

Chrysalis 771

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Chapter 771: Is it getting damp in here?

With the pupa safely ensconced within Tiny's muscular arms, we move at speed through the nest and back out to the front lines again. I've been doing this walk a great deal lately and I swear it gets busier every time. The vast farms that have been constructed are still teeming with ants, collecting the enormous quantities of Biomass and cores that flow endlessly every day. How on Pangera we manage to consume all of it, I have no idea. There must be a ton more hatchlings being trained in the stratum above than I think there are, if most of it is going up there. Just thinking about the rapidly growing population of the Colony puts a hop in my step. It won't be long until there are just too many of us to be dealt with easily, especially considering how strong we all are.

More and more tier fours are appearing all the time, to the point that down here in the second stratum, there are more tier fours than there are tier threes. Even more exciting than that though, is the growing population of tier fives! Almost exclusively soldiers and scouts, these powerful warriors are the vanguard of the ant age! It's a shame that, since we're monsters, there's no other way for us to level up and evolve other than to fight. The surface races don't have this problem, their farmers can grow crops and level up just from performing their duties, but not us! No matter how little suited to combat the carvers and brood tenders might be, it's the only way they can accrue the experience they need to evolve. Hopefully some of the creatures from the farms are also being used to funnel xp to these more peaceful castes.

Just because they don't fight, doesn't mean that there aren't benefits to evolving them! I can scarcely imagine how useful a tier six brood tender would be, every ounce of her evolutionary energy given over to auras and glands that nourish and aid the larvae and pupae. Knowing the System like I do, I wager the young would have all sorts of benefits from being raised by such a tender, higher stats, greater skill levels, perhaps even body parts and organs that perform above their usual specs.

Now that I think about it... that would be so damn useful!

If I can think of it, I'm sure the rest of the council can also think of it. No doubt this project is under way already. When the first tier six brood tender is born, I seriously want to be there to find out what they can do! That'll be insane!

For now though, it's back to the relentless fight. The only thing allowing the Colony to make the incredible strides forward that it had made over the past weeks has been the stalwart defence being made at the borders and it is our duty to help with that, being the strongest group of fighters the Colony can draw on!

After a brief conversation with yet another supervising general, we take our positions and drive forward into the face of the wave the moment the garrison pulls back. All of us except Tiny that is, since he's been relegated to pupa-sitting duty. He was strangely alright with the decision to leave him behind, cradling the cocoon as if it were a baby as he fell asleep against the side of the wall. I think it'll be fine, since if the ant ecloses in his embrace there is zero chance she'll be able to fight her way out of his grip.

For the rest of us, it's business as usual.

The monsters are nearly endless and I continue to train my mind magic on them whilst Crinis performs her dark work and Invidia detonates everything he can, radiating glee with explosion. When we run into the tougher monsters, we team up to take them down, harvesting their cores and scarfing down the Biomass as quickly as we can before getting back into the thick of it. Unsatisfied with just guarding the entrance, I direct the pets to advance down the tunnel with me, hoping to clear out the bulk of the monsters plaguing this section of the defence.

All goes smoothly, until Crinis notices something is a little different than usual.

[Master, isn't it a little more... damp than usual for the second stratum?]

I pause for a moment, my mandibles freezing in the act of biting and my minds flash to my sensory input. She's not wrong, there's an unusual amount of water for this section of tunnel. The second layer of the Dungeon might be called the Shadow Sea, but there actually isn't that much liquid water down here.

[You aren't wrong,] I tell her, feeling a little tense, [eliminate everything nearby, something doesn't feel right.]

If something weird is going to happen, then I want every other threat in the area neutralised as quickly as possible. Only too happy to comply, Invidia picks up the speed of his detonations, spinning his magic at an incredible speed. Which is precisely when a bolt of solid water flies out of the darkness and smacks him right in the face.

[Invidia!] I cry.

I leap over to check on the demon to find that he'd protected himself at the last moment by weaving a shield in front of his face. The speed he works at... incredible! But where the hell did that water come from? I peer into the darkness around us, sweeping with all of my senses. It's faint, but I can detect a strange ambient mana in here that I can't quite put my finger on.

[Ssssss. *Irritating...*]

The little envy demon flutters his wings and lifts himself back into the air, the impact clearly having done some damage.

[Heal yourself up and stay alert,] I warn him, still watching the place where the water blast originated.

Imagine my surprise when I get hit from behind by a blast of water coming from the *opposite* direction to the first! Dammit! Even my advanced warning wasn't enough to dodge the strike, I was so focused on the other direction. My legs stagger under the force of the blow as my carapace absorbs the shock. This isn't any ordinary blast of water... it's *heavy*, and the water was moving *fast*.

Failing to penetrate my carapace, the pressurised water creates a fountain of spray that drenches everything around us in freezing liquid. That does it! Irritated by the attack, I spin together my omni-elemental construct and start churning out blue fire mana. As soon as I get a hold on some I whip up a fire domain that expands outwards from my position, roasting the area around me and drying me off instantly.

The moment the domain flickers into life, I hear a strange gurgling roar echo from all around me, as if the flame had offended some creature simply by coming into existence. Which is when I notice the water around us flowing together, trickling from the walls and across the ground, gathering speed until it forms a flood. In mere seconds, thousands of litres of water have coalesced into a *really* cheesed off looking wall of water that stares down at us like I just pooped on its rug.

Water... monster?

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Chapter 772: A taste of what is to come

Now that it's in front of me, I can sense it far more clearly, the aura of mana that had been spread throughout the tunnel has concentrated in one area, the hidden core of the monster now exposed and pulsing with power. This beast is no small fry, tier six certainly, and most likely not from the third strata. Not wanting to allow this newcomer to make the first move, I draw deep on my core, pulling out all the mana I can and feeding it into the construct, shaping and condensing it at the same time in bolts of pure flame.

[Invidia, you're on defensive duty, but feel free to take shots when you have time. Crinis, see if you can get a crack at its mind, otherwise keep the small fry away from us,] I tell my pets tersely.

The two of them acknowledge my orders as I stare up at the strange water monster. It's huge, towering above me and filling the tunnel with its presence. Its body seems to be fully formed of liquid, the core glowing bright in the centre of its mass. The water continues to flow, shifting and moving in constant motion, occasionally frothing and fizzing as competing currents wash against each other and form waves across its body. It doesn't take any particular form, no arms or humanoid shape, rather it simply looks like a giant mass, or pillar.

Then it shifts slightly and my antennae scream at me.

Holy moly!

I leap to the side, nerves afire with energy as a blade of water slices through the air where I stood just a moment ago, cutting an inches deep groove into the rock. What the heck was that!? It went straight through my fire domain like it wasn't even there! In retaliation, I fire off a duo of condensed blue fire bolts, watching as they fly straight into the water creature and fizzle out instantly.

Hmmm. That's not good.

BOOM!

Hanging back and staying behind me, Invidia weaves together an explosion right next to the monster that sends a spray of water flying out and causing waves of force... as well as literal waves to roll through the entire creature.

[Nice, Invidia!] I cheer.

Once more that gurgling roar echoes out and suddenly the air is filled with water, bolts, blasts and jets firing off every which way as the monster retaliates against the envy demon. Forced onto the defensive, Invidia weaves layer after layer of shields around himself to protect against the onslaught of aquatic

attacks. Unwilling to abandon the floaty eyeball, I launch onto the offensive, peeling my mandibles back wide as I lock in place and charge!

Dash!

My legs surge with energy as I leap toward the target, bringing it within my fire domain that causes it to hiss and steam. Then, with a powerful surge I smash shut my mandibles, invoking my most powerful bite skill as I do so!

DOOM CHOMP!

Splash!

It's hard, but I manage to force my jaws shut through the monster's body... but then what? I look up to see that giant mass of flowing water, the vague outlines of a face formed within it looking down on me with contempt. Alright then, so biting doesn't work... how about this?

FWOOM!

Not content to throw tiny balls of fire at the monster any more, I unleash a solid stream of blue fire that roars forward from between my mandibles directly into the creature's body. How you like them apples?!

Immediately a wall of steam bursts forth right in front of me, singeing my antennae and washing over my body as the monster roars in pain. My senses buzz with warning but I stay put, applying the blow torch for a moment longer before a wall of condensed water slams into my side, sending me skittering to the side as I absorb the impact. It's clear that he didn't like that very much. Perhaps small amounts of fire are easy enough for him to shrug off, but you apply enough heat it starts to chip away at him. Not willing to let up, I dash forward once more, working my sub-brains overtime to pump out more blue fire mana.

BOOM!

Freed from defence thanks to my offensive, Invidia finds the time to squeeze out another explosion that rocks the mass of water, sending foam and spray all through the tunnel.

[Master! I think I have it!] Crinis cries out.

She takes advantage of the distracted creature to extend her tentacles from a shadow she had prepared earlier, directly behind it. Turning them immaterial, she pushes them deep into the frothing water, reaching for the core held right in the centre. Clever girl!

With a sound like a tsunami breaking on the shore, the monster *ripples* with anger before every drop that makes up its form starts to rotate. In only a moment, what was a flowing pillar of water has transformed into a raging storm, a cyclone of ripping currents that shreds Crinis' tentacles where they connect to the ground, forcing her to retract them back through the shadow.

Damn! This thing is a right pain in the backside! It's clear that the core is it's weak point and Crinis nearly took hold of it perfectly, using her new abilities to reach right into the heart of the creature and pluck it out. Could I do the same with my gravity mandibles? Unlikely. Mana doesn't work that well on internal structures and I'm guessing the same rule applies here, otherwise Invidia would be setting off his explosions *inside* the creature rather than next to it. If I could spear the core, or attack from outside in

some way... Should I use a gravity bomb? No. Not yet. If I can I want to capture the core whole so I can learn more about this creature. I'll face many more like it and I'd rather have more information than less if I can help it.

We know it doesn't like fire burning away at it, but I get the feeling it's only going to cause damage if I can really bring the heat. I'm going to need to bust out some serious firepower. Cursing that my mind mana focused mutation does nothing for me in these circumstances, I kick all of my brains into overdrive, drawing out every ounce of mana I can from my core and shoving it through the construct to produce as much blue fire mana as I possibly can. Once I get my mental hands on it, I use my main mind to squeeze it down and condense it as much as possible before handing it off to the smaller brains to shape into the spell I want.

Of course, all of this takes precious seconds, time that I spend trying to distract the monster as best I can. Still in its whirling wall of death, the creature is extremely dangerous to approach. I can see rocks being shattered and cut to bits by the pressure applied by the currents and swirling waters, so I'm not too eager to stick my head in. Instead, I dance around nearby, keeping it within the range of my fire domain and chomping away at it when I get the chance, doing whatever I can to make a nuisance of myself.

Frustrated, Crinis has been forced onto the defensive and occupies herself cleaning out any remaining small-fry as she watches and waits for her chance, keeping her main body at a safe distance and shifting position constantly to avoid getting pinned down. Without me actively casting offensive magic, the barrage of water has resumed and he drifts from side to side, dozens of shields popping into existence and shattering every few seconds.

It's risky, but I don't save him. With the monster focused on protecting itself from my two pets, I can use this precious time to supercharge my spell to the highest possible degree.

If anyone can be said to be big-brained, it's my little envy demon. I have every confidence in him!

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Chapter 773: Getting hot in here?

Whilst trying to do everything I can to distract the vortex of water, I keep my focus internal, driving and shaping the mana as best I can to create the most powerful fire spell I've ever attempted. The spell shape isn't too complicated, not compared to the heavy lifting I've been doing lately making things like the omni-elemental construct. Even so, seconds tick past as I race to create it whilst Invidia does his best to deflect and dodge a barrage of water based attacks.

For his part, the little demon punched his massive brain into overdrive, weaving vast amounts of mana into shields at a speed that was dazzling to behold as he drifts lazily through the air. His eye blazes with power as the many mind constructs he's built weave spell after spell, deflecting and blocking the innumerable bolts of water that fly in his direction as if shot from a cannon. Judging by the damage done by those streaking water bolts when they hit the terrain, I don't think he'd survive if he were hit by a single one. Invidia might be a magical powerhouse, but taking shots head on is not exactly something he's designed to do. His tankiness is basically zero.

Cool as a cucumber with one massive eye, he sticks to his guns and pumps out shield after shield, somehow keeping up with the towering whirlpool of death as it desperately tries to prevent him from blowing it sky high.

Actually, I just had a thought... It's throwing out hundreds of litres worth of water... is that weakening it some way? If the water is part of its body, and I cause damage by burning it away, is it hurting itself by doing this? Then my mind is drawn back to the scene we saw when the creature first revealed itself. It had clearly dispersed it's body and then pulled itself back together, so perhaps it can call that water back to itself if given the chance?

[Crisis! Try and destroy whatever water you can find lying about.]

[Ah! W-what?! How do I do that?!]

[Just drink it or something!]

Wait a sec...

[Don't drink it, but do *something!*]

[Yes, Master!]

Hopefully she can prevent the creature from calling the water back, making the loss of mass permanent.

[How are you holding up, Invidia?] I call to my pet, still focusing inward on piecing my spell together.

[*I sssshall take all it can give meeee!*]

[I like that confidence!]

He does seem perfectly capable of it at the moment. Good luck chief! Keep up the good work! Because, as a matter of fact, I only need a moment longer to put the finishing touches on this damn thing...

There!

The last of the condensed mana slots into place and each of my brains sits back with a sigh, wiping the metaphorical sweat off of their neurons. This is possibly the heftiest piece of elemental magic that I've put together to date and I hope to heck it works against this stupid thing. If not, I'll be forced to break out the bomb.

I skitter back from the monster, giving myself a little space before I rear up and unleash my spell. An immediate wave of heat blasts into existence, flaring into life and chasing away the perpetual shadows of the second stratum. The spell takes the shape of a tornado of pure flame that grows as it travels forward until it connects the ceiling of the tunnel to the floor. The temperature around us rises, precipitously as I hear the monster scream its rage once more.

Gweheheheh.

How do you like that, you stupid puddle?! Get roasted!

In only a few heartbeats, the fire and water collide with a deafening hiss as steam billows to an absurd degree, blotting out vision and causing my antennae to start dripping from the overwhelming moisture in the air.

[Invidia! Strike now!]

Preoccupied with battling against my fire, the barrage against the little demon has faltered at last. With a gleeful gleam in his eye, Invidia floats forward slightly before weaving together a devastating series of detonations that rock the tunnel and send debris flying.

Unsure what's happening, I start to draw out chunks of gravity mana and start squashing it in case I need it. Before I get far with that process, my antennae twitch in warning and I sense movement all around me. It's calling back the water! All of the dispersed water that Crinis hasn't managed to deal with are drawn back to the ball which is still reeling from the barrage of magic. Unwilling to let it heal itself, I charge more mana into my domain, spreading it further before leaping to intercept as much of the liquid trailing through the air as I can.

More hissing, more steam as the water evaporates when it contacts the domain. I keep the pressure on maintaining my domain and moving closer to the creature once more, relying on the constant burn effect to continue whittling it down. After a few tense moments, my patience is rewarded with the voice of Gandalf himself.

[You have slain level 57 Aqua Spiritus.]

[You have gained experience.]

Nice! Finally got it! Eager to collect the spoils, I run forward into the drifting steam, casting my senses about as I attempt to find what I'm after. It doesn't take long to find the core, given how powerful it is the thing practically radiates mana. I leap on it with glee and seize it up in my mandibles before I start looking around for the rest of the rewards. It takes a long moment of turning left and right for me to work out that the creature was made of water... and therefore wouldn't have anything by way of Biomass.

No food! After defeating something like that?! How is that fair?!

I look down at the damp floor of the tunnel, the water now freely mixing with the dirt, rock and dust there... I think I'll leave it. I'm not that hungry. Tired and weary from the difficult fight, the three of us make our way back behind the defensive line to find Tiny still sleeping with the pupa cradled in his arms. Unwilling to wake him prematurely, we settle down for a meal only to find he immediately wakes the moment any Biomass is placed within several metres of him. We chow down but I can't help but bring my antennae forward to examine the glowing blue core of this particularly strange monster that we ran into. It wasn't like anything I'd seen before and I'm quite interested to see how it ticks.

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Chapter 774: A glimpse of the fourth

Travelling the wildlands of the uncultured south wasn't pleasant, dear reader, not at all! The depredation! The sheer lack of fortified beverages! I jest, readers, of course I jest. Who am I, after all? Tolly! The bold explorer of the unknown! Despite what I may have been led to believe by the general

discussion amongst the ladies in my circles, the trip wasn't nearly as terrible as I might have thought. Rolling hills, green grassland, forests alive with birds and wildlife. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was picturesque, do not be confused reader, the sparse population of those lands means that the monster population is high and we saw many such critters roaming as we flew overhead. I only mean to state that it wasn't nearly so desolate as many might have you believe.

For the journey, I travelled by Skimmer, a lovely beast by the name of Skydaisy, and her handler Barlon who was more than accommodating on the trip. A lovely gentleman who was himself born and raised in the wild country, he proved an engaging and informative guide as the kilometres vanished beneath us. It took several weeks of travel before we reached the lands once occupied by the frontier kingdoms, small fiefdoms established a mere few hundred years ago by break away families who sought to carve out their own destiny on the edges of civilisation, battling against the monsters and the land.

There is a certain romance in it, reader, is there not? As a fearless and brave adventurer, I myself can perfectly understand the wild, untamed spirit that would cause someone to leave behind the comforts and security of home to take hold of their own fortunes! The difference being, I would never do it. I would miss my sherry and the warmth of my enchanted hearth far too much to give it up entirely. It's already as much as I can bear to be away from my comforts for the time it takes to satisfy my curiosity and bring back these missives for you, you can't ask more than me than that, my demanding readers!

On a more sombre note, it was clear when we crossed the border and began to see the devastation that was caused by the wave. Ruined towns and cities, burned farmsteads and a flattened countryside were cold reminders of the tragedy that occurred here. It was such a sorry scene I needed Regilent to pass my smelling salts to dash away a case of light-headedness. I shall not dwell upon that which is past, though it pained my old heart to witness it, instead I shall return the focus of this travelogue to the bizarre present and the unknowable future!

For it wasn't long after that we began to fly over the first signs of civilisation! Newly built farmsteads with smoking chimneys, freshly ploughed fields and dark tilled soil, it was almost enough to bring a tear to my tired eyes. The unfailing spirit of the sapient! The hardy folk of the frontier, risen from the ashes like the phoenix of Avar! Although they did not do it alone... as you are well aware.

My heart fair skipped a beat when I first saw the first one, all the rumours I'd heard of this strange place flooding back all at once. Still a day away from the newly established capital of Renewal, we flew over a small village, scarcely more than a handful of farmhouses built next to each other, unremarkable in every way. Except for that one, key detail. The anthill! Quite a remarkable sight, dear reader, even for one as well travelled as I. Nothing like a crude pile of dirt that the word might evoke in your mind, not at all. This was a masterpiece! A hundred metres tall if it was an inch, every part of it reinforced and compacted until it gleamed like polished stone. And the carvings! Remarkable. Hundreds, thousands of skilful, expressive and detailed images such that my eyes couldn't quite work out what they should focus on and what should be ignored. Gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous.

Then of course, there were the ants themselves! I could only see three, peeking out the top of the 'hill', watching as we flew over. It quite whet my appetite I must say, and it was with rising anticipation that I awaited our arrival in the city. You know your Tolly, reader! My thirst for adventure is unquenchable! Await my next missive, in which I detail my first impressions of possibly the most remarkable city in the world!

What a strange and curious thing... examining the core reveals both more and less than I expected to see and gave me my first insights into the sorts of things that were possible in the fourth strata. I'd been told little scraps of information by Granin, who had apparently spent very little time there as a younger, more sprightly Shaper on an expedition with his superiors, but to get hold of a core and see it for myself...

I didn't even think some of this stuff was possible! And these are the sorts of creatures I'll run into when I get to the fourth stratum? Holy heck! I'm starting to resent my start as a lowly ant hatchling even more, though I suppose it worked out alright in the end.

I mean, take a look at this! So apparently a Water Spirit... thing... actually *does* have organs, although not of the sort that I have obviously, rather they appear to be immaterial, or part of the water itself? Somehow?

For example, let's think about musculature. I need muscles to move around, that much makes sense, but how does a giant wall of sentient water with a face on it move? With magic, of course, but that magic needs to be channelled and directed in order to be fit for purpose. That's where the Tidal Mass Manipulator organ came into play! It allowed the spirit to create micro 'tides' by shifting the water within its body around, which allowed it to move. Then came the Liquid Shaper, a different type of water within the body the spirit that it could mould into different shapes. I think this was how it was firing bolts of water at us, by forming a pressure cannon out of this stuff and then blasting away.

There appeared to be quite an array of fancy core attachments as well, ethereal organs that are more akin to magical constructs than flesh and blood. One for attracting and moulding the water, one for permeating mana throughout the body, gradually changing the water into a ... I don't know the technical term here... magical water? I guess? It infused every drop of water the spirit absorbed with water mana, strengthening it and giving the creature better control over it. At least, that's what I think.

All sorts of different bits and pieces that I hadn't even considered before... The idea of being able to have a body that is essentially powered by mana alone... I suppose it makes perfect sense as you get lower down and the mana becomes more dense, but it's a different thing, seeing it for myself. Does this mean that Crinis might eventually be able to transmute her entire body into actual shadow? Just... be a living shadow and jump out of the dark at people? That's *terrifying*! Or Tiny! Could he just make himself into lightning? That would be... that would be rad as heck...

What about me then? What might I become? What am I already becoming? Maybe I'll turn myself into a sentient black hole, just floating around sucking up people. Wait, that sounds wrong...

At any rate, fascinating stuff! I flag down a passing scout and have them deliver the core to the core shapers, they'll be more than a little eager to get their mandibles on it, I've no doubt about that. We check in on the pupa to find that she's developing away as expected. This time we leave Crinis behind to babysit and head out once more into the breach, keen to improve our skills and drive back the wave.

Hopefully soon this mess will be over and we can all get back to more regular action. I for one am more than a little excited to get back to the third strata and have a better look around. I'm sure there's a heap of cool things to see down there!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 775: The boiling rage

The heat was pervasive, radiating out from the rock around her, from the open pits of flame that guttered and belched smoke in the distance and from her own suit. With a grunt of effort, Morrelia brought her twin blades forward, driving them straight into the chest of the frothing demon in front of her before she stepped back, smoothly withdrawing the glimmering steel as she did so.

With a flick of her wrists, she sent the bubbling ichor of the monster hissing onto the ground where it boiled away, the stench of it rising as a vapour and clogging within her helmet. She growled. Just what she needed. Teeth bared in a rictus snarl, she seized hold of that anger, that rage, and drew it out of her belly, through her chest and into her arms. It hurt. A wrenching pain that pulled at her very bones, fuelling the rage and driving it to greater heights as she continued to channel it.

Up and into the arms, into her hands, then with a final *shove* into her blades. The two swords flared with violent red light as her anger took root in them, resonating with the metal and magnifying her anger until the rage was all she could feel, all she could see.

She didn't know how much longer it was until she came to with a start, a large, armoured hand resting on her shoulder as she stood breathing heavily surrounded by slain demons.

"You need to be more careful," came her father's voice from behind her, "it's a dangerous Skill to use without the proper precautions in place."

She nodded silently as she braced herself. It hit a moment later, the overwhelming lethargy that came with the loss of her berserker rage. Her hands began to shake and her limbs felt completely numb. It was all she could do to sheath her weapons, needing three attempts to line the first sword with her scabbard. Knowing how she felt, her father didn't say anything else, merely led her back through the lines and into camp where she lay down on the first cot she found, not even bothering to take her armour off.

Titus just chuckled as he looked down at her and she weakly flipped a hand at him in protest.

"I was just thinking of your mother," he clarified, "she was often left in this state when she channelled the rage."

He turned and sat down on a bench nearby, he own abyssal armour ringing like a softly struck bell as the plates shifted against each other. She couldn't help but frown. When was she going to get a set like that? Her own armour was excellent, of course, but her father's was the real deal, forged hundreds of years ago from the best materials the Legion had. It weighed a ton, but she was starting to feel as though she might have the strength for it. If she didn't, she soon would, given the rate her level was climbing.

The commander watched his daughter recover for a few minutes, sitting silent and simply being present. When he judged enough time had passed, he unclipped the canteen from his belt and gave it to her, nodding when she sat up to drink.

"You're recovery time is getting faster. You've levelled it up already?"

Morrelia drank greedily, pouring the lukewarm water through her faceplate, uncaring of the state of the metal.

"Take your helmet off," Titus growled, "you're just being lazy now."

She growled right back at him, and Titus couldn't help but laugh. She did listen to him, dragging the runic steel from her head and letting it drop to the ground, revealing her dirt-streaked face and short cut midnight hair. Free of restrictions, she brought up the canteen again and this time Titus didn't bother until she had drunk her fill.

There was a quiet moment, or at least as quiet as it could be when surrounded by a perpetual warzone, and Morrelia decided to say something that had been on her heart ever since they had come to the third stratum.

"Father..." she said, barely tripping over the word as she had in the past, "have you been sent here as punishment? For failing to destroy the Colony?"

It certainly seemed that way to her. Titus had returned to the Iron Mountain with his Legion just as the wave was getting underway. After reporting to the brass, his troops had been whisked into someone else's command and the decorated soldier had been unceremoniously sent into the third stratum with a small detachment of troops, Morrelia included, to guard an unimportant outpost, fighting tooth and nail against the wave with far too few troops.

After a brief silence, she raised her head to find her father looking at her with an odd expression on his face.

"What?" she demanded.

He just shook his head.

"Is that what's been bothering you? I swear you've been moody ever since we got here and only now you come out and tell me?" he chuckled again, and she marked not for the first time how much freer he'd been with his emotions since they had returned. "No, I'm not being punished. Why would I be punished? I did what I could, the situation was worse than we expected, and we retreated before the risk to my legionaries became too great. The council accepted my report, it was corroborated by the junior officers and that was the end of it," he shrugged.

"But weren't you stripped of your command? Your troops?"

"Of course not," he snorted. "There's a wave on girl, the troops went where they were desperately needed. I'll have my Legion back when the wave is done."

"Then what about us?" she demanded, waving a hand at the desolate nothing around them, "why have we been sent out here to the middle of nowhere to guard nothing for weeks on end?"

Titus scratched the side of his nose for a moment.

"I thought you'd already worked it out. I'd actually thought *that* was why you were so irritable."

Morrelia frowned.

"What are you talking about- ... *mother*."

The commander nodded with a wry smile on his face.

"Seems like she's not done babying you just yet. I was a little surprised when the orders came down, but it is something she would do."

She felt her temperature rising as the anger kindled in her belly once more.

"Are you telling me she sent us, and these other legionaries here, as a *training* camp for me?!"

"She did," he confirmed.

When he saw the rage starting to burn in her eyes, he quickly raised a hand.

"Before you get too wound up, be a little patient and I'll tell you a few things that might alleviate a little of your anger. Alright?"

With a conscious effort, she shoved her ire down and listened to what her father had to say. Seeing she'd taken control of herself, Titus went on.

"You might see this as coddling, unnecessary interference from a parent and a waste of resources," he gestured to the small camp around them, "but let me say this, we *always* defend this checkpoint during a wave. It may not seem like much, but if the monsters swarm through this area, they group up with other streams moving up and cause major issues to our holdings further up. To nip the problem in the bud, we deploy to several places down here to cut down the trickle before it becomes a flood. Make sense?"

Morrelia nodded, but still didn't agree. Was it important that this place be defended? Of course, what her father said made sense, but that didn't justify sending someone of *his* strength and experience to do the job. He was wasted here.

"Secondly," he continued, noting her dissatisfaction, "your mother did not send us here to babysit you, but to accelerate your growth."

She wanted to object and say those were basically the same thing, but she held her tongue.

"Promising Legionaries are often given opportunities like this when we see they have the potential to rise through the ranks. And before you ask, your mother and I had no part in selecting you for this accelerated program. Me being sent with you? That's likely to be your mother interfering a bit. Not that I mind though."

She frowned, thinking. If someone had put her forward for this, and it was a standard procedure.

"You're a candidate for officers training," her father confirmed before her mind could get there on its own.

"WHAT?!" she squawked.

Titus allowed the pride he felt to show on his face.

"Not many berserkers get chosen for this. Not considered stable enough. Though, I suppose your mother rising to Consul might have shifted opinions on that front a little."

Complicated emotions rose in Morrelia at hearing this. Did she deserve this sort of treatment? Was it even something she wanted? It had been her dream at one point in her life, she had worked herself to the bone to rise to her father's expectations. Now?

"I'm going to go hit something."

She pushed herself up out of the cot and shook her limbs out before grabbing her helmet and slamming it back on her head.

"You sure that's a good idea? So soon after your last rage?" Titus cocked one brow as she stalked away.

She didn't reply and he allowed himself to crack a smile as he watched her draw her blades as she made her way back to the sounds of battle.

"We'll have to talk about your class evolution when you get back," he called.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 776: Getting Classy

The third stratum remains a point of fascination for many researchers due to several of its unique properties. For similar reasons, the various powers of the world make it a priority to establish and maintain vast swathes of territory within this region of the Dungeon. The first reason for this is obvious: the world pillars. To my knowledge, no successful attempt has ever been made at destroying one of the vast columns that support the overworld. Whatever material they are made of, it certainly isn't plain stone. There have been many who simply sought to mine or study it, but even with advanced tools they were unable to so much as scratch them. Which isn't to say that we know nothing about them. The outside of the pillars appears to be a layer of self-regenerating stone, similar to Granite, with a very high resistance to temperature.

This outer layer can be removed with some effort, only to reveal the black rock that lies within. It is this stuff that none have ever damaged, though it's possible that the secret has been uncovered and is held very close to the chest by those who have it, since such knowledge would surely shake the world. It isn't known if the black rock, which is known by many names, is even the final layer, or if an even greater secret is held within.

Just because none have ever damaged a pillar, doesn't mean that the many nations of Pangera don't fret and worry that it is possible. For this reason, securing the pillars that support their own lands is seen as a key plank in any policy regarding the Dungeon. Not that this is easy to accomplish. Proxy wars are constantly being waged, attempting to seize control of a rival's columns, threatening to cut Dungeon empires in half by cutting the depths from the surface. This is without the constant threat of the demons themselves, the other fascinating aspect of this stratum.

Intelligent, vicious and capable of forming rough societies with shared interests, the demons are the worst form of barbarian tribe, capable of forming their own self-governing cities, kingdoms or even empires. Their inherent nature makes them shaky allies at the best of times who are equally as likely to act against their own interests as they are for them. The prodigious spawn rate of larval demons means

the population is essentially inexhaustible, with new powerful leaders rising from the sea of larvae to replace the old within days.

During a wave, this process is exacerbated a hundredfold. Almost all major upheavals within the third stratum occur during these events.

- *Excerpt from 'Musings on Mysteries' By Elric the Wild Mage.*

Morrelia vented her frustrations and mixed emotions on the blameless monsters until the bodies were piled high and she could no longer raise her blades. Exhausted and numb, she stumbled back to the camp, stepping aside so that fresher warriors could take her place.

The demons were strong opponents, without the advantages of her Legion issued Abyssal Armour, or her new enchanted blades, she'd be overmatched easily. With them, she was able to cut through most of the opponents she faced in the third stratum so long as her rage burned hot.

As a berserker, it was the fundamental key to her strength and her most highly ranked Skill, having upgraded it to the seventh rank only recently. Such power came at a cost though, she could only maintain that level of power for a short period of time. Without triggering her rage, she was weaker than most legionaries of her level, since none of the synergies and abilities that came with her Class were active. Once activated, she became a killing machine, incapable of feeling pain or fatigue, driven to violence and empowered to do it. But that only lasted five minutes.

There were things that could be done to push the rage to last longer, raising the skill level, various enchantments, a few tonics, but most important was the mental state of the berserker. Anger didn't come naturally to most people, which naturally made them unsuitable for the Class. As a child, her impatience and drive fuelled her anger, alongside her natural short temper. Later in life, it was the dissolution of her family, the loss of her brother and the absence of her mother that she channelled into the rage as she ran her own delve team and roamed the wilds.

For the moment, she wasn't sure how she should fuel her berserker Class, she had run out of things to be angry about. That is, until her father dropped that surprise on her.

Before she'd left, her mother had given her some advice on managing her rage, cultivating it like a flame.

"It will burn bright some days," she'd said, standing over Morrelia as she gasped for breath after a sparring session, "but that doesn't mean it's strong. Think of your anger like coals, deep in the heart of the fire. People get distracted by the flame, dazzled by it, but that isn't where the heat is. Even when I'm calm, or bored, or happy, deep in here..." she tapped herself on her leather breastplate, "... in here, the coals glow red hot."

Which wasn't the case for ordinary people. Her mother was a freak of nature and one of the strongest women on the planet. A natural born berserker who had once managed to fuel the rage for an entire hour, a record in the Legion.

Too weary to worry about it, she found her way into a tent and fell into the nearest cot, once again failing to undress, causing the wooden supports to creak under the weight of her metal garments. She was so tired, she wouldn't have noticed if it collapsed.

When she woke, she emerged from the tent to find the camp cook had left the stew on the boil and she was more than happy to ladle herself a generous helping, only bothering to pull her helmet off when she realised she couldn't shove her spoon through the opening.

"You probably should clean yourself up a little before we get started."

Titus' voice rang with disapproval but she merely grunted, not pausing in the slightest as she continued to stuff her face. As always, her father was clean shaven and neatly attired, his armour freshly polished and his leathers positively gleaming with a fresh coat of oil.

"Shouldn't you do some fighting?" she asked.

"I was," he said and sat down.

"I'm going to assume your weapon isn't as clean as the rest of you?"

He served himself a pot of stew and started eating.

"It was," he said between mouthfuls, "but like a dutiful legionary, I cleaned it."

She snorted and Titus crooked a smile before his regular, stern expression settled back over his features.

"Classing up," he said.

She groaned.

"Does it have to be now? I feel like garbage."

"I offered to let you clean up," he shrugged, "so here we are. Besides, time wasted is experience lost. As far as I'm aware, you don't have any other major Skill close to increasing in rank, so delaying any longer would be a waste. I think you've driven about as far as you can with your current Class and you should make sure you take advantage of having someone with my level of experience around while it lasts."

She flicked her eyes to him as he said that last part.

"What do you mean by that?" She asked slowly.

Titus shrugged, his eyes still firmly locked on his stew.

"Who knows what my next deployment is going to be, or whether you'll be part of it. If all goes well, you'll be put on the fast track, which usually means deeper deployments. They'll start you on the fourth, then maybe the fifth once you acclimate to the mana. You'll be pushed hard to see if you'll crack and sent against tougher opponents than you've ever seen before."

The slightly smug tone in Titus' voice alerted her to how he felt she would fare against the challenge, but she shared none of his confidence. The fourth strata? The fifth? The monsters at that level were crazy! Not even Anthony would be able to match up to many of them, and he was a giant ass insect covered in literal diamonds!

"I really need to Class Up," she gulped.

Her father nodded.

"That's what I've been saying."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 777: The new way

"You could have told me what was coming," she grouched to her father as they settled into a more private setting, "I might have worked a little harder if I'd realised what the Legion was looking to put me through."

The commander actually laughed. Laughed! She was so befuddled by the rarely heard full-throated chortling of the man who raised her that she couldn't even glare at him properly.

"You've literally been working yourself to the bone since we got here," he eventually stifled his mirth long enough to say. "You haven't taken a break to wash yourself in over a week. You fight like a fury until you conk out and sleep, then get up and do it again. In my eyes, doing any more would be detrimental rather than helpful, so I decided you didn't need to know until now. If you upgrade your Class now, you'll have just enough time to grow used to any new features and Skills you develop by the time the wave ends."

"... and use my increased power to drive my levelling speed even higher during the height of the wave," she added.

"Just so," Titus agreed.

She took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then let it out, trying to drive out all the distracting emotions in her head along with it. She repeated this several times, until she felt calm and clear headed before turning to her father.

"What can I expect?"

Upgrading or changing a person's Class was altering the most fundamental part of their existence and how they integrated with the System. It was never something to be done lightly, and just as Titus had said, not taking advantage of his expertise whilst it was available would be a criminal waste. Her current Class was specific to the Legion itself and knowledge of the paths that branched from her current point was strictly contained, even she didn't have access to most of it and she was a member! But her father did... More than that, her own mother had been a Legion Berserker, just as she was now. She had little doubt that Titus had just as detailed a level of information on the berserker Classes as he did his own.

"You're currently an Legionem Abyssi Berserker, level fifty, correct?" He asked, just to confirm.

She nodded and he continued.

"As far as entry level Classes in the Legion go, the Berserker can be considered second tier, one above the basic level of Armoured Legionary. It does a decent job of marrying the strengths of the Berserker and Legion Armoured combat, but it's far from a perfect union."

It was true. She'd lost some of the benefits of her previous Berserker Class when adopting this new one. Most important being the Class Passive which allowed her to turn mana into anger, the fundamental plank of the berserk tree. Without it, she needed to work much harder to channel her own emotions to

get anywhere near the level of rage she had experienced before. At first she'd thought it was far too crippling a blow, but over time she had grown used to it, though having it back would be amazing.

In return, she'd gained much, primarily access to the Abyssal Armour Skill which allowed her to wear and mesh better with the incredible Runic Armour the Legion provided. Enchantments in the specially crafted berserker set she wore helped mitigate the loss of Mana Rage, whilst simultaneously driving her stats and defence to a level far exceeding what she possessed before.

"The next step is all about iterating and bringing your two key Skills into a better balance," Titus explained, "and there are several ways you can go about that. Do you want to emphasise the Legionary side and boost the performance of your armour? There are several advanced Skills that are required before you can utilise the best suits we have, and if you ever want to wear one, this is the path you'll need to go down."

She drew a slow breath when she realised what he was talking about, just to calm herself down. Praetorian armour. The legendary equipment worn only by the most elite Legionaries in the most dangerous parts of the Dungeon. She'd never lain eyes on a set, if fact, none of the Legionaries from Liria had, even the veterans. Except perhaps...

Her eyes flicked to her father, but his face was a stern mask once more, unreadable.

She tsked audibly but he didn't react. The full details of Titus' service record were sealed to someone of her rank and he'd never been open about it. His exploits in the upper strata were well known and he was happy to talk about them, but what her parents had done and been before moving to the surface? Barely a word.

"The other way to go is to push further into the Berserker side," he continued, "which won't cut you off from later picking up better armour Skills but will significantly delay them. On the flip side, you'll have more raw power at hand that isn't dependent on your equipment."

Power was always dependant on equipment, every Legionary knew that well. No matter the level of Skills a person accumulated for themselves, there was no chance their skin was going to become more durable than a set of well-made armour reinforced with enchantments. A person could never become as dangerous with their fist as they could with a weapon, though it was possible to go close.

"The third possibility, is that you take a Class that will add something else into the mix, give you access to Skills you will find more valuable as you progress. Whether that be an alternate combat style, leadership Skills or something else you think might be necessary to achieve what your end goal."

"Do you have anything you would recommend on that front?" Morrelia asked.

He shook his head.

"I don't want to influence your decision too strongly. The System is generous when it comes to combining Skills and if you build the foundation of the final Class you envision, then it will almost certainly exist. There are tried and true combinations, but even then the details of the Classes can differ from person to person. Your achievements, circumstances, personality and desires can all come into play when the System offers Classes."

"Don't I want to avoid taking a lower tier Class?" She asked. "I'd be stuck with low stat gain, grinding out another twenty levels, for what?"

"Gaining twenty levels on the third strata during a wave isn't going to take long," he pointed out, waving a hand at the chaos of the third stratum around them, "and if it means you get to take a fourth or fifth tier Class that is more suited to what you envision for yourself, it will definitely be worth it."

Hearing this, she sunk deep into thought as she tried to consider all the possibilities that would be available to her. It had been much easier when she was younger. All she'd had to do when maxing out her Class was choose the next in line, promoting it to a more advanced variant of itself. In this way she went from Warrior to Initiate Berserker to Berserker. She'd dipped sideways and levelled Novice Ranger and Shallow Delver to get access to Skills that would help her survive in the wilds and Dungeon respectively before returning to the tier four Class Rage Berserker.

Her current Class had been a sideways shift and it was likely the most powerful choice she would have available would be a tier five Class that combined what she currently had with her highest Berserker Class. The other path her father had described, leaning more heavily into the Legionary Skills and armour, would likely be a tier four Class that might see her abandon her Rage Skills entirely, focusing more on becoming heavy infantry. It would mean forty levels of grinding before she would get the chance to Class Up again, but there would be little doubt the fifth tier Class option that merged her Legionary and Berserker Classes would be better.

The third suggestion was even more extreme, in terms of time taken, despite what Titus said. Taking a third path, a weaker, basic Class, then levelling it up would be easy enough to do where they were, but that was only for the initial ranks. If she wanted this third Skillset to meaningfully impact her options at the fifth tier, then she would need to promote that Class through several tiers, not just one. To raise it all the way to tier four would mean almost a hundred levels worth of experience! It was a big ask, and she wasn't even totally sure what sort of third path she might choose...

She'd already been offered leadership style Classes in the past, being in command of her own delving team had more than likely been the catalyst that unlocked them for her, but she'd never taken the option. She was certain both her father and mother had gone down this road at some point, though how far, she had no idea. They were useful Classes, to be sure, and likely a requirement if she wanted to rise far in the ranks of the Legion. At basic levels, these Classes gave access to speech Skills, making the leader more persuasive, but as they advanced, they became much more potent, granting Skills that could increase tactical acumen, or even buff Skills that applied when giving orders in the thick of battle.

The real question was, what did she want? What would she be happy with? Would she be content just being the best Berserker she could be? A deadly killing machine that the Legion could reliably point in whatever direction they wanted and sit back while she went to work? She might have thought so a few years ago, but now? Ever since she had met Anthony and the Colony, she had found this idea more and more distasteful. Her world view had changed and being a mindless warrior of fury no longer appealed to her as it once had. Her life had undergone massive shifts over the past year, so much so that it was sometimes a shock her head wasn't spinning.

Now she was in a place where she needed to decide who she was, and what she wanted to be, and the answers to those questions had changed so much that she didn't have any confidence.

Chrysalis

Chapter 778: What happens when the water recedes

The battle yet raged, a full hearted defence of the Colony demanded the attention and resources of every caste and every council member worked (almost) around the clock to ensure the family would ride through the trouble, greater and stronger than ever before. In many ways, the current Colony was like an egg, a hard shell on the outside, protecting what lay within from the storm as they grew and developed.

Although the war was waged against the Dungeon in a constant battle of attrition, inside the territory claimed by the ants, a different narrative was playing out. Unprecedented growth. The wave brought challenges, obviously, but it also brought more food, more cores, more experience and an opportunity. With the castes bringing in previously unheard of levels of resources every day, all of it was being funnelled into an absurd population explosion. Much like a chicken nestled within the borders of its shell, the Colony was getting ready to hatch.

In fact, Cobalt mused, that this might well be the second largest transformation to take place within the family since the Eldest had changed their species and put them onto their current path. Not only would the population of the Colony more than doubled by the time the wave was complete, the number of higher tier ants would also have seen a similar increase. Against all odds, the brood tenders had gone above and beyond, finding ways to budget the required cores and succeeded in realising the Eldest's ambition of having each hatchling graduate the academy at tier four. A monumental achievement that would change the fate of every ant. To manage to do this at a time when egg production had skyrocketed was mind boggling to the carver and she could only dip her antennae in awe to the efforts of Theresant and Florence.

The strength of the Colony as a whole had risen to an entirely new dimension, and it would only continue to rise from this point forward. Cobalt herself was currently under extreme pressure to finalise the designs and preparation work for four new satellite nests that were due to begin construction the very second the wave receded. Teams had already been assigned, the workers prepared to drop their current tasks and rush to assemble when the word came through. Resources were being stockpiled, Queens being raised and guard detachments organised. As a matter of fact, last she'd heard from Antionette, the eight new Queens had already evolved to the fifth tier, the same as every other Queen in the Colony. The decision to put a massive priority on the tier of the Queens had already paid dividends, bringing their egg-laying capacity higher and allowing them to further develop the mutations which increased the stats of their offspring and allowed them to produce eggs more efficiently.

Cobalt raced around the model of the nest she was currently working on, her eyes pouring over every detail as she considered every angle. This was the final draft of the third nest and she wanted to ensure it was perfect before she moved onto the final design. Immaculately carved and shaped in hardened stone, the massive model weighed over a ton and was an exact scale representation of the new nest and the surrounding Dungeon, down to the finest details. Spotting an error, she clacked her mandibles in irritation before bringing one antennae forward, charging it with earth mana as she smoothed down one section of tunnel by a millimetre.

"Surely it's ready by now?" huffed Sloan from behind her. "I need to brief my generals and I've already been waiting here for ten minutes!"

"I don't rush your work," Cobalt chided her sister as she reached into the network of tunnels connecting the chambers in the model before her and shaved off another tiny fraction of stone. "Would you have the new Queens take residence in a less than perfect nest?"

The idea of short-changing the Queens was certainly not something that Sloan wanted to have on her conscience at all, they were the future of the Colony after all. She shifted in place for a few long seconds before she spoke again.

"Are your carvers even able to notice such tiny changes to the design?"

Cobalt chuckled as a few of her assistants turned to look at the general with genuine disdain in their eyes.

"Absolutely," she told her sibling. "They aren't really using their eyes to examine the model, but their mana sense. The stone is infused with earth mana which they can detect with minute precision. Once this master design is complete, eight copies will be constructed by my fellow carvers here and each will be a perfect replica, down to the level of mana in every square centimetre. We've gotten pretty damn good at this you know?"

She finally stepped back from the model with a satisfied waggle of her antennae.

"There, finally done."

Without another word, the eight waiting carvers got to work, leaping onto the eight prepared blocks of stone and ripping into them with mandibles and earth magic as they raced to complete their own models. These would be the eight carvers in charge of producing this nest and they took their responsibilities very seriously indeed.

"Why isn't Tungstant in here helping out anyway?" Sloan asked.

Cobalt sighed.

"There has been a lot of movement at the checkpoints as garrisons have been pushed back. The amount of frontline repair work that's been required has more than doubled over the last week, so we decided one of us should move closer to the hotspots to help coordinate construction efforts."

"Makes sense," the general replied, her mind turning to her own experiences at the checkpoints, "not long to go though, we only need to hold on a little longer."

"Not long to go," the carver echoed, already thinking of the next design she needed to complete.

"Alright then, bring your generals in, you can brief them while the carvers work, it won't distract them."

"If you're sure..."

"I am."

"Alright then."

With a wave of an antenna, a dozen of the smaller soldier caste entered the chamber and huddled around the model as their senior general began to detail their next major duty, managing the garrison of this new nest and the difficult work of protecting the carvers as they worked on constructing it. It would

be a difficult task, but that was the kind the ants most craved. Moving into the next chamber through a narrow opening, Cobalt stopped to behold the half-finished design her sibling had begun work on before she'd left. It would take hours to go over the nuances and tease out the partially formed ideas and concepts that Tungstant had been working on, then hours more, with a great deal of trial and error, before she could bring those elements to fruition.

Each nest was a product of its environment after all, there were so many things to consider, so many variables that were unique to the location of the nest. Where would the tunnels converge? Where could the natural features of the terrain be utilised to better defend the nest? Where would Biomass, minerals and other resources be taken into the nest? Where were the nearest hunting grounds? The quality of the rock, the stability of the soil, all things that needed to be considered. She moved over the half-formed sculpture as if in a trance, sensing its flow and direction with her antennae as well as her mind. Hours later she brought her antennae forward and brushed away a portion of stone, her first alteration. An hour after that, she used her fore-claw to pinch off a section of tunnel, then resumed her communion.

Slowly, but with an accelerating pace, she got to work. By the day's end, the model would be complete and another eight copies would be produced. Within the shell, the Colony continued to develop at a rapid pace. Soon would come the time they would emerge as an entirely new creature. Cobalt was confident that the Dungeon wasn't ready for what was about to come.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 779: War Planning

"How long have you got?" Advant asked, her scent distracted and her antennae wavering busily back and forth.

"Not long," replied Brendant, similarly occupied, "I'm only off shift for under an hour and I had to travel to get here."

"I also have a lot of places to be," Victor looked tired but a determined light sparkled in her eyes.

"I don't know why you don't have that much time, I usually have heaps of time. Although I suppose I do move a lot faster than you. Maybe you just need to move faster? Or talk faster? You all talk *reeaaaaally* slow and it's quite annoying, you know? I'm here waiting for you to finish waaay after I've worked out what your trying to say but it would be rude to interrupt, right? *Is that a monster?* No... Anyway. What was I saying? Oh yeah! You're all too slow! Try being faster!"

Advant wavered in the face of the onslaught of pheromones from Vibrant before she firmed her stance and managed to process half of what her older sister had said.

"We aren't too slow, you're just too fast!" she retorted and the others each nodded their heads.

Vibrant's evolution had only exacerbated her need for speed, and the combination of mutations and organs she had allowed her mind and reactions to keep up with her speed, which meant that quite literally she was operating on a faster pace than the rest of them.

"I do think we should try and converse a little faster, just to help Vibrant keep track of things," suggested Victor and the others agreed. Maybe they'd also get through more of their agenda if they spoke faster?

"The idea of this gathering is to lay the groundwork for our intentions once the wave is complete," intoned Victor, calling the semi-council meeting to order. "Obviously we don't want to make any final decisions now, but we can work out how each of us feel the next steps should be and then go from there. I'll open the floor, please feel free to share your thoughts."

So saying, the general stepped back and gave the others space to voice their opinions. Surprisingly, it was the healer, Mendant, who stepped forward next.

"The real question isn't necessarily, 'what will the Colony do?', but 'what should the Colony prioritise'. Our family will continue to grow and expand, even without our input from this point forward. There have been protocols and norms established for most basic processes, and despite our sophistication, we are still monstrous ants. The desire to expand and secure the next generation is built into us. We need to be thinking about what *our priorities* are going to be and how we can influence our siblings. We are guides rather than commanders, remember."

So saying the diminutive healer stepped back in place and allowed the others to digest her words. Advant was the next to speak her piece.

"I agree with what Mendant had to say. The Colony has grown beyond the point where we will be able to be aware of everything that goes on and influence every decision. Instead, we need to place ourselves on the forefront of the Colony's most important initiatives so we can assist as much as possible."

It was an important moment for the Council and the realisation they had come to would be fundamental for the way they would operate in the future. Indeed, the Colony had grown in size to the point where it was much too difficult for the twenty of them to adequately be in touch with all of the goings on of their own caste. Even for the Queens, who were the smallest in number, this was difficult, since they didn't travel between nests to communicate with each other.

Instead of trying to grasp at authority, the council instead opted to narrow their focus and trust that the Colony would be able to handle itself. It had the Eldest as its guiding light after all. There was no ant who would willingly betray the will of their most senior member.

They each reflected on this idea for a moment before Burke stepped forward.

"The Colony will continue to expand, and it will continue to descend. I believe that is where our focus should be. We can only be safe from those who would attack us if we have sufficient strength to defend ourselves. That means we must be aggressive in seeking that strength for ourselves. The third strata is the natural evolution of this quest. Even without our influence, there will be expeditions launched down there, so we should commit ourselves to guiding this effort."

"But what sort of expeditions will be sent? Resource gathering? Scouting? Biomass harvesting? What exactly are we hoping to achieve down there?" Coolant asked, stepping forward for the first time. "We need to be clear about our goals otherwise we will be at cross purposes."

Each of the members present sunk into thought once more. The future of the Colony wouldn't be decided here and now, but it was an important moment nonetheless. What was the plan of action? What were their intentions? The Colony had risen to a new level of strength, but how would that strength be applied.

It was several long minutes before Advant stepped forward.

"War," she said.

There was a long pause as the scent of that word hung in the air.

"Against who? For what purpose?" Burke asked.

"Whoever we find, for however long we need it," Advant spoke determinedly. "We have been on the defensive for a long time, but now is our chance to go on the offensive. We need to take and hold the territory and resources we will need to grow powerful to protect us from that which will threaten us."

She stepped forward once more until she was in the centre of the circle, pivoting slowly to look each of her fellow council members directly in the eye.

"I propose we invade the third strata in overwhelming force. We smash any who would stand in our way and leave in peace those who mean us no harm. We cannot be afraid anymore. If we stay in the upper levels of the Dungeon and huddle close to our nests, we'll be destroyed eventually by a power too great for us to resist. The Eldest has helped prime us for this opportunity, but now is the time when we must be bold and seize the moment."

It was stirring rhetoric and each of the listeners thought deeply on what was said. The meeting ended not long after, each of the ants returning to the thousands of tasks that they still needed to complete before the wave died down at last. As they worked, each of them had the same thought swimming through their minds.

War.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 780: Getting down in the tunnels

The thing about the tunnels in the second stratum is that they're freezing cold, like really cold. What's more, when you get this deep, they reek of death mana, which when combined by the near total darkness makes them a rather unpleasant place to be. It's like being in a graveyard at night where it's permanently raining. As an insect, I can't say that this is the most pleasant environment for me, though I don't suffer as much as a regular ant would.

I mean, if us monstrous ants were that susceptible to temperature, the entire Colony would have gone straight into hibernation the moment we got too cold.

With the rising mana levels of the wave, the stink of death, which is usually more of a background scent, has risen to be an all-consuming assault on the senses, magical and mundane. Even worse than the smell? The monsters.

[Watch out behind you Tiny! You can't just hit 'em once! You need to turn them into paste!] I yell at the ape.

With a surprised grunt of irritation, Tiny turns around to see that the zombified mountain of flesh he'd thought was finished had gotten back up again to try and claw at his back. Hands igniting with energy, the giant ape unleashes a flurry of punches so fast his hands blur and the air comes alight with fists

formed of his energy that pummel the monster into a blob, but he doesn't stop until he hears the notification, whereupon he nods to himself in satisfaction before flicking the muck off his fists.

I thought I'd seen the worst of the death monsters the second stratum had to offer, but I was far from correct. The generic sort of monster that housed death mana that we'd encountered was usually little more than a shadow beast that had a few too many bones sticking out, and more guts hanging out than one would expect to see. These types though?

[Invidia! Gimme the boom!]

[Yessssss! Give me your screamsssss!]

BOOM!

The monster I had gripped in my mandibles, pinning the serpentine creature covered in writhing strings of guts, detonates right in the middle, sending a shower of gristly guts flying through the air. The monster shrieks in what I'm pretty darn sure is not pain as its face of exposed bone tries to take a bite out of me. Oh no you don't! Eat flame! A burning jet of pure blue fire ignites in front of me and burns the creature's face as I apply more pressure with my mandibles.

Crunch!

With a horrific sound of snapping bone the monster's face disintegrates as the fire burns it away and voice of Gandalf rings out in my head at last. Gah! I'm sick of these damn zombie monsters! They're so damn hard to kill! It's not like they even regenerate or anything, they just don't stop! Slice one in half, it keeps on moving. Blow them up? Still moving. Just like in the classics, the only way to finally get them to stop is to destroy whatever houses the brain, be it the head or whatever else they have going on.

Burn you darn pains in the neck!

Using all of my brains, I concentrate hard and blast out three jets of fire at once, pushing back the darkness and burning away the cold, along with a handful of monsters. Gweheheheh! Yessss! Burn for me! Won't be long until that pupa hatches and I have a new little student to teach the ways of the Dungeon and Colony as well. Man, so much to do!

[Master! They're still swarming on this side!]

[Still?! Are you able to get rid of them!?!]

[I'm holding them off, but they're still coming!]

Holy moly!

[Hold on, I'm on the way! Invidia and Tiny, you need to hold down this side for a while!]

I race toward the other side of the three way junction we've been holding toward the left side where Crinis has been slaughtering her way through the crush of monsters by herself. After all, mass de-limbing is something of her speciality. When I get there I see a wall of tentacles thrashing and twisting around hundreds of monsters, each roaring and tearing with maddened fury. In the few glimpses I get through the chaos I can see the tunnel beyond is completely filled with creatures tearing at each other in their rage and desire to push upward.

This is never ending! It's been bad the last few days, but this is just madness!

[Hold them for a minute, Crinis! I'll give them a bomb!]

[Got it, Master!]

Throwing away all my constructs and residual fire mana, I task all of my minds with one particular job: drawing out and crushing my gravity mana. With all of my brains working together, we can crunch one together pretty darn quick! Standing still, I allow Crinis to protect me as she works double time holding the monsters back, giving me time and space to work.

A minute later, doom announces its presence to the monsters with its signature welcome.

HOOOOOOOOWLLLLL!

[Crinis! Get out of the way and brace!]

The bomb rotates with slow grace as it flies through the air, vanishing amidst the grasping claws of the onrushing monsters before it expands into an all devouring sphere of death. When the dust finally clears and the ring of notifications in my head has finally stopped the tunnel is clear. A tiny bit of breathing space before the crush starts again.

[How are you doing on flesh, Crinis?]

[I'm getting low.]

[Eat what you can while the numbers are low. It won't be long un-... what was that?]

Before I finish warning Crinis, my mana sense goes crazy as a huge pulse of energy floods through the Dungeon, racing up from the depths and past our position in less than a second.

[Did you pick up on that Crinis?] I ask her. With her much finer mana senses, she's sure to pick up on it better than I did.

[I did! Master, check the mana levels!] she cheers in my mind, full of exuberance.

In fact, her tentacles are doing a little dance as she hangs off the wall. What is going on? As she suggested, I turn my attention to the ambient mana around me, recoiling from the overwhelming fog of death mana that lays over us. I... don't think anything is different? Or is ... wait... wait?!

[It's going down?] I ask, almost not willing to believe it.

[It's going down!] Crinis confirms, flinging her limbs into the air in celebration.

Oh so slowly, the mana level is creeping down, which means the wave is coming to an end! The moment the realisation hits me, my heart starts thudding in my carapace and I unconsciously turn to face the tunnels leading deeper into the Dungeon, excitement building inside me. It's finally going to end, after *weeks* of this nonsense! No longer are we going to be chained to these damned tunnels fighting the same monsters over and over again! I can't wait for a change of scenery!

I'm seriously looking forward to a warmer climate coming my way once we go lower, and I am determined to go lower. There's just something about this life that makes me want to keep pushing. I

mean, it's not like I let things get me too down in the last one either, but this one is different. The things I've seen, the things I've been able to do, it's incredible. I don't often slow down to reflect on it, but the changes I've experienced in this life, ignoring the difference between my current incarnation and the previous, just within this second lifetime, I don't know... it makes me hungry for more.

I want to keep delving, I want to keep pushing further. I want to get into trouble, fly into danger, then fight my way out with Tiny, Crinis and Invidia by my side. I want to Grow stronger to defend my family. I want my family to become strong enough to defend themselves. I want more friends, Gandalf knows I could do with more of those. I have two lifetimes worth to accumulate, after all.

What's more, I want to see. I want to see what lives in the middle of this Dungeon. I want to see the heart of this planet and I want to see the most powerful monsters in existence, the slumbering Ancients. Wouldn't you?! A worm who can swallow a mountain?! I mean come on! This is only the beginning. I have everything I need, and soon enough, the Colony isn't going to need me to take care of them anymore. Not all the time at any rate.

Whatever's down there, I'm coming. There's no chance you're going to be ready when I get there!