

## Chrysalis 311

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#### Chapter 311: Approaching Liria

Here now at the end of the world, what do we have to say to those that we destroyed? I'm sure it's not something that would cross the mind of most on my side of the divide. Would we even say anything, if given the chance? I don't believe so.

We saw this path as inevitable. The moment the truth was learned, our feet were marching on this road. Others would not, could not accept this reality. It is no fault of theirs. They are not built as we are. Perhaps they cursed us, wailed against us in their palaces and war councils. It matters not.

We did what had to be done.

- Author unknown

We settled back into the mini-Dungeon chamber we had excavated to allow us monsters a chance to regain our mana and rest. Morrelia kept an eye out from up top. She barely seemed to need to sleep, catching a few hours here and there seemed to be enough to sustain her almost superhuman levels of effort over an extended period of time. It's been a sharp reminder to me that in this world a person is not limited as they were back on earth. Acts of physical or mental prowess that would be impossible to a human on earth can be made trivial here with levels and training.

So who am I to say that being able to run and fight against horrific beasts for an entire day, sleep for three hours and then do it all again the next is remarkable in this world? Obviously not every person can do that, according to Beyn, most people level twenty to forty times across their entire lives. That isn't enough to amount to much for most classes, the stat growth is simply too low. For the elites though, the privileged who are able to, via wealth or ability, farm the Dungeon and raise their levels fast, who knows what kind of incredible feats they are capable of.

Liria was apparently a young, backwater kingdom, founded by pioneering farmers who wanted to open up more land for agriculture. The real powerhouses are further north and east across the lake, so I'm told. I don't think that'll matter much to us though, being a small colony in the middle of the wilds, neighbouring a tiny village, we shouldn't be of any consequence to anyone for a long time.

[Are we ready to head to Liria?] I asked Morrelia as she kept an eye out above us.

[Yes] she answered, [I can't think of anywhere else in this area where I might find survivors.]

[I'm surprised you found as many as you did. Makes me think there may be quite a few more hidden away in remote places, perhaps even in the towns if people were smart enough to hide.]

It was true. Including the folks from Midum, we'd found hundreds of survivors and sent them packing to the village. I hope Enid has it all under control down there, finding beds and meals for the villagers was tricky as is, it's going to be even harder now.

For now, it isn't my problem. The colony has sent me out to act as their scout and determine the nature of the threat on the surface and that is what I'm going to do. We've managed to do some damage, killed

a heap of monsters and rescued some people, that's all good and noble, but not the main reason why I'm here.

Although the Biomass and skill levels have been nice. My constant practice of external mana manipulation has continued to yield results, taking Greater External Mana Manipulation to level 3. Enhanced mind magic affinity levelled once, Advanced Cerebral Endurance went to level ten and I ranked it up to Expert Cerebral Endurance. I also managed to gain a level! It was something of a shock to level up by cleaning up weaker monsters from the upper levels of the Dungeon but I think it was mostly due to the Garralosh Commander putting me close to the edge.

We've also been making sure to keep eating as much Biomass as we can when we get a chance. I've gotten my supply back to thirty five, which isn't much but every little bit helps! My incomplete mutations and my impending evolution are weighing on my mind more heavily with every passing day. Something inside is saying that this evolution is going to be different and I want to make sure I'm as prepared as I can be. That feeling could also just be my oversized core causing me pain, who knows.

[We need to be careful as we approach the city] Morrelia brought me back to our conversation, [I'm still not sure how it's possible for Garralosh to be up here, but if we run into that beast then I don't think either of us could make it out alive.]

[I thought you said she wasn't as evolved as I thought?] I protested, [now your saying we couldn't even run away?]

Morrelia growled in frustration, but it wasn't directed at me. I could almost feel her glare through the dirt above my head.

[I suppose it doesn't matter if I tell you, it might even help keep us alive. The truth is that Garralosh has been prevented from descending to the lower layers in order to starve her out. My father, and the Legion, didn't want to allow Garralosh to grow. I'm not sure exactly why they singled out the beast in this way, but they did it, they boxed her in. The thin mana was supposed to kill the creature eventually, without anyone having to hunt the filthy thing down.]

[But it hasn't worked] I pointed out the obvious, [Garralosh seems to be fine and dandy, better than ever in fact, she's doing the crocodile rock all over the surface for goodness sake!]

[I know!] Morrelia ground out, [something hasn't worked and I have no idea what. Garralosh was defeated by my father decades ago and was supposed to have scurried off to slowly die from a lack of mana. Something about this situation is very wrong!]

[Wait a second, your Dad defeated Garralosh? Like, by himself?!]

Silence.

Holy HECK?! No wonder Morrelia is so freakishly strong! Them's is some crazy genes!

[So, uh. If your Dad comes back up to the surface ... could you, uh, put in a good word for the colony? We aren't so bad... certainly aren't crocodilic in any way.]

[Ha!] Morrelia barked out a short laugh across our mental connection before she managed to stifle it. [Commander Titus isn't a big fan of Dungeon monsters. If he finds you I can't think of anything would prevent him from attempting to destroy you utterly.]

...

Well, that brought the mood down.

[Okay, putting your murderous, immensely powerful sire to one side, how do you plan to approach the city? I won't let you go in alone, the colony has requested that I scout and I'm not going back without clapping my eyes on the big Croc at least once.]

Morrelia laid out her plan and we finessed the details for an hour before we felt confident enough to proceed. I roused Tiny and Crinis from their rest, climbed out of the Dungeon and we were off.

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#### **Chapter 312: The oppressive sense**

After we left our little slice of Dungeon, cores fully charged and feeling fresh, we began to make our way toward the capital in earnest. We'd done a few sweeps out this way before but had resisted the urge to push too close to the city in the event we attracted the wrong type of attention whilst there were still people that could be saved and roving bands of monsters that could be cleaned up toward the south.

Those things have been cleared up now and there is nothing to stop us making our approach. Moving cautiously, we kept low, avoiding the main roads as Morrelia directed us west into the large forest south of the city. Moving back under those leafy branches was nostalgic to me, on the north side of this forest is where the colony set up our first nest on the surface. Not far from the village where I bit off Beyns arm. Ah, memories.

I wonder the Branchies are still around?

Morrelia takes care that we stay hidden and out of sight as we continue to progress to the north, displaying a level of woodcraft that I hadn't expected to see in such a bloodthirsty warrior. When I, perhaps unwisely, commented on it, she snorted out a laugh of derision before replying.

[You think roaming the wilds is as simple as killing everything you find? If you don't know when and how to hide yourself, a hunter will wind up dead and eaten before they can blink.]

[That's a little surprising to me] I replied honestly, [I haven't seen anything on the surface that could hope to put a scratch on you or me. Is there really a need for that kind of caution?]

Morrelia continued to move and scout as we spoke, her eyes shifting without pause and her feet placed carefully as we moved.

[Don't get a big head. Surface monsters are much weaker than Dungeon monsters, that much is true, but there are still creatures on the surface that are powerful. Why else do you think the entire surface is yet to be reclaimed? Probably half of the landmass of Pangera is still considered 'wildlands', with no sapient race laying claim to it.

[But why?!] I exclaimed, [I just don't understand. If you have fighters that are able to battle in the Dungeon, then you can surely spend some of that strength on the surface? Don't people want to rid the surface of monsters? Wouldn't that be safer?]

[The key point you aren't grasping here, is whether or not that land is valuable.]

[Well. You need land, right? For farming... and... living?]

Morrelia laughed, a harsh barking sound that suited her warriors demeanour far more than a girlish titter would have.

[Oh aye. For regular folks, land is critical. Need to farm, grow families, fell lumber, mine. The wealth and prosperity of the common people is built on land, certainly. What about the elites? What about the rulers of those mighty nations? For what do they need land for?]

I could feel the ire rising in Morrelia as she spoke and decided I should keep my mouth shut until she was finished. Wisdom showing itself in me once again!

[The truth is, to the truly powerful, territory in the Dungeon is a thousand times more valuable than territory on the surface. Rare materials, monster components, cores, experience, these are the things that they are willing to fight for. The greatest empires of the surface don't measure their strength by how wide their lands are, but how deep. The regular people on the surface are left to fend for themselves, when they aren't being drafted into some new crusade beneath the earth.]

[So that's why you spent your time hunting in the south? You wanted to use your skills and strength to try and help out where others wouldn't.]

She hesitated before she spoke, just for a brief moment but I caught it none the less.

[Yes. Amongst other reasons, I wanted to try and do something to assist people on the border. My crew and I would take commissions to hunt from the monarchy, bounties basically, it wasn't much but we made a living out of and got to feel that we were doing something worthwhile.]

I felt like it was a bit of a waste of her skills to be honest. If she'd been doing something more like what she was doing now in the village, training people and escorting them into the Dungeon to allow them to build up the strength to defend themselves, it would have been a more effective way to protect the people on the border. You know the old saying: Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will kill monsters in defence of family and property.

Or something.

I made my opinion known to Morrelia and she seemed to reluctantly agree.

[It's possible] she conceded, [I've greatly enjoyed training the refugees, more than I had expected I would, to be honest. I'd never thought I'd have the patience for it. I'm not sure if it's something I could have done before. Access to the Dungeon was restricted in Liria, just like everywhere, and finding people in the villages who were willing to flaunt that rule and fight for themselves would have been hard before this mess occurred.]

[Why is access to the Dungeon so restricted anyway? Wouldn't it be good if people got a little stronger and advanced their classes?]

Morrelia smiled grimly, her eyes still shifting left and right as she scouted for danger. [That's exactly why. They don't want people getting stronger, advancing their classes and potentially creating their own centres of power outside of their control.]

I sighed internally. Even in another world people would be this petty and selfish. This kind of thing just reinforces to me the wisdom of the colony way of life. The idea of a worker trying to seek some sort of advantage over another worker is almost enough to make me laugh out loud! If anything they would scheme to ensure that they themselves were sacrificing more and working harder than others.

Our conversation had run its course so Morrelia and I fell into a companionable silence. It would take quite some time for us to make our way through this forest, particularly since we didn't want to be seen. I wasn't even training any mental skills as we travelled, wanting to maintain my mental energy in the event that we ran into trouble.

Fortunately, we didn't. After extended travel without rest, we managed to make it the northern side of the forest. Somewhat sadly, we didn't run into the old anthill, I think we passed somewhat to the east of it, but eventually the trees began to thin out as we approached the edge of the forest.

My nerves grew apace as we advanced, I'd heard a lot about Garralosh since I'd been reborn and her stupid children had scared the willies out of me on more than one occasion. I'm ready to lay my eyes on the culprit.

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### **Chapter 313: Over the walls**

After a long period of stop-start running through the forest we eventually made our way clear of it and into the open fields. The once neat and organised fields that had been planted with crops or contained docile herds of animals were gone, trampled into the muck by monstrous feet. I didn't expect the sight to effect as much as it did. My heart experienced a definite pang when I gazed upon the sheer destruction and human misery that had occurred here.

I hadn't exactly had a positive life experience amongst humans before my rebirth. In fact I'd go so far as to say it was horrible. I never knew why, but my parents had hated me from, as far as I could tell, the moment of my birth. Growing up in that kind of environment wasn't conducive to my ability to form healthy relationships, things at school went as you might imagine.

After I grew old enough to care for myself my parents pretty much disappeared, I dropped out of school and most social contact vanished. When I think of it in those terms, it doesn't seem strange that my mentality became a little weird. It makes me a little uncomfortable to admit it, but I felt more at home and more welcome amongst the colony in this life than I ever did amongst humans in my last one.

They accepted me without wanting anything in return, never asked anything from me and my mother, the Queen, gave me her complete and total trust in an instant, simply because I was member of her family.

That was something I'd never experienced before. Not even anything remotely like it. Gandalf mentioned that people brought to Pangera were usually crazy in some way, broken, I think was the way he phrased it. I've never really thought of myself in that way, my life wasn't ideal by any means, but I

always felt there were plenty who were worse off than me, but not I think I get what he was trying to say.

He didn't necessarily just want to bring insane people here to Pangera and reincarnate them as monsters, he wanted to bring people who would feel more at home here, amongst the monsters, than they did in their previous lives. I suppose it could be said that only a crazy person would meet that criteria and perhaps that is what he meant by 'broken' people.

I wonder what will happen if I were to meet another person like myself, someone who had originated from Earth. It's a question that's been bothering me for a long time. We're both monsters after all, designed to fight and kill each other in order to progress along our path. If I meet one and they try to nibble my face off I'm certain to fight back, no question about that. Is peaceful cooperation even possible in the Dungeon?

My mind weighed down by these concerns, we begin to make our way through the final stretch of our journey. We crept across abandoned fields and passed the numerous scattered farmhouses and small villages that orbited the beating heart of this small kingdom, the capital city of Liria.

The once proud stone walls no longer looked so imposing, large gaps had been smashed into the stone, giving us glimpses of the destruction that had occurred within. Massive stone blocks that had been part of the wall had been scattered across a wide area of land, as if the masonry had been smashed by a titans fist, blasted out of place and flown a hundred metres to land in a field.

What buildings that had existed outside the walls, concentrated around the gates for the most part, had simply ceased to exist, flattened and destroyed, barely a wall remained standing of these dwellings which appeared to have drawn the monsters ire for some reason. They present an ill omen for what remains of the city inside the walls.

Morrelia grows more tense the closer to the city we get. Her muscles are bunched and knotted by the time we reach two hundred metres of the wall, her eyes are ablaze with fury, like balls of liquid magma they seem to radiate heat into the air, so great is her wrath.

[Try and stay cool] I advise her, somewhat uselessly, [Whatever has happened inside the city is likely to be worse than what we see out here and this is exactly the wrong place to go berserk.]

[Don't you think I know that?] she replied, though her teeth remained clenched in her mouth.

Not going to have a lot of luck there...

[Crisis] I speak to my loyal follower, [If Morrelia flies off the handle, I need you to try and grab her so we can run the heck out of here.]

[I'll do my best, Master!] she replies, never failing to follow my instructions to the letter. If only Tiny could be so diligent.

The ape in question is sniffing the air as we speak, looking bored without anything to fight. Just to be certain I reach out and speak to him as well. I want to make sure there aren't any incidents.

[We aren't here to fight, Tiny] I warned him, [You are not to attack any monster we see inside the city. No fighting at all until we are safely away. This is an order.]

I reinforce the point to ensure there is no wiggle room for him to avoid obeying me. I can't afford any stuff ups this time.

Morrelia and I decide to climb the wall and take a peak rather than slip through one of the cracks and move directly into the city. We want to get as much information as we can whilst remaining as far from any momma Crocs that might happen to be positioned inside the city, so taking a glimpse from a higher vantage point makes the most sense, even if it might outline us against the sky. Most monsters have quite poor vision anyway, especially those from the first strata. Since we only intend to look for a few seconds, we should be safe.

Hunkered down, we circle the city a little until we come to a largely undamaged stretch of wall with no openings for a few hundred metres on either side. If we're spotted and pursued then the monsters either having to go over the wall or travel the extra distance could mean the difference between life and death.

I look constantly around at our surroundings, it's eerily quiet. Where I expected to see roaming hordes of monsters there is almost no motion, no sound. The city feels dead, in a complete way, as if no living existed within it for the last hundred years when only a few months ago I had seen it full of life! Just what is going on here?!

When we begin to close the final stretch to the base of the wall itself I feel something change.

I freeze in place for a moment before snapping out instructions to my pets.

[You two stay back here! Do not get any closer than this!]

[Master! No!] Crinis protested.

Thank goodness she's sitting on my back and not on my head, otherwise she would have felt this change at the same time I did.

[Off you get Crinis, Tiny come over here and let her ride on your shoulder. Don't get any closer to the city than this!]

As an aside I speak to Morrelia. [You can feel that too, right?]

Her face looks even more tense than it did before, something I hadn't imagined was possible. If she looked like she could eat rocks before, she looks like she could chew through steel now.

She nodded. [Somewhat, though I imagine it may be a little different to you.]

Once Tiny had taken Crinis off my back and moved back a little, the little ball of mayhem protesting the entire time, I began to move forward once more, very slowly.

It was an aura, an aura that had hit me like a truck running straight into my brain. Oppressive, dominant and filled with endless fury it switched on the moment I drew close enough to feel it, as if someone had flicked a switch. My entire body quailed at the touch of that aura and my minds shied away from it. This was far worse than what we experienced in the Marsh Expanse, this was ten times worse.

Garralosh. It had to be. If it isn't the big Croc, if one of her children can unleash this kind of power, then we are cooked. We are a duck stuffed into a chicken, stuffed into a turkey and then double baked kind of cooked. I'm talking well-done with the charred marinade on the outside.

Focus dammit Anthony! Stop imagining yourself beings so delicious!

As if moving through molasses I firm my will and push forward to the base wall and then begin to climb. One leg at a time, I advance, my claws digging into the stone and sticking like a vice as I reach up to grasp my next foothold.

[Advanced Grip (II) has reached level 5]

Shut UP!

Who cares about that right now?!

Impressively, Morrelia uses her own bare hands to climb, her fingers display extraordinary strength as she finds minute holds and gaps in the stone to haul herself up. She still takes longer than I do, walking up a wall is only somewhat harder for me than walking on the ground, but I have natural advantages.

After ten minutes of silent, tense climbing, we finally reached the top.

Just before we poked our heads over the edge, Morrelia and I turned to look at each other as possibly the worlds' first 'Good luck, hope we don't die' look was exchanged between human and monster. Then we took the final step and lifted our heads above the edge.

....

That's a big ass Croc.

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### **Chapter 314: The beast itself**

The city was in ruins. Forget about a hurricane, earthquake or other natural disaster, this level of destruction was far beyond that. It looked as if a meteor hand landed on the city, or if a god had stamped down with its heavenly foot. If the latter had occurred then that god had supremely flat arches because the city was just gone.

It looked as if no two bricks still stood one atop the other. Every building had been flattened, the open spaces were strewn with rubble and the once proud, cobbled roads were broken and cracked. In the distance, the hill on which the castle had once stood, with its inner wall and high towers, there was only a ruin.

This city had been built up over two hundred years of effort and endeavour, and now it was gone. If anyone wanted to try and recreate the city, establish the kingdom of Liria once again, they would need to do so from scratch. Heck, even the job of cleaning up this mess would take a monumental effort.

Although, just because the buildings had ceased to be, didn't mean the space inside the walls was empty. Oh no, it was full to bursting. With Monsters.

Across every surface, on top of every stone, they stood, stock still. As if mesmerized by an illusion, monsters of every type from the first strata stood rooted to the ground and stared in one direction, unmoving and still. The site sickened me to my core for reasons I couldn't explain. It was unnatural for monsters to act this way, as if they were mindless drones with no will of their own. These were creatures born of the Dungeon! They should fight, struggle and battle!

Silent and still they appeared weak, like slaves to a greater will than their own. Bears, frogs, centipedes, hounds, slugs, bats, apes, lizards, even a few shadow beasts were in the mix, each doing the exact same thing, staring in the same direction, even the sightless monsters, as if they were receiving the light of the sun from their god.

Or goddess, in this case.

She sat above the Dungeon entrance inside the city. When I lay on eyes of the beast it felt as if her aura that dominated the air around me grew stronger, threatening to knock me off the wall. This was supposed to be a weakened monster?! Are you kidding me?!

I'm not sure what I expected Garralosh to look like, her offspring seemed to gain limbs, heads and tails as they evolved, following a strict 'more is more' policy, but the big momma Croc did not seem to follow in that pattern. Of all of her different offspring mutations she most resembled a Titan Croc. Long reptilian body, powerful front and back legs that supported her when she lay flat and would allow her to walk when she stood., with a second pair of arms below the first to help support her more heavily massed upper body.

Rather than two heads, three heads, or the over and under jaws of the Commanders, Garralosh simply had the one Crocodile head. It was difficult to make out the smaller details at this distance, but I think she did have more than just the two eyes, I'd have to closer to be sure, something that wasn't going to happen!

One muscular croc tail extended from the back of her body, lazily sweeping back and forth as she rested.

Long ridges extended down her back, almost long enough to be called spines, from her head all the way to the tip of her tail. They were dark in colour, and gleamed like obsidian in the light. Her scales were a deep, dark green and even at this range I got the sense that they would be as thick as steel plates.

There was nothing exceptionally remarkable about Garralosh in monster terms, so long as you discounted her size.

She was huge. It defied physical reality for a crocodile to be this large. What is this, the cretaceous period?! Someone get this frickin' dinosaur out of here! My mind boggled to even look at her. She was to a Croca Beast what a megaladon was to gummi shark.

It was hard to say exactly how large she was, but from nose to tip of the tail I estimated her to be over twenty metres. She was like a semi-trailer truck, in mass as well as length, since she wasn't just long, she was built. Her neck, shoulders and body were thick with muscle, not to mention her enormous jaws which looked as if they could shatter a building with one snap. This was ridiculous! Did you pour every ounce of your evolutionary potential into getting massive?! Were you a gym junkie in a previous life? Are you the monster equivalent of a steroid addict?!

I was so bewildered by the sheer size of the monster that I failed to focus on what was happening around her until I heard Morrelia mutter something under her breath.

[What is it?] I sent over our mind bridge.

[Who is that? What are they doing?] she asked, her mind strained with focused intent.

Who is who? Are you seeing this freakin' crocodile?!

I turned my attention back to the area occupied by the enormous crocodile and tried to divert my focus away from gawking at Garralosh to take in what was happening in the monsters' surroundings. From the distance we were, it was hard to make out the small details, but what I saw was enough to throw me into confusion.

There were humanoids down there. Something told me that they weren't human, they were too tall and too slender, though their physique was difficult to make out, given that they were covered in long robes with hoods. Basketball playing monks? What the heck is going on down there?

Not for the first time I cursed my poor ant eyesight. I'd taken huge strides in improving my vision but long distance viewing still remained my weakness. In the Dungeon it didn't matter so much but it was really biting my thorax right now.

Now that I took a clearer look, the area around Garralosh did look weird. She lay, brooding and massive in what looked like a crude basin of some kind. The odd robed figures were positioned around her in a loose formation, each of them wielding a staff tipped by a glowing core.

Something about their positioning tickles my brain and when I try to connect the vague shape in my mind it suddenly snaps into place that they are forming a spell matrix using their bodies as part of the construct! What the heck kind of magic are they trying to cast?!

I can't squint due to my lack of eyelids but I still strain as hard as I can to get a glimpse of what is happening in the distance. I can get a vague impression that the robed figures are drawing something up through openings in the earth below them and it seems as if it's draining down into the basin where Garralosh is resting.

[Are they... condensing mana for Garralosh?]

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### **Chapter 315: Flight from Liria**

I can't be exactly sure but the shape of the basin and the terrain around the robed figures' feet gives the impression of liquid being brought up from below ground and running downhill to be collected. If they are bringing a liquid up from the Dungeon, what could the liquid be but mana? I mean, I've never seen liquid mana, but unless they are bringing up some sweet natural spring water in order to give the biggest Crocodile in all the worlds a soothing bath, perhaps followed by an exfoliating scale scrub, revealing skins' freshest layer, then what does the Croc need that can be found in the Dungeon?

Mana.

I know it can be condensed, I have the freakin' skill to do it! Perhaps I've never seen something like this, but that doesn't mean it can't be done!

[They're feeding Garralosh mana! Using some sort of voodoo technique to compress the mana in the Dungeon and letting her absorb it! That's how she's able to hang about on the surface!]

My minds race, connecting the dots now that I have this information.

[This is why she isn't dead!] I exclaim to Morrelia, [she was never starving of mana. Whoever these people are, they've been supporting Garralosh within the Dungeon and keeping her alive, feeding her mana, controlling her.]

Oh snap! If these guys and gals can regulate the flow of mana to Garralosh then she is dependent on them, completely at their mercy. If they decide to turn the tap off then big mamma croc has no choice except to fade slowly away as her core bleeds dry.

[This is insane] Morrelia ground out, her eyes burning with rage, [who the hell are they?!]

That is the question of the hour. The two of us remain with our heads poked over the top of the city wall, straining to make out any details.

Just then, something new caught my eye. Movement to one side of the basin as something that had buried itself beneath the dirt rose up, shaking itself free of the loose soil which cascaded from the large creature and onto the ground. What the heck is this now? Another monster?

When the dirt finally fell away what was revealed was not a hideous monster or another deformed Croca Beast variant, but a large lizard that appeared to be draped in what I can only describe as luxurious robes and golden jewellery.

This lizard was large. Although it was dwarfed next to Garralosh it was still a hefty ten metres long from nose to tail, but not nearly as bulky. Something about the creature, perhaps its dull scale colour or wrinkly skin, seemed to speak of incredible age. I got the feeling that this lizard had been around the block a few times.

I could almost feel the weight of its gaze and it stared at me.

Wait a sec.

[Morrelia? Is that giant lizard staring at us?]

[Kaarmodo!] she hissed and jumped from the wall.

What the heck?! We're like eight metres up!

[Hurry up!] she hollered at me across our mental link and I watched stunned as she neatly rolled on landing and began sprinting away from the city.

[I'm not up to speed here? Why are you running?] I asked as I hesitated at the top of the wall.

Then I noticed something. Inside the wall, not only was the lizard looking at me, but Garralosh herself had turned to face me.

And so had every monster inside the walls.

I leaped from the wall, legs flailing in the air as I attempted to flap my way to freedom. Why the hell didn't I give myself wings?! I know I live underground 99% of the time, but still, wings!

THUD.

I smacked into the ground with a dull thump, the impact sending shockwaves through my carapace. Thankfully my sturdy exoskeleton and its inner plating managed to absorb the force without cracking, since I didn't trust my legs to do the job. Not wanting to break any limbs at this critical juncture, I'd wisely tucked them up so my body would hit the ground first. Repairing a broken leg right now would be a little awkward to say the least.

[RUN!] I shouted at my two pets as they watched from a distance away from the wall, [let's gogogogogogogooooo!]

The moment I had my legs under me I was dashing, holding nothing back in my desperation to get away. Morrelia was way ahead of me, not pausing in the slightest when she realised I hadn't moved as quickly as she had. That's cold! Sensible, but cold!

[What the heck is that giant lizard?] I wailed at her.

[It's a Kaarmodo! They are not monsters, they're a sapient surface race, like humans!]

[How in the heck is a giant lizard like a human?]

[Listen] she growled back at me as we sprinted, [they are one of the elder races that existed on Pangera before the Dungeon opened. They are powerful mages and live for a very long time. Those robed figures we saw are it's Setsulah, bonded servants.]

[And why is it helping a giant Crocodile Monster slaughter a heap of humans?]

[I have no idea! Would you please focus on running for your life?!]

Good advice!

HUUUAAAARRRRRRR!!!!

The sound of thousands of monsters bellowing in rage at once rattled against my ears and the ground beneath my feet began to rattle like a snare drum. It became apparent why not long after as monsters began to flood out of the gates and over the wall as a tide of death.

[Move those fancy feet, Tiny! Do NOT stop to fight, do NOT turn and do battle. This is NOT the time to fire up! We are a Jamaican Bobsled team, keep cool and run!] I bellowed at my most wilful pet and with me keeping up the flow of constant orders and reprimands, for once, he wasn't able to turn fight against impossible odds as he so wished.

[Where are we running to?] I gasped at Morrelia, the strain of constant dashing already starting to catch up with me. I am taking care of this problem when I evolve next, no doubt about that!

[I don't know] she rasped, the usually unflappable warrior looked a fair bit flapped as she ran, [any bright ideas?]

[I think so! This way!]

As if the demon hordes of hades were on our tail, which they sort of were, we ran with all our strength, feet growing leaden and weighed down the further we got. Across fields, around fences and down roads we ran with the constant rumble of monsters feet shaking the ground behind us. I didn't even want to look behind but my stupid eyes with their near three-sixty degree vision granted me tantalising glimpses of a monster horde greater than any I had ever seen by far. No way I was going to turn and fight this, even ten Gravity Bombs wouldn't be enough to swallow the entire horde, we had to get to safety.

Fortunately, it didn't take too long before it came into sight.

On a hill in the distance I could see a small church building, still standing somehow when so much of the buildings around here had been flattened. The church was a centre point of a modest town that I had visited before, and I happened to know that I path into the Dungeon could be found in that church!

[Let's go to church!] I bellowed at my companions.

### [Chrysalis](#)

#### **Chapter 316: The escape**

As if the hounds of hell were on our tail, or perhaps the crocodiles of the damned, we fled until my poor ant legs ached with the strain and my antennae drooped low from exhaustion. Into the village, up into the church and then down in the still open Dungeon entrance the colony had opened what seemed like a lifetime ago.

Due the wave still ongoing, the tunnel was packed full of monsters and we were forced to pummel and slice our way through them in order to penetrate into the Dungeon below. The battle was endless but we were careful not to finish off the monsters that we fought, knocking them out of the way, slowing them with gravity magic, even Tiny just bopping them on the head until we were past, anything to create more of a road block for the zombie monster horde following behind us.

Down we fought, charging through the escape Tunnel that the colony had painstakingly dug until we reached the point where it connected to another Dungeon path via a narrow connection. I'd dug that connection myself in order to go hunting for the colony during our escape and hopefully it would serve us now! Tiny, Crinis, Morrelia and I piled through the narrow connection, widening it in some places to get Tiny through, before collapsing and filling it in behind us.

A simple ruse, but possibly enough to divert the mindless horde of monsters that pursued us. Damn I wish I knew how the Crocs were able to mind control monsters the way they did. Was it a form of magic? A skill? An aura mutation? I hadn't seen anything like it in the menu so far, but that could just mean I hadn't 'unlocked' it through whatever esoteric means the System used to conceal options until it was happy you'd jumped through the right hoop.

Could it be something to do with core strength even? Perhaps once I upgrade my core to a rare core, I'll be able to influence monsters in a similar way? I just don't know, and it's frustrating the heck out of me.

Not content to wait so close to the escape tunnel, we battled further into this side path before I told the others to cover me whilst I dug out a new chamber, blessedly free from the influence of the mana veins and therefore clear of constant mana spawns. At least until the mana veins extend into here we will have a little chance to rest.

Exhausted we all collapse. Tiny is asleep before he even hits the ground, Crinis not far behind, though she preserves her dignity by lowering herself down to the ground with her tentacles before retracting them and growing still.

Morrelia leans back against the dirt wall and slides down, uncaring how the soil trickles down into her hair, until she's sitting with her arms resting on her knees. I'm desperate for a bit of torpor in order to recuperate but first I have to know more about what we saw.

My minds move wearily to reconstruct the mind bridge, sheesh I'm getting a lot of practice with this construct these days, how the heck did I ever get by without it?

[Any chance you can explain to me a little about what we saw up there? The big lizard thing? The fancy spell work? Who are they and why would they want to keep Garralosh alive?]

Morrelia sat with her head bowed for a time and I resisted the urge to pester her with questions. I can tell she's still a tad angry about we saw up there, to put it mildly, and I don't want to be the one to set off a Berserker explosion.

[I don't know why they'd keep that beast alive. I've no idea. To think that they would have to have been supporting her for decades in order to prevent her from weakening. Why? It makes no damn sense.]

[Who is 'they'? You said something about a Koomodo?]

[Kaarmodo] she corrected me. [The giant lizard you saw is called a Kaarmodo. They're an ancient race, older even than humans. They live for hundreds of years and are always accompanied by their Setsulah servants. I don't know too much about it but from what I understand, the Setsulah were a race conquered thousands of years ago and pressed into slavery by the Kaarmodo. They are bound in some fashion, tied by bonds of magic to their masters.]

Magically bonded slave race? That got real dark, real quick.

[So I take it that these Kaarmodo aren't considered friendly then? Evil race of salamanders?]

Morrelia waved her hand in frustration. [Not really. The Kaarmodo are just another sapient race on the surface. We even trade with them here in Liria. Their empire is in the mountains to the northeast, we share a narrow border with them. I still don't see why they would support Garralosh. Why would they use that creature to attack Liria? Their empire is thousands of years old! They have everything they could possibly want! What is here for them?]

Morrelia was visibly angered by her inability to find a reasonable answer. The destruction was on such a broad scale and so indiscriminate, there had to be a good reason!

I didn't necessarily agree with her. Who knows why giant lizards with magic slaves make decisions? I sure don't.

[Could it be land?] I asked. [Perhaps they want to exterminate the minor kingdoms here and move in without anyone thinking they were behind it?]

She shook her head, rejecting my suggestion outright. [What would be the point? They could walk in and stomp the minor kingdoms with almost no effort anyway. And who would care if they did? The only reason these lands were settled in the first place is because nobody wanted them!]

[Okay, well the next suggestion is a little worse. Weapons testing?]

Morrelia froze. [What do you mean?]

My inability to shrug really gets me down sometimes. There is an equivalent antennae movement that we ants use, but nobody else seems to understand it.

[Well, you've managed to tame a big bad monster, something that is too strong for the first strata and possibly stronger than most things on the second. Presumably, if you keep growing the monster, helping it to evolve and manage the mana that you give it, you could control it forever. Might be a bit of work, but it would sure be a heck of a lot less resource intensive than raising a pet to be as strong as Garralosh.]

[And the testing?]

[Well, if you've got this creature under your control, why not see how well it works? They've put decades worth of effort into it, may as well see if the project is going to be worth further investment.]

Morrelia turned to face me, her expression a mask of horror.

[You really think they'd destroy entire kingdoms filled with people just for that?]

I shrugged again. Antennae are the best.

[I'm not a giant lizard with hundreds of years of life behind me. You tell me. Does that sounds like something they'd do?]

Reluctantly, the Berserker nodded.

[The Kaarmodo aren't without rivals. They compete for resources in the Dungeon with numerous groups and empires. I still can't believe that they would go this far...]

I stepped over to the visibly emotional Morrelia and patted her on the shoulder with an antenna.

[People, lizards. They all suck. This is why I'm happy I'm an ant.]

Smooth.

## [Chrysalis](#)

### **Chapter 317: Advance**

We lay low in the Dungeon for hours. The dirt and stone that surrounded us meant that we heard nothing of our pursuers, even if they passed within ten metres of us. The constant warfare amongst the regular monsters remained constant, as it always way when they weren't brainwashed by some fat ass Croc.

Haaa. I really need to get back to the colony, all of this stress is giving me a potty mouth. Some down time might be nice.

[We need to get back to the village] Morrelia sent over our mental connection, catching me by surprise.

She'd been brooding and punching the walls in fits of anger during our stay here. I could tell she wasn't too pleased by what I'd had to say, who even knew if it was the truth. To me, it didn't really matter why

an empire of elderly lizards was unleashing a Dungeon monster on their weaker neighbours, what mattered is that they had, and how we were going to cope with it.

[If we rush back to the colony, won't we just lead them straight there?] I protested.

Leading the horde and Garralosh down onto my family was not my idea of being a filial worker. I could already see the twenty, rolling their antennae with frustration at this new mess that I'd caused them whilst refusing to say anything about to me because I was technically the eldest.

[We aren't dealing with back kingdom hedge wizards now, Anthony] Morrelia growled at me. She was angry, frustrated, and it was making her a bit short. [They'll have scried out the entire south by now, since they know which direction we came from. Maybe they had done that even before we poked the hive with a stick. Point is, they will know about the village and the colony. They aren't going to leave them be.]

Gawd.

[A tiny little village and colony of harmless ants? Why would go to all that I effort?] I muttered.

Morrelia snorted at my use of the word 'harmless', I don't think she's buying just how innocent and loveable we are. Or perhaps she knows what we might be capable of...

[They came here to eradicate the people, I don't think they'll leave before the job is done. Besides] she added, [I don't think they'll want you or I to survive, given what we've seen.]

Makes sense. It doesn't really mean much if you have raised a secret weapon that nobody knows you can control, if someone has seen you controlling it.

Dammit!

[So the only way we actually make it out of this alive, outside of fleeing through the Dungeon, is to rally the colony and village and fight against them?!]

The warriors face twisted at my mention of fleeing through the Dungeon, as if the very thought was repellent to her. Hey! I didn't actually consider doing it! As if I would leave the colony alone to fend for itself in its time of trial. That is my family right there.

[Correct] Morrelia nodded. [I have no idea how, but the only we make out is if we fight. If we try to flee, they'll hunt us down eventually. I don't know a way that we could hide from their scrying magic, we just don't have the Skills.]

And fleeing into the wilderness would put the colony at risk at just the moment we were beginning to explode in our potential. If we'd had an extra month then I wouldn't nearly be this worried, the number of ants the colony would be able to wield by then would smash the horde following Garralosh and drag the stupid Croc down into the mud.

As it was we just didn't have the firepower.

The villagers were in much the same position. The training and Dungeon expeditions had done a lot to take a collection of former farmers, labourers and traders and put them on the road to becoming proper

warriors, but they weren't there yet. There wasn't enough of them and they weren't far enough along in their skill development to turn the tide against a monster like Garralosh.

[Okay then. First thing first, we need to get the heck out of here and we need to do it fast] I decided.

[You have a plan?] Morrelia asked, her eyes sharpening on me.

[Nope] I admitted, [plans aren't really my strong point. I was thinking we could just bust out the way we came in and hightail it south. It's not subtle but it gets us there as quickly as possible.]

Morrelia stared at me for a moment before she threw back her head and barked out a laugh.

[Too bad the Legion doesn't accept monsters in the ranks] she chuckled, [I have a feeling you'd fit right in.]

I turned my antennae toward the woman, reading the air around here subconsciously. She constantly talked about the Legion, not directly of course, but always mentioning it here and there. I know her father is a massive big shot with them, but what about Morrelia? She's powerful, very much so. Why wasn't she a member? I refuse to believe she was kicked out.

[So...] I began.

[I quit after my brother died in the service] she interrupted me.

...

How does someone even read what an ant is about to say? I don't even have facial muscles on the outside! Still, what she'd said did raise another question.

[How ...] I began.

[My father did not take it well] she answered.

And judging by the steeled expression on the Berserkers case I wasn't going to get more information than that out of her. I think I'd pried enough anyway.

[So we break through the front?] I asked.

[I think its most likely the horde will have returned to Garralosh' side. They can't have their monsters rushing around in the Dungeon forever, no matter that they can replenish their stock during the wave. Let's go with your idea, but if we run into too much opposition we can retreat back to this position and try to find another way out] Morrelia suggested.

Sounded good to me.

[Alright then Tiny and Crinis, are you guys ready to fight your way out?]

At the word 'Fight', Tiny literally seemed to come alive, energy and light filled his eyes and his hands clenched and unclenched at the prospect of battle. For her part, Crinis unfolded a few tentacles and walked her way over to me, settling onto my carapace primly. If a shadowy ball of infinite despair could do anything 'primly'.

[I am ready to fight by your side, Master] she declared.

Well, good then.

[But I feel compelled to inform you] she added after a moment's hesitation, [that I believe I have reached the required level to evolve.]

Ohhhhhhh boy.

[Really?! I sputtered with excitement, [that's great!] I couldn't help but reach back with my antennae to pat and stroke the little ball.

[Well done Crinis!] I praised her effusively, [and you even managed to tell me on your own! This is going to be great!]

...

[Crisis?]

Dang. Too much praise, too quickly. She'd short circuited again.

### Chrysalis

#### **Chapter 318: Fleeing south again**

We had to delay our escape for a few minutes until Crinis had come back to herself, but we didn't dare allow her the extra time to evolve right now, we needed her fighting strength to help us in the tunnels. If we managed to break free and make it to the surface then she could probably evolve whilst riding on my back if it came to it, but until then we needed her alert.

Once everyone was prepared we enacted our plan, such as it was. Bust out into the tunnel, kill everything we see, bust back into the escape tunnel, kill everything we see, break out to the surface in the church, kill everything we see.

There was a sort of simple elegance to the plan that quite appealed to me. At any rate, we were successful. Relying on the simplest and most direct methods, we chomped, stabbed, punched and tore limb from limb everything that came our way. We were lucky though, the seemingly bottomless horde of monsters that had been sent after us was nowhere to be seen. In fact, it felt as if the zombie monsters had done us a favour by killing the spawned monsters that had crowded the escape tunnel. We had to contend with far less monsters on the way out than we did on the way in. So that's a plus!

Things were a little less simple when we reached the surface.

I'd like to say that it was me who anticipated the ambush and foiled it with my brilliant tactics, a lie I don't even believe Crinis would have been able to swallow. It was unfortunate, but it Morrelia was the one who made us pause in our escape, not one hundred metres away from the surface entrance beneath the church.

[You know they'll have an ambush in place, right?] she asked as she eyed me askance.

[Of course] I lied.

She nodded to herself as if relieved. Not having a human face helped a lot when deceiving humans, I decided. My antennae had waggled like crazy as I'd spoken the obvious lie, my face, which was literally a part of my skeleton, had remained silky smooth.

My own pets were a little more wise to my deception. Crinis shifted uncomfortably on my back and Tiny looked at me with slack jawed astonishment. Stupid pets! Don't give the whole game away!

[So how do you think we should deal with it?] I prompted Morrelia, hoping to keep her distracted.

She rubbed her chiselled chin with one hand as she looked towards the exit and contemplated. Whoever her parents were, they had some serious jaw genes going on. Morrelia was a solid unit for a woman already but her jawline was so damn sharp it could probably cut steel.

[Do you think you could rustle up another one of those giant bomb things?] she asked.

I clacked my jaws with joy.

...

[You have slain level 22 Garralosh Commander]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 32]

[You have reached level 33]

[You have reached level 34]

HA! None of your fancy tricks this time you idiot crocodile!

After charging up my Gravity Bomb to a ludicrous degree once more, I unleashed it at the entrance from a safe distance away, Morrelia helping to ensure that proper planning was executed for once in the deployment of this particular magic.

I aimed the spell to hit right next to the opening and it would appear the Garralosh Commander had been prowling right next the opening in the hopes of catching us the instant we exited the tunnel!

BWAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

THE POWER!

Internally I cackled with glee as we charged forward to expunge the remaining monsters that hadn't been caught in the blast. Taken aback by the devastating strike that had instantly killed the most powerful monster amongst them, they were completely unprepared for the savagery of our follow up assault. I took my time tormenting the weaker monsters and squeezed a couple of levels into Tearing Bite, allowing me to upgrade it to the next rank, Severing Bite (III).

This particular bite skill tree continued to be distasteful, specialising in separating monsters into parts. As an active skill it was even more horrifying, allowing me to slice off monsters limbs from range. Crinis' seemed delighted by the skill however, further evidence of the dark road on which she treaded.

After her evolution, who knows exactly what she will become?... I'm nervous. I'm kind of worried to even perform core surgery and manipulate the outcome, I'd inevitably have to ask her how she wanted it to go and I'm not sure I wanted to hear the outcome.

Speaking of evolution, that Gravity Bomb had helped push me closer than ever before to my next evolution, only six more levels and I'd be there.

Once we finished off the remaining monsters Morrelia kept watch so we would have the opportunity to chow down on the Commander. We didn't want to waste any time in the event that Garralosh herself came to collect the corpse as she did last time so I can't blame Morrelia for wanting to avert her eyes from this rapid feasting. It got messy, real quick.

The rewards were worth it though. The entire corpse hadn't quite been obliterated by the Gravity Bomb and we fell upon what remained with relish. I managed to obtain a hundred Biomass from the remains, as well as the greater prize.

[Compatible rare core detected, would you like to absorb or reconstitute the core?]

[Warning, absorption will take you beyond your current limit.]

Mu .... Muaha.... MUAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!

The core is MINE!

Filled with glee I rip out the core and hold it in my mandibles, triumphant. I have managed to retrieve it after all! Mother will have to accept it!

Not willing to wait around any longer we began to cut to the south as fast as we could. Us monsters had our cores recently topped off and I returned to my constant effort to absorb mana from the air using external mana manipulation in order to continually top off my core and increase my up time.

Even so, Morrelia and I made a point to veer to the east occasionally in order to try and keep tabs on Garralosh and its lizard handler, along with horde of thousands of monsters it was bringing along for the ride. We found them eventually, moving along the road that wound around the forest towards the south. Garralosh lumbered in the middle of the horde, easily visible even from a great distance, the Kaarmodo mage and its attendants not far behind.

Their marching speed isn't too hot, probably trying to maintain the mana in the cores of all the monsters who have them. If they don't find an entrance to the Dungeon on the way, they're going to have trouble, although I wager the lizard would be scrying for that as they travelled. I really needed to know more about scrying magic, and how the heck it worked. Morrelia wasn't sure but she thought it might be an extension of air magic. Still, beholding the sheer size of the horde arrayed against us, and the gargantuan dino of a Croc in the centre of the mass, brought home again just how difficult the upcoming struggle would be.

The colony could not afford to lose, we wouldn't be spared from the jaws of the foe, just as we would not spare the enemy if we were to emerge victorious. Unable to flee, it was backs to the wall time for my family. I would do everything in my power to ensure they came out the victor.

Mind buzzing furiously, we ran south.

## Chrysalis

### **Chapter 319: Reunite with the family**

By the time we came within reach of the colony's scent trails I'd managed to level external mana manipulation twice, and we were completely exhausted. Tiny was stumbling with every step, the poor guy was the heaviest of all of us by quite the margin and the hard running had worn him down. Stamina had levelled again for me at least, but only the once, proving just what kind of ridiculous effort was required to get that skill to level up.

Crinis had declined to evolve on the journey itself, preferring to use the time riding on my back to contemplate her skills, Biomass spend and the direction she wanted to take in her all-important evolution. When I could spare it, I turned my own thoughts to the possible upcoming evolution. I had no idea how the colony would be able to bring down a monster like Garralosh but if I was to do my bit, then I needed to be as strong as possible. Getting six levels in a short amount of time would be difficult without any higher tier monsters to chomp on but it wasn't impossible.

The first scent trail I came upon tingled against my antennae as the pheromones registered on my sense of smell.

"Biomass source in this direction has been exhausted. >:)"

More scent-mojis!

Looks like the colony has been raiding towards the north in search of surface monsters to fuel the colony's growth. They must have been successful if they managed to wipe them out. Hopefully the workforce was ready to begin to hunt in the Dungeon, if they hadn't already. Vibrant had been taking her personal posse of workers down there for a while now, but the full time raids needed to start en masse. We didn't have much time and the colony needs to grow as much as possible.

Morrelia and I discussed briefly how much time it would take for Garralosh to arrive at the village and she gave us a week. Maybe a little more. It was a heap of time, and precious little at the same time.

We slowed a pace a little, this close to the finish line. The scent trails became thicker and more frequent the closer we got until we started to run into small patrols of workers.

"Hello Eldest!" they greeted me, "work hard!"

I'm always working hard dammit!

"How are things with the colony?" I called to them as we passed by.

"Busy!" one of them called back.

Wise guy.

It's a colony of ants! Of course things are busy!

Morrelia must have noticed something about the interaction because she reached out to me over the mind bridge.

[Do you talk to each other?] she enquired.

Ugh. Letting the humans know more about the colony could be a risk but also a sign of trust. It's not as if they could overhear what we say to each other, so I don't really see the risk in it... Perhaps I've just grown to trust Morrelia a little more over our time together, which is possibly what she wanted out of this expedition. At any rate, I decide to answer the question.

[We do] I admitted, [we can talk to each other using our pheromones. It was pretty basic at first but has grown more complex lately. We can talk pretty much as well as humans can.]

Better, if you include the development of the scent-moji.

[What did they say?] she asked curiously.

[I asked how things are with the colony and she told me it's 'busy'.]

Morrelia stared at me for a moment before throwing back her head and laughing.

[It's a colony of ants!] she chortled, [of course they're busy!]

Exactly!

Fifteen minutes later we parted ways, Morrelia to head to the village and myself toward the colony. The workers were thicker now, bustling here and there and it wasn't long before she saw the anthill in the distance.

What in the name of great googly-moogly?!?!?

It's HUGE.

The anthill had tripled in size at least. High as a hill and just as wide, with a strong palisade around the outside formed of wooden posts and... was that a moat?!

Small openings dotted the surface of the massive hill, with ants poking in and out constantly as they went about their various tasks. Burlier looking soldier ants patrolled the hill here and there, antennae twitching this direction and that as they kept their senses sharp for invasion.

What the heck was been going on in my absence? All this dirt must have come from somewhere, which means the excavation below ground should be spectacular. It appears that scout wasn't joking when she said things had been 'busy'.

[Tiny, make yourself comfortable and get some rest. You earned it buddy.]

The weary bat-faced gorilla flopped to the ground the moment I'd finished speaking, exhausted to the bone. I wasn't even five metres away before he started snoring.

Slacker.

I would also love to throw myself down the ground and nap but I have serious business to take care of before I'd get the chance. I felt that there would be precious little time to rest over the next few days, what with the impending doom marching south to kill all of us.

There were several crude bridges made from logs laid next to each at intervals around the colony and I hustled over the closest one with Crinis still riding on my back. The footing would seem treacherous and

uneven to a human but to the ants it was like a broad highway, my claws gripped into the wood with ease and I passed over the waters swiftly.

Then up, up and up we went, climbing the side of the hill to reach the main entrance at the top. Scent trails were thick on the ground here, scouting paths, hunting paths, even resource collection paths had been laid out trailing away from the hill.

Ignoring the smaller entrances I pushed my way to the top so that I could enter through the main opening. I wanted to get the broadest sense of the changes and I was less likely to get lost coming through the main entrance.

The problem I had with the anthill is that my tunnel map doesn't work as well above ground, it only maps out Dungeon tunnels. The portion of the nest beneath the surface level was neatly outlined in my mental map but the rest ... nothing.

Fortunately scent trails had been used almost like the coloured lines in a hospital to guide workers the right way.

"Queens chamber."

"Day Brood chambers."

"Farms."

"Lecture Theatre."

"Artisan workshop."

"Healing chambers."

"Mage Training area."

So organised! Looks like someone finally took charge and put some thought into the nest layout and the sorts of spaces we might need! Thank goodness, because it was never going to me. I've been coming to know myself more and more recently and I'm happy to admit that this sort of detailed planning is not exactly my forte.

Clutching onto the wall of the tunnel I made my way down into the depths of the nest, the sheer number of workers rushing around catching me by surprise. It feels as if the colony has doubled in size since I left, which is absurd. I'm sure the numbers aren't that high but there are surely a heck of a lot more than I saw last time if this level of activity is anything to go by.

[Crisis, pass me the core.]

The little blob on my back wordlessly passed the core she had been clutching in one tentacle along for the ride and I grasped it in my teeth.

I couldn't wait to show mother what I'd brought her.

[Chrysalis](#)

**Chapter 320: Mother of Planning**

THWACK!

HIYA!

SNAP!

The moment I entered the Queen's chamber, a powerful antennae came flying at my head. This time though, I was prepared, I'd thought ahead, inspired by Morrelia's thoughtfulness I had anticipated how my reception would begin.

Thus it was that I stood upside at the entrance, clinging to the roof with one of my mother's antennae clasped between my own. Sword catching is for fools, antennae catching is a whole new level.

"Hold on a second, mother! It isn't like you to be hasty!" I appealed.

The Queen's eyes lay on me like a weight, peaceful, serene, but heavy.

"I see you have brought a gift for me child" she replied evenly.

I tried to shrug my antennae whilst still gripping hers and largely failed. I wouldn't weaken my hold just yet, in case she felt I was being particularly foolish.

"Oh this old thing?" I deflected, "there are so many of them up on the surface that I'm starting to think they don't hold any value at all. Why, I almost feel bad giving you something of such low rarity."

"In that case" mother answered, amusement rippling through her voice, "perhaps it would be best if you kept it for yourself."

Dang it! Operation downplay the core was a failure.

"Is this the kind of welcome you give to your child who was away from home, slaving away as a scout in dangerous territories for the colony?" I try a different tack and divert the conversation.

I may have struck a chord with mother on that one, since she retracts her antennae from my grip before she responds.

"Welcome home child. I am, of course, very pleased to see you, even if I am concerned at what mischief you might have caused whilst you were away."

Oh, she's definitely amused now. I reply whilst climbing down the wall to the chamber floor, hoping to put myself on more solid ground.

"You wound me, mother" I say reproachfully even as I sweat inside.

Truth be told there is some bad news coming our way but it isn't my fault this time! I may have caused Garralosh and company to come down this was earlier than they had planned, but considering the Kaarmodo lizard was actively utilising scrying magic, chances are they already knew the human survivors were congregating here.

The Queen loomed above, still so much larger than myself. Her chamber still rests under the surface level, within the Dungeon, which necessitates her guard to be constantly on-alert, seizing monsters the

moment they spawn from the walls, subduing them and more often than not bringing them to the Queen to kill, feeding experience and Biomass to the monarch.

"There might have been a couple of things that came up whilst I was away. Nothing we can't handle..." I hope.

Mother's antennae waggled with frustrated amusement.

"I had assumed as much the moment you walked out of the nest."

Ouch.

"Where is Aphy? I haven't seen her about?" I wondered, trying to shift the focus of conversation away from myself.

The Queen was only too happy to take the bait. Her eyes shone warmly as she discussed her beloved pet.

"I was worried that Aphy would be at risk here in my chamber, she is currently positioned with the brood under the watchful eye of the tenders. Did you know she'd already evolved?" she said proudly.

"Congratulations, Mother. I'm pleased to see your pet has brought you such joy."

And I was. Mother cared deeply for every member of the colony and we all loved her back, but we had stuff to do. It's nice to have someone be your devoted companion. I only had to think of the ever loyal Crinis resting on my back to remind myself of the security a devoted pet brought to the owner.

"Not much longer now and she'll be able to add her own eggs to the brood chambers" I mused.

"Yes" the Queen nodded happily, "it will be so helpful for the family."

Nice. Now that I've reminded her of all the good work I've done, it's time to bring her attention back to my gift.

"So about this core..."

THWACK!

Ouch!

Swift as a lightning bolt from the sky, the Queen's antennae descended on my head. Even with all of my upgrades, that still really smarts!

"There are others in a better position to make use of this gift than I, child, we have discussed this before" Mother spoke adamantly.

I winced, but held my ground.

"I already have one, and I'm not going to need another for a long time. I promise you I will obtain more of these cores for myself before I need it, but right now there is nobody in the colony who can make use of this core as much as you can!"

The Queen wasn't convinced.

"What of the soldiers? What of the generals? If the family is to fight for its survival, they will need to be as strong as possible. I am the only Queen in this colony right now, but there are two others who will soon fulfil this role. I do not fight as the others fight. They need all of the strength they can muster."

Haaa. The Queen was always downplaying her own importance to the colony. I'm not sure if she's just humble or if she just genuinely doesn't understand what it would mean for the colony if she were lost. In truth, I suspect that she simply sees herself as performing her function for the family as well as can be she believes there are other parts of the colony that need to be strengthened more than herself.

On that point we disagree and I'm not going to back down this time.

"For fighting we already have me. I have a rare core already and soon I'll be prepared to evolve. I promise you that whatever battles threaten the family, I will stand forward and fight. There is no other ant in this colony who is close to matching me. What we need isn't more battle potential, we need the strongest Queen possible to act as our beacon of hope, our bastion of strength and to fuel our growth."

My antennae wave passionately in the air as I try to convince the Queen to go along with my idea. Why is it so hard to convince this particular monster to get stronger?!

"Many times you've been the last line of defence for us and I suspect that you will be again. In truth, giving you this core will increase our fighting potential the most, as well as increase the future growth prospects of the colony. You have to accept it. Even if all it does is relieve the nerves of the workers, none of us want to lose you and it will give us comfort to see you as powerful as you can be" I pleaded.

As my words ran out, for the first time I noticed that not only was the Queen watching me in her careful way, but so were her guards, all of them facing me at rapt attention.

"He's right, Mother" one of them spoke up.

"It would be a boon to the colony" another said.

"You must not fall" a third chipped in, standing directly on the Queen's head.

Gradually more workers began to speak until the chamber was filled with their voices, each of them urging the Queen to accept the rare core, to strengthen herself so that she would not be lost. I was shocked. It was so rare for the workers to express themselves to the Queen, even after they had gained the ability to speak. Her guards were like shadows, ever alert but never questioning her slightest decision. To see them speak out like this was unprecedented. Clearly they thought as I do. The Queen had to be preserved, no matter the cost to the rest of the colony, our Mother would be protected.

The Queen rose one antenna into the air and all sound cut off in an instant.

"I will accept this core" she said.

Her guards turned back to their task without comment, as if their display of loyalty and affection had been an illusion the room returned to what it had been but moments before.

"That's great" I sighed, relieved to my core.

Not willing to wait, I rushed forward and deposited the large core on the ground before the Queen before stepping back.

"How long until you'll be ready to evolve?" I asked out of curiosity.

It was one thing to accept the core, it was another to reach max level and evolve. Until that point, all the core did was provide a little extra mana, a little juice in the tank. It was in boosting our evolutionary potential that the core really shone.

"I can evolve at any time" the Queen said dismissively as she reached down to the core with her antennae, rolling it this way and that as she inspected it.

Wot?!

"You can evolve now?! That's huge news! Is your core maxed out? What about your mutations? You maxed them yeah? Tell me you've maxed them!" I gushed.

The Queen waved one antenna to brush aside my concerns.

"You know I have not filled my mutations child, the Biomass must go toward the growth of the colony. But yes, I reached my maximum level not too long ago. The children saw to it that I have been supplied sufficient cores to reach my full potential. Something of a waste but they were insistent" she huffed.

Fantastic news! Good work colony!

"In that case, I won't keep you, Mother" I said gleefully, "accept the core and evolve straight away! No need to wait!"

"Thank you child" the Queen said softly.

"You're very welcome, Mother" I responded with a tip of my antennae.

I retreated quietly out of the Queen's chamber and into my own quarters below where I found the twenty already waiting for me.