Demonstrating their fast learning capabilities they are already deploying some of the tactics I'd spoken to them about. On my left the hatchlings on the flanks and not only moving to surround their foes on the side, but those from behind are climbing on top of their siblings to attack the enemy from above, opening up a new angle of attack.

I can't imagine human soldiers riding on their comrades shoulders into battle, it would be faintly ridiculous to be honest. Ants on the other hand have no issue holding each other up and finding footholds on each other. Heck, some species of ants form living nests, the walls and tunnels formed out of masses of ants hanging off each other, climbing on another ant to attack is just basic stuff!

In this way the hatchling ensure they are never outnumbered and can use their many avenues of attack to ward off more powerful monsters who would otherwise threaten them. Naturally I also have to lend a hand every now and again when things get a little hairy, bailing them out with a well-placed chomp, my powerful mandibles shearing through these weak enemies in a single bite.

Once we've cleaned through the room I get the hatchlings to stuff their faces, mutate anything they can and it's off to the next one. Then the one after that, then the one after that. We continue to fight and eat until they begin to tell me that their mutations are complete, at which stage I tell them to take the excess Biomass to the Queen, a task they take to with incredible enthusiasm, bursting with pride at the chance to feed the Queen.

When all the farms are empty, we have finally achieved our goal. All level five, with maxed out mutations. Weary but triumphant, I lead my suffering charges out of the farms and into my chamber where Tiny continues to keep a watchful eye on the Dungeon.

At this moment I get another pleasant surprise from Vibrant when she tells me the workers are stirring. The colony is waking up!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 266: The beast slumbers no more

The hatchlings are herded into my chamber where Tiny is instructed to keep a keen eye on the situation whilst I go to find Vibrant and see what the situation with the workers is like. I find Vibrant hovering around the two hundred larvae that recently hatched, fetching chunks of food that my class had brought in and just dumping it close to the grubs as she races back and forth, trying to make sure the ravenous little things get fed.

Whoops!

The workers tending to the grubs are so omnipresent that I didn't even think to make sure they were getting fed! Thank goodness Vibrant was on the job. They wouldn't have starved to death in such a short time by any means, but their development would have been delayed if they went too long between meals. The larval stage of an ants development is primarily for them to stack on mass. They have nothing to do but eat, eat and eat some more. The faster they bulk up the faster they are ready to go into their cocoons and take shape as proper workers of the colony.

"Vibrant! How are things with the workers?"

"Hold on a sec, Senior! I need to feed these grubs!" she yells as she rushes past me at a full dash.

"Aren't they all fed?"

"Nope!"

Dangit. No point being lazy, I'll pitch in and help. The bulk of the food was stacked in the Queen's chamber and it doesn't take us long to deliver it to the remaining grubs who immediately wiggle their ungainly bodies to a position in which they can munch at it. They don't exactly have the best mouthparts for this but they are giving it a red hot go!

As we worked, I asked Vibrant again what was going on.

"I've started to see a little movement amongst the workers. The higher evolved ones and the workers I was leading were the first to start moving" she announces cheerfully.

"Where are they?" I ask.

"Oh! Everywhere!"

"...."

Turns out they are scattered all over the nest in various chambers. After rushing here and there I eventually find a worker showing signs of life. This fellow looks like he might've been on his second evolution, an advanced worker of some kind. Impressive! I do have the distinct impression that they should have been a bit larger than they currently are though...

"Haaa Hrrrrr"

Whoa! The ant is talking! He's developed the Pheromone Language gland whilst sleeping?!

"Hey there buddy. How are you doing? You sleep ok?" I ask.

"Hen, han ... " as movement slowly returns to the worker, they continue to try and speak using this new mutation.

"Take your time champ. No need to rush."

"Harr.... Havvv. Have."

"Have? Have what?"

"Have ... I ... died... for the colony?"

"... No."

"... Dammit."

COME ON!

Do I have to deal with this again?!

Over the next hour, more and more workers wake up and I direct them to the Queen for a quick debrief before they go back to their duties. After speaking to both me and the Queen, and a few workers who had cores being inspected by me, I was able to piece together what had happened to them as they'd slept.

Not only had the system changed their species, it had also brought them as close in line with the generic template of the new species as it could. The workers haven't completely changed to match the new hatchlings, but they are close. They all have the Pheromone Language gland and all of them have sacrificed size and lost mutations in order to fuel their brain development. They aren't as smart as the hatchlings are, but they are a heck of a lot smarter than they were before.

After a few evolutions, I suspect the difference between the old workers and the hatchlings yet to be born will disappear entirely. The first twenty are going to get an extra kick to start off their lives, the hatchlings born after this won't be getting this sort of VIP treatment.

I emphasise to each worker, and I have the Queen double down for me to hammer the point home, that each worker is far more valuable to the colony alive than they are dead. I'm not sure if the new wave of sacrifice minded workers have heeded the message or not, but hopefully it sunk in enough that by the time I get the first twenty out there to help manage things there won't be any damage.

Speaking of the twenty.

With the workers slowly going back into action it's time for their first evolution. I head back down into my chamber and recall Crinis to meet up with us. When she arrives the twenty hatchlings are arranged in a half circle before me in the chamber, Tiny backing me up like a half asleep bouncer.

"Hatchlings. You are about to embark on the first step of the long road to ant greatness. This evolution will help lay the groundwork for your future progression. It is my aim that in time, you will grow to become the foundations of this colony as it grows and expands. It isn't feasible for every hatchling to receive the same start in life that you have, the resources required are too great."

The ants listen to my great spiel with focused eyes. My rambling seems to be resonating in some way. In fact, the spirit in their gaze is starting to make me a little nervous. No need to be quite so serious guys!

"Ahh. *Cough*. For your first evolution you'll choose the Superior Hatchling option and I want you to be sure to select a stomach as your organ. This will help hasten your future development of mutations and decrease the demand on the resources of the colony. Beyond that, you can do whatever you want with your stats. From your second evolution onwards you'll be able to choose a caste and decide how you'll contribute to the colony from there. Are we ... good?"

"Yes Senior!" they shout in unison, causing me to jump.

"Okay! Get to it then, I guess?"

At that weak instruction the ants quickly cluster in one corner of the chamber and immediately grow still as they begin to interface with the evolution menu.

After some research it was determined that only by purchasing a stomach upgrade during evolution would the ants begin to mutate their stomach. Some of the mutation advancements are especially appealing and I've provided some advice to the hatchling in that regard. Having core surgery is a little bit of a hack in some regards. I can't see the whole evolution menu when I'm in there but I can look at options that are within reach of the core I'm looking at.

With all of them choosing a stomach and then mutating it, getting them to +10 for another perfect evolution will be a piece of cake. I've done the maths on my cores and I think I only just have enough to max out the cores of all twenty for the next evolution. Five cores each means one hundred cores straight up and then another sixty or so to form the special cores through fusion. I don't imagine that the royal family of Liria ever imagined their amassed wealth in cores would be wasted in just a few short weeks in this way.

It's enough to bring a smile to my heart.

Gweheheh.

Not long now and I'll be able to turn over the bulk of the thinking in the colony to these hatchlings. Once I get them through the second evolution, it's going to be on them. Then I'll be a little more free.

For now though, whilst they are busy evolving I should use my time somewhat productively. The Queen wants me to take on the rare core so I might as well try and start absorbing it.

Feeling nervous, I dig it out of the wall and the powerful gem rolls onto the dusty earth of my chamber before me. This is one honking big core. I can't help but feel an internal sting as I contemplate trying to absorb this thing.

This ones gonna hurt.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 267: Lining up those ducks

The rare core sat on the ground in front of me and I knew it was time to pay the piper. As much as I'd derived a strange sense of joy forcing the hatchlings to absorb a special core, this process seriously hurts. I've already maxed out my core AND absorbed a special core. If I absorb this rare core, will I really be able to take it?

Or will my core just detonate and rip me apart from the inside?

Hoo boy.

Here we go.

Taking a deep breath I gingerly reach down with my antennae and touch them to the cold surface of the core.

[Compatible Rare core detected. Would you like reinforce your core or reconstitute the monster?]

I sure as heck don't want to create one of those crocs as one of my pets, I have too many bad memories of them to even consider it.

Nothing for it. Gimme dat core juice!

As soon as I give my mental assent, the densely packed energies contained within the gem-like sphere begin to flow into me, swirling throughout my body before settling in my core core, adding their strength to my own.

And it hurts immediately.

I'd gotten used to the vaguely stretched feeling of my maxed out core to the point where it didn't really bother me. I'm not sure if that was just because I'd become accustomed to the pain or if my body had adjusted to the extended core size. Ultimately it doesn't matter, as the vast energies within the rare core pour into me and my core starts to grow, the pain is instant and intense.

My body was not meant to hold a core of this size!

Damn that stings! Holy Moly! With a capital M!

This must be what it feels like to have a swollen stomach that is not a stomach but actually a stone formed of condensed mystical energies. The pain isn't even localised around my core! Unlike before, it is radiating outwards, zapping along my nerves to the ends of my limbs and rebounding off my extremities to come back to my centre even worse than before.

How delightful!

In complete agony, all I can think of is to endure as best I can. I don't know why, but the idea to immediately stop and just walk away doesn't occur to me. I don't need this in my life. I've suffered plenty in my new existence, perhaps someone else could pick up this burden for me. I've done more for the colony than every other individual in it bar the Queen herself at this point.

And it isn't as if I want to be all powerful, lord of all he surveys sort of monster. I don't especially crave individual power, I'm not deeply ambitious, I'm far too lazy for that!

And yet, I grit my mandibles and hold on.

Perhaps it was watching the twenty hatchlings be so stoic and selfless in their attitudes. Perhaps it was the acceptance of the Queen to what I had done, creating so much change to push the colony forward. Perhaps I'm just stupid. I haven't ruled that out.

Whatever the reason, I hold on.

It hurts and I hold on.

There is agony and I hold on.

I feel like my body and mind are breaking into a thousand pieces, but I hold on. As strange as it sounds, I felt clarity in those moments. As if the pain radiating out from my core as it grows is searing away the clutter and doubt that normally rattles away inside my mind.

I feel clean. I feel pure.

I'll endure this. I'll survive. There are things that are more unendurable than this. I have a family now, something I've never really had before. I won't allow them to suffer. I won't allow them to struggle. Deep down, I'm prepared to shoulder burdens to help them.

This core needs to be used and I'm the best one to use it. For whatever reason, there is no member of the colony as advanced as I am. For the time being it has to me.

And so I hold on.

There is nothing in my universe except for the pain and the ball of packed energy resting on the dirt before me. The transfer of energy is glacially slow, or at least it feels that way. This core must hold more than ten times as much energy as a special core. No matter how much I drain out it doesn't seem like I'm any closer to finishing absorbing it!

More pain. I endure.

I hold on until my thoughts fade away to nothing and my vision goes black.

HAH!

I'm up!

DANG it still hurts!

When alertness rocks back into my mind I spring to my feet only to find my entire body is screeching with agony. Yeeouch! It's like every cell in body hit the gym with an enthusiasm they were not able to endure. Not a single part of me isn't radiating an intense displeasure with their present circumstances.

And my core.

Holy moly, the core.

As if I'd swallowed a rock that carried a grudge, it sits in the centre of my body and it just doesn't fit. I'm too damn full! Worst of all, I can still see the rare core on the ground in front of me. I must have passed out from the pain before I'd been able to finish the absorption process.

Perhaps that's a good thing. I really don't feel like I could take any more in right now. I really feel as if I'm on the edge of some serious damage here. I hope that after some time has passed the tightness and pain will fade to the point that I can absorb the rest, right before I evolve.

Gingerly, since every motion sends new signals of hurt rocketing through my nerves, I roll the core to one corner and bury it with the rest of the my stash.

The hatchlings appear to still be in the process of evolving. Which is good. I need a little rest and recovery time. Before that though, I'd told myself I would check in on the village, just to make sure that the changes to the colony weren't about to spark some sort of conflict or misunderstanding.

So like a geriatric grandpa ant with severe arthritis and three dodgy hips I make my way up the central shaft of the nest. Despite my condition, I can't help but notice the changes taking place in the colony already.

The first and most obvious thing is the pheromone trails that have been left. Where once they were very simple messages, "food here", "brood needs tending", "help dig", they have become much more complex. Swishing my antennae through the air I get a rush of conversations that have taken place lately and descriptive long term trails that have been marked down several times.

The first one I run into says "Hi there! Brood is over this way, need help with cleaning and feeding. Current food levels are healthy but expecting a spike in demand soon."

Followed by "Hi-hi! I've been told there will be a spike in demand for food soon! How exciting! Follow this trail above ground to join in the surface hunting. Make sure you hunt in a team! Groups of five, stay alive!"

I can tell that last one is Vibrant, apparently continuing to step up her leadership skills.

In general the messages are friendly are business like. Things like "This way for digging, keep that soil fresh!" or "Afternoon brood chambers this way! Can always use more help, lots of brood lately! :) "

How the hell did they invent the scent emoji in such a short time?!

Even as I slowly clamber out of the nest I receive lots of greetings and well wishes as I do so.

"Hello. Keep up the good work!"

"Hi. Work hard!"

"Stay healthy there fellow worker. Otherwise you can't work!"

I get it... you like working! At least they aren't talking about throwing their lives away in some pointless fashion. I suspect that the next time the colony is under attack that might come back out. We'll see.

For now I tip toe my way over to the human village to see how things are travelling.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 268: The second phase

[We need more of this. As soon as you can get it.]

...

[Uh, okay? Maybe take it out of my face a little so I can see it?]

An unusually forceful and intent Enid is waving something in my face with shaking hands. As soon as I waddled my way into the village someone had gone to fetch her and the normally dignified older lady had arrived at a dead run, her skirts hiked up with one hand and the other clutching this, object.

As she withdraws the object slightly I can see that it is, as suspected, the mana infused wood that I delivered to Beyn a day or so ago.

[Ah. Finally got your hands on that did you? So what is it?] I enquire.

[It's mana infused wood.]

[I can see that plain as day! What is it good for?!]

Enid huffed with her hands on her hips.

[Well that's a different question, isn't it?] she held the branch tenderly in her hands, like a newborn babe, [this wood has absorbed the plentiful mana of the Dungeon and taken on the attributes that surrounded it.]

[Yeah?]

[These kinds of materials from the Dungeon are treasured and worth just as much as cores. Nations fight over the rights to expanses and other regions that produce this kind of thing fiercely. They are rare and incredibly useful! Not to mention valuable. In the past I dealt with some things like this that my husband managed to bring up. They sold high, I can tell you. Enchanters and craftsmen love this stuff.]

[For what?!] I'm losing my patience here.

Looking down at me disapprovingly, Enid sniffs before answering. [When making items designed to channel certain types of mana, materials like this will amplify the effect. For example, if a staff were made for a water wizard with materials that were imbued with water mana, any spell cast through the staff would be more powerful.]

[Ooo, that is handy.]

Enid smiled triumphantly at my growing enthusiasm. [Not only that. You could make shields, swords, armour, or artefacts that would add that element to their offense or defence.]

[But this wood has double elements in it] I pointed out, [water as well as earth. Is that good?]

[That!] declared Enid, once again waving the stick with vigour in my face, [is the most important thing! Double affinity! Double the offensive boost, double the defensive! This kind of material is extremely rare! In Liria, anything like this was claimed directly by the crown!]

[Okay. So it's great stuff. That's nice. But what exactly can we do with it? I doubt there are any master enchanters hanging around the village currently, and the colony certainly doesn't have the ability to make anything with it.]

Yet.

With how hard working and dedicated the workers are, combined with their new smarts, who knows what they'll be capable of in a few years? In my mind scenes of the great ant forges begin to appear, the cavernous halls under the earth where thousands of teeming artisans craft ant weapons and armour at an industrial scale.

Gweheheheh.

It's glorious within my mind!

Focus Anthony. Play it cool. The inevitable ant future will arrive in time.

Enid was looking at me strangely. Dammit Anthony, don't let the ambition be quite so naked!

[Well you aren't wrong] the wily woman answered warily, [but we do have a few tradespeople, apprentices and, more importantly, we have Beyn to help guide us to unlocking the skills and classes related to shaping mana infused materials and enchanting.]

[Won't it take ages for someone to train up those skills? Just how much time do you think we have to spend on something like this?]

She shook her head.

[It won't take as long as you think. By accelerating level growth in the Dungeon and with expert knowledge to crack the unlock conditions, the only thing missing is materials to use for grinding skills.]

[I see. So this is why you want me to bring more up. The question I have for you is, what's in it for the colony? The expanse is ours and we are the only ones able to go down there and collect the stuff.]

We got down to a bit of haggling and eventually worked out a distribution deal for the crafted materials, the lions share going to the colony of course. I was also able to extract a promise from a curious Enid to engage in a knowledge sharing arrangement, where the village would inform the colony of anything they were able to learn.

With that business concluded, it was time to return to the nest and check in on my class of hatchlings. Once more painfully shifting my legs one by one as shooting beams of agony rippled through my body with each step, I made my way back to my chamber. The journey only took four times as long as normal. I feel as if I'm prematurely aging.

Back into the nest as the flood of greetings, conversations and trails rattles my antennae once more. It really is noisy in here now. Thinking back, it wasn't that long ago that I was worried I'd never have anyone to talk to ever again. To have this constant chatter and noise around me, here, in this place where I feel so safe...

It's just nice. Almost enough to bring a tear to my eye, but not quite because I remain physically incapable of it.

Back down the chamber, the ants are alert again. For whatever reason they are clustered about Tiny as the great ape remains seated on his backside, to all appearances totally asleep.

[Any issues here Crinis?] I ask my more alert and capable companion.

[No problems, Master. The little ones awoke only a short time ago.]

I have to chuckle at Crinis referring to them as 'little ones'. She isn't that much older that they are.

[Why are they looking at Tiny so closely?] I enquire.

[I've no idea. He's been sleeping on the job for the last thirty minutes] Crinis sounds decidedly irritated at her lazy associate.

[I'll sort him out later] I promised her before I rounded on the workers.

"Okay then you lot. One evolution down, one more to go before you have graduated from basic training. You know what that means! More core absorption!" I shout joyfully.

The best thing to forget about your own pain sometimes, is to inflict it on others.

Chrysalis

Chapter 269: Diving into the depths

"Stop your slacking, aren't you ready to work for the colony?!"

"Ugh. Of course, Senior!"

The hatchlings are once again suffering from the effects of being stuffed full of cores and then absorbing a special core. Packing all of them full has depleted my stash to basically nothing but it'll be worth it. These twenty are getting the best start in life an ant could possibly hope for.

Each and every one of them has taken the 'superior hatchling' evolution that Vibrant had. Their stats have been boosted only a little from their original hatchling form, the only significant difference is in Cunning, since a small boost in that stat represents a substantial shift, but over their next few evolutions the payoff will be huge.

Regardless of what type of ant these first twenty choose to be, Soldier, Queen or Worker, I want them to be exemplary examples that will be able to lead those who follow in their footsteps. I'm on the clock though, I need to get these twenty up to level 10 and evolved before the next set of two hundred hatchlings emerges. When last I checked in on the brood they were quite chubby little grubs. It won't be long before they enter the pupal phase. Gotta move fast!

Or at least, I would, but I'm still suffering from my own core being oversized. Gawd I hate this feeling.

Crinis is leading the way down at the moment, with Tiny bringing up the rear. This is a good chance for the two of them to grind some skill points and I don't want to waste it. Normally I'd want to be grinding those skills myself but the discomfort I'm experiencing has dampened my enthusiasm somewhat.

As we descend through the tunnels Crinis reaches out with a forest of dark tentacles, grasping hold of monsters before they even know she's coming. Once held within her grasp there is little they can do to save themselves. More tentacles lash out and the victim is quickly rendered unable to fight before being deposited behind her. One of the ants steps forward to deliver the finishing strike before the rest approach to devour the Biomass.

We are advancing in record time to be honest. This system is nothing except efficient. The workers are still levelling at a decent pace and their enhanced stomachs are working just as well as I'd hoped they would. Not only has their capacity increased, but apparently the mutation menu for the organ has an option that will allow them to consume Biomass as if they were one tier of evolution lower, reducing the penalty!

I MUST get my hands on this organ during my next evolution! Things will be made so much simpler! In fact, this organ and mutation should be mandatory for all workers in the colony! The efficiency gains when spread across thousands of workers will be staggering!

Arrrghh! That stings! Damn core...

What this means for my class of hatchlings is that they are rapidly piling up Biomass as we advance further into the Dungeon, seeking higher level creatures to feed them the experience they need to reach level ten as soon as possible.

[How's it going Crinis? Do you need to rest? I can have Tiny swap in for you any time?]

[That is unnecessary, Master. I am more than sufficient to dispose of this filth. Please allow me to continue]

[Sure, sure. As long as you're okay.]

I can almost feel the dark joy emanating from Crinis as twists and crunches these monsters into a helpless state. You are walking further and further down a questionable road Crinis. I'm not sure how I should feel about it to be honest.

For now though, our progress is rapid as we continue to descend.

After another hour of this I call a halt to our procession and gather the hatchlings before me.

"You've done well to keep up with my accelerated learning program so far, your hatchlings. But the time for you to earn your own supper has come!"

"What do you mean, Senior?" they query me, antennae wobbling with curiosity.

"I mean, it's time for the twenty of you to engage in glorious combat for the colony!"

"At last! Before the day is done my broken body will decorate the trash pile of the colony!"

"I've had enough of you! Go stand at the back and think about what you said! Sheesh!"

I shake my head for a moment before fixing my gaze on the rest of the workers. "You know the rules. Each and every one of you is to make it back to the colony in one piece. We have invested heavily in you because your future contributions to the colony will be immense, don't waste it!"

I fix them all with a sharp glare, especially that moron at the back.

"I want to see if our lessons have been sinking in properly and I want to see if you can handle yourselves when my pets and I aren't here to help you. Have you got what it takes?!"

As one they roar with their squeaky hatchling voices, "of course, Senior!"

"Everyone comes back alive! Don't forget!" I ram home the point once more.

I can't help but be worried. Tiny, Crinis and myself will be with them of course, ready to step in just in case something goes wrong, but protecting the ants from their own sacrificial impulses could be much more difficult than protecting them from monsters.

With a flick of an antennae I gesture for the much smaller hatchlings move to the front and take the lead. Once again, they seem strangely deferential as they pass Crinis, greeting her politely even though she can't hear them.

[Tiny, make sure to guard our back zone. I don't want anything to get a jump on us.]

[Hrrrr, bored.]

[Don't care buddy.]

[What about me, Master?]

[You're with me Crinis, hop on.]

The writhing mass of tentacles before me cheerfully retracts until the compacted softball of infinite despair is once again revealed. She takes her customary position on my back and we are ready to depart. This should be interesting.

The hatchlings are a little hesitant at first and I can hear them conferring with each other in hushed tones.

"You don't really need to talk quietly guys, you don't actually make any sound" I tell them.

One of the hatchlings on the outside of the huddle turns to answer me. "We are operating under the assumption that it's possible other species capable of pheromonal communication could exist, therefore care should be taken at all times."

"That's...." actually pretty smart.

Huh.

"Who has the best vision?"

"I'm plus six."

"Plus seven here."

"You two take point."

"Right. Who has the highest acid upgrades?"

"I'm plus six, extra damage."

"Also plus six, restrictive."

"You two should go up top and keep the line of fire open as much as possible."

"I have the best carapace here, let me frontline."

"Good. I think we have our formation. Are we ready?"

"Yes, proceed."

In almost no time they arrange their team into a working formation and delegate roles to each member based on their best attributes. Watching them arrange themselves so quickly and then begin moving out with such purpose and organisation has got my heart fair pounding in my chest.

In some ways these hatchlings are more than I had ever hoped they would be.

"I've got the best healing though, you should let me throw myself in the enemies mouth to take their weapons out of the battle."

"That could be good"

"Oi! Shut up you!" I yell.

Some of them still need a lot of work it seems.

Chrysalis

Chapter 270: Back from patrol 1

'The Civilised Races' is a term often bandied about casually in scholarship, yet many people remain ignorant of it's true meaning and origins. The lines that become drawn between the races are often no so clear cut as 'these races are civilised, therefore safe, and these are not'. The so called 'Civilised' are just as prone to greed, violence and short sighted action as the creatures of the Dungeon at times, as history as proven many times.

Others simply don't understand the lines drawn between those races who existed before the Descent of the System (often referred to as 'The First Born') and those who came after (somewhat derogatorily referred to as 'The New Blood').

Before the Time of Rending, mana began to infuse the surface, giving rise to magic and many other wonders. At the same time that mana concentrated in certain places and within some things, a process that only accelerated as the Dungeon opened and the surface became flooded with mana at levels that have never been seen again.

This mana injection changed the surface of Pangera forever, not only due to the monsters that devastated its surface but also by giving rise to new races, such as the Bruanchii, a race of sentient tree like creatures that appeared from a single tree in the southern wilds. Or the Brathian, the aquatic creatures who developed from Lake Bratha after it become flooded with mana during the Rending when a Dungeon opening connected to the Lake.

The Elder races have not always welcomed these newcomers peacefully and when the Dungeon monsters receded, a new wave of conflict began when Old Blood began to mix with New. Eventually peace was established and cooperation began. After all, the System does not recognise the 'Civilised Races' as monsters, therefore it would be unnatural to fight against each other, at least that is what the Church of the Path has always preached. Others, such as the Sophos, were not so lucky. Branded as monsters by the system they were first excluded and then hunted, causing them to conceal their underground settlements and withdraw from contact with those they had fought beside during the Rending.

Excerpt from 'Ruminating on the Races' by scholar Fuandri'll of the Kaarmodo.

Myrrin was exhausted. Her body ached from top to toe and she had a sneaking suspicion one of those toes was broken. The mental fatigue may have been the worst of it. She hadn't slept in what felt like three days. Why the hell did she let herself get talked into this rubbish?

"Donnelan, remind me why I let you talk me into this rubbish?" she asked irritably.

Her equally exhausted yet strangely animated fellow legionary turned back to her and she swore she could see the light of madness dancing in his eyes.

"After two weeks on the Bulwark, you want to spend our precious leave sleeping?! I am going to eat and drink until I'm sick, then do it again!" he declared and continued threading his way through the crowd.

Mirryn had to admit the idea held some appeal. The things she'd seen, done and been made to understand since her baptism had obliterated her understanding of how the world worked.

Only now did she understand what an underdeveloped and ignored pocket of the world Liria truly had been.

The trainees hadn't been given any time to question or absorb their new circumstances before being thrown into gruelling training. The commander himself tirelessly drilled them. Two days of practice in the living rock suits known as Abyssal armour and they had been thrown into live combat patrols. Three days after that and they'd been broken up and sent to various forts that formed part of the 'Bulwark', the network of defences that locked a bubble of Dungeon off from the lower levels.

"Time you find out the sort of the thing the Legion really does down here" the commander had informed them gruffly, and find out they had. He'd taken the group on an extended tour of the Bulwark, inspecting the forts and dropping the trainees off as they went.

Deep down, Mirryn had always felt as if she were tough, as if she were made of stern stuff. Nothing like the commander obviously, but still, tough. The Legionaries she had met at her fort were so damn tough she felt they didn't need Abyssal Armour at all, the monsters would snap in half when they tried to bite them.

She'd reported to her new Centurion on arrival, a grizzled veteran named Tannar, and been shocked at the man's age. If he was a day under sixty she'd have been shocked. Thin and wiry, the tendons in his neck plain to see, Tannar had very quickly eliminated any concerns about age from her mind.

The man fought like an angry bear and sounded like one too. His Legionaries hung of every word that came of out his mouth and Mirryn learned rapidly to do the same. This man knew the business of killing monsters and business was good.

Too good.

If the wave above had been brutal, down here in the second strata it was worse. Each fort was tasked with locking down one tunnel, preventing monsters from coming up and going down. Shorthanded and undersupplied, the Legionaries fought for hours on end, every day. When they couldn't stand up anymore they were rotated off to rest until they could, then it was back out in the thick of it.

Mirryn hadn't even taken off her suit the entire time she was out there.

She was also made to see some of the other measures the Legion had been forced to in order to hold the line.

She grimaced.

"Did you have any irregulars at your fort Donnelan?" she asked.

He paused for a moment as he pushed through the crowd, before starting up again.

"I see a bar over there, come on" he muttered grimly, pulling her across the street.

The two of them parted the curtain that hung across the front of the establishment, like most buildings in Railleh it was shaped out of the stone, creating a dark and cool atmosphere inside. Glowstones dotted the walls and roof providing a soft illumination that revealed a crowded bar area, with tables and booths towards the back.

Behind the bar a massive figure stood, a Golgarin, one of the stone people. His thick hands moved with surprising grace as he poured drinks and fetched glasses for his clientele. Barely pausing to take the scene in, Donnelan quickly stepped towards the bar and slapped down a coin, flashing it at owner, who nodded towards them as finished serving his current customer.

"I guess we know what those prisoners were for now eh?" the mage forced out a laugh as he played with the coin in his fingers.

"The what?" Mirryn asked, leaning onto the stone bar next to him.

"The prisoners" he repeated, staring at her. When she continued to stare back blankly he continued, "remember? When we came down here to Railleh the Legion brought a bunch of killers and criminals down with us? Where did you think the Irregulars came from?"

Her eyes widened with understanding. "Oh."

Donnelan grunted. "Right, oh."

As the massive bartender made his way over Donnelan ordered two tall glasses of 'something with kick' and paid the man.

As the huge figure with skin that looked like solid rock poured out the drinks Mirryn wasn't sure she felt about the Irregulars. They had certainly helped in the fighting. Not as strong as a full Legionary, but stronger than most normal people. Now she knew where they came from, she didn't know if it was right or wrong.

The criminals had been sentenced to death, and in most ways they had died, as humans anyway. She'd seen the Irregulars, seen them eat. She certainly wouldn't call them people. That was what happened when a person eats Biomass.