

Chrysalis 1161

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Chapter 1161: Hype Train

The entire city was abuzz about the upcoming match. Among the humans who made their homes within the nest, several hundred at this point, there was little conversation about anything else. The Great One, as the ant was usually referred to by the people of Renewal, hadn't been seen by the people for a long time. Even aside from the new, fanatical following that Tunnel Ball had created, every human who could get a ticket would have shown up just to see the famous ant in the flesh.

"OH GREAT ONE! BLESS US WITH YOUR GLORIOUS PRESENCE!"

"We praise the Great One!"

"YOU ARE MIGHTY! A CREATURE OF CHITIN AND POWER, WHERE WE ARE FLESH AND WEAK!"

"Reforge us in your image!"

Peter watched the gathered crowd of the faithful from a... safe distance. Priest Beyn had practically begun vibrating the moment he'd learned the object of his faith would be within his sight once more. The preaching had begun immediately, and hadn't stopped for the last ten hours. The farmer had thought they'd run out of steam, but, if anything, they'd gained momentum as the time ticked past.

"Looking forward to the match, Peter?"

Someone called from behind him and he turned, smiling, to answer the question.

"Very much so," he said sincerely.

"What do you expect will happen?"

It wasn't the first time he'd been asked that question since the announcement, or the hundredth, and his answer had been the same every time.

"I have no idea," he said. "I know I'm supposed to be the expert, but I just don't know."

The old man who'd spoken to him sucked his teeth in, a pensive expression on his face.

"I was hoping you'd have some advice, I was looking to put a wager on the game...."

Peter frowned.

"You know how the Colony feels about that."

The old man raised his hands defensively.

"Just a little flutter. There ain't no harm in it.'

"That's not how they see it."

Gambling wasn't anything unusual amongst the humans, and with a new and exciting contest on the scale of nothing they'd seen before, betting had sprung up almost overnight. In the Colony's eyes, it was an utter waste of time and resources. The practice confused them more than anything else, and they

would have ignored it if not for the unrest it caused within the nest. Humans losing all their money, or going into debt, or fighting outside the Stadium... it was a shameful sight.

Commentant had mentioned to him that the Colony was close to banning betting on Tunnel Ball entirely, and he honestly hoped they would.

“OH GREAT ONE! WE ARE PRIVILEGED TO WITNESS YOUR SUPERLATIVE GREATNESS!”

“We humble ourselves before your glory!”

Peter sighed. They weren't going to stop until the match started. Possibly, they wouldn't even stop then, he realised.

“Ah, are you Peter? The Tunnel Ball commentator?”

Another voice, probably to ask him for a prediction for the upcoming match. He turned with a smile. If it was about Tunnel Ball, he never got bored of talking.

“That's me,” he said. “And I have no idea what will happen in the match.”

A young woman frowned quizzically at him.

“Okay? I was sent to find you. Are you free at the moment?”

“Uh, yes?”

“Fantastic, could you come with me, please?”

She turned and led him to the edge of the relatively open human compound the Colony had built and towards the more narrow tunnels that led deeper into the nest. Two ants waited there and he felt a mind bridge connect as he drew near.

[If you could follow us.]

[Can I ask where we are going?] he thought.

[There is one who is in need of your expertise regarding Tunnel Ball. We hope you don't mind.]

[No, it's fine.]

This wasn't so unusual. He'd been asked to educate ants many times about the game. They were fascinated by the cultural practice, and the Colony seemed to think they could determine why it was so popular by examining the rules in granular detail. He'd heard there was a theory among the ants that there was something about the pit the game was played in that was satisfying to the human psyche.

If he was honest, he couldn't explain why the game had caught on as much as it had, but he could speak endlessly on what *he* found enjoyable about it.

Through the tunnels they went, blending into the endless winding traffic of the nest until Peter found himself staring, slack-jawed, up at the biggest ant he had ever seen.

The monster towered over him, each mandible the length of his entire body, the antennae three times that length. Its dark compound eyes seemed to stare straight through him, and as it turned, he would swear the light seemed to weaken as it neared the ant's carapace.

[So you're the guy? The Tunnel Ball expert? I'm Anthony. Sorry to drag you out here, but I'm supposed to play a match tomorrow and I've got no idea what the rules are....]

Peter couldn't bring himself to speak for a long moment, and he felt the giant ant's thoughts turn to concern over the bridge before he managed to get a coherent sentence together in his mind.

[S-s-s-so you're the... Great One?]

[Are they still calling me that? Holy Moly. Look, I'm Anthony, the Colony likes to call me the Eldest, which is mainly a technicality, but whatever. Just use my name.]

[O-o-ok.... And you're going to play against the Endless? In Tunnel Ball?]

[Yyyyes? That's literally what I came up here to do. My core is leaking power right now, I ain't here on vacation, that's for sure.]

In the back of his mind, Peter had never actually believed the Endless would lose. He'd seen them play so many times, and their strategy and execution were flawless, to a point where he'd begun to think they might never fail.

Now, looking up at this colossus, he couldn't imagine a way they could possibly win.

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Chapter 1162: Final Preparations

Turns out the rules are pretty straightforward. I question the poor man for far too long, getting him to explain the foundations of the game and how it's developed over time, as well as asking him about my specific opponent.

As expected of a Champion general, it appears that Solant has already developed quite the reputation for devious strategies, trickery and ingenious tactics. The twenty members of her training group have followed her, forming the core of her following, and they rotate members in and out of the team depending on the opposition and the way they want to play.

It's hardly going to be enough against me, of course, but their undefeated streak is certainly impressive. Even as superior hatchlings, who are significantly weaker, stats-wise, than regular tier two ants, they still wouldn't lose.

In terms of the rules....

[Are you *sure* that only basic elemental magic is allowed?] I ask for the tenth time.

The poor chap nods wearily.

[The game has its origins as a training exercise for hatchlings. The young mages are restricted by the Colony to only the basic elements, so those are all that have ever been allowed....]

[Hmph.]

I could end the match instantly with a gravity well, flattening the Endless to the floor and walking on top of them to score at the other end. It would have been glorious! Those plans are out the window, dammit.

[Considering I'm playing as a one ant team, they really should make allowances and let me use whatever I want.]

Peter just shrugs.

[I couldn't say anything about that, I wasn't involved in organising the match. I do think it's reasonable that you are handicapped, though....]

[More like *mandicapped*. We don't have hands, remember?]

I clack my mandibles to demonstrate and the poor man flinches back from the sharp cracking sound that emanates from them.

[Alright. So if I'm on offence, and I drop the ball, or can no longer advance it, my turn is up and I switch to defence, right?]

[Yes.]

[And if I manage to get the ball to touch the other wall, I score a point?]

[That's right.]

[What happens if I crush the ball?]

A very real risk, considering my strength.

[You lose your turn on offence. You have to protect the ball from the opponent, that's part of the game.]

So I can successfully defend by destroying the ball while the Endless have it? That should make it easy enough.

[This was included in the training exercise to train mages about controlling mana,] Peter enthusiastically elaborates. [If you can't control the mana around your own team, then you risk being unable to advance at all. Likewise, controlling the mana around your opponent is a powerful advantage. There are several mage-heavy teams who use this as their primary strategy. In fact...]

Hmmmm. Well, if the opponent is smart, they'll bring along four mages at least if they want to contend with me. In fact, if they don't bring at least that many, I'll smash them with superior mana control. I'm no slouch at elemental magic, after all.

[Other than that, there's basic safety rules in place. No killing, removing legs, blinding or any other such shenanigans?]

[Ah... yes. Although in some training exercises, the ants were allowed to cause non-fatal damage, for the *sport* of Tunnel Ball, the less... violent version of the game was adopted.]

Fair enough.

[Are there limits to how much I can modify the terrain?]

[You may not exceed the height of the pit.]

[Hmmm. Well, thank you for your time. If you see priest Beyn out there, tell him I said to shut up. I know he's going nuts out there, he's bothering people.]

Peter smiles in relief, then his face takes on a slightly green shade. I guess he's happy he can tell the one-armed idiot to be quiet, but isn't too happy to be the one bearing the news.

[Ask one of the Colony to pass the message on,] I advise him.

He nods, relieved.

[I'll do that. Thank you.]

[Nono, thank you.]

As the elder farmer takes his leave, I reach out with my senses and grab hold of the thread I'm after. Here in the nest, my Vestibule is absolutely jam packed with incoming Will. An absolute ocean of the stuff, pouring into me every second. Discerning one ant from another in that tidal wave of energy isn't easy, but I've had my constructs picking through it all for ages until I managed to grab hold of the few I was looking for.

The Endless, obviously. It's not really cheating if I spy on them like this, right? I'm allowed to use my abilities, just as they are allowed to use theirs. It's not like they aren't trying to spy on me right now, after all.

She's doing a good job of it. The scout managed to sneak into the chamber while I was talking with Peter and is currently positioned in the shadows in one corner, doing her level best to remain as still as possible as she observes me.

I *could* try and pass on a heap of false information, but I hardly think I need to.

"Leonidant."

...

"Leonidant...."

...

No reply.

Irritated, I turn to face her directly.

"Oi. Answer me already."

...

Still nothing. Does she really think she's hidden?!

THWACK!

"Ouch!"

“How many times do I have to address you before you answer me?” I demand. “What about showing respect to your Eldest?”

“I thought you were guessing....”

The little scout rubs at her head with a foreleg as I glare down at her.

“I don’t need to guess,” I state haughtily. “I know where you are and what you’re thinking at all times. The same is true for each and every member of the Endless. I can tell you what Solant is plotting down to the finest detail.”

She stills.

“That... shouldn’t be possible,” she says slowly.

“You’re barely hatched!” I declare incredulously. “The things you know couldn’t fill a thimble! You think because no other team of newly hatched weaklings can beat you that you’ve achieved something special? That you have something to show *me*?”

I scoff.

“Run back to the others and get ready for the match. I need to try and refill my core. Shoo!”

I push her towards the exit with one antenna as I sit and begin to manipulate the mana around me, actively pulling it inward and forcing it into my core.

“The Eldest can read our intentions, you say?” Solant asked intently.

“That’s what they seemed to suggest. They said they knew exactly what you were planning.”

“It isn’t necessarily true,” the general pointed out, “just because the Eldest knew where you were doesn’t mean they can sense our locations and intentions all the way across the nest. The one doesn’t lead to the other at all. Perhaps the Eldest is simply very good at detecting stealthed monsters.”

“It *is* possible,” Leonidant said hesitantly.

To the scout, having been so close to the massive ant, it was difficult to believe there were any limits on a creature that powerful. Solant seemed to sense the scout’s hesitation.

“Don’t worry,” she comforted her, “the Eldest is of course the mightiest of all the Colony, but they are restricted by the rules of the game. Much of their power is sealed.”

“That’s... true.”

“The question is, what counter measures should we take if it turns out the Eldest was telling the truth? If they can read our intentions, then we’ll need to prepare plans within plans. This could prove to be a most interesting distraction.”

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Chapter 1163: Rocking the Stadium

When the Colony goes all in on something, they really do go all in. I was obviously aware of that, but seeing the gigantic stadium that they’ve built to host games somehow still manages to shock me.

Did they really need to go *this* hard? Holy moly. The thing is enormous!

And there are ants *everywhere*. As well as people! I was asked to head to the venue well ahead of the game, there's a waiting area for the teams before they go out onto the pitch apparently, but as I make my way over, the place is already packed!

The second I step out in the cavern that holds the stadium, a great cheer goes up from the gathered humans, and even the ants start clacking their mandibles in appreciation! Apparently, they learned to mimic clapping? There's tens of thousands gathered already, and the game isn't for four hours.

I pick my way through the crowd carefully, essentially walking above them, placing my legs in whatever gaps I can find.

"Nice to see you all. How've you been? Shouldn't some of you be working?"

"Speak for yourself!"

"Oi! I *am* here to work!"

And thus, Tunnel Ball officially became classified as work for the participants.

It was rather embarrassing being the centre of attention in all that, but once I make my way beneath the stadium and away from all those prying eyes, I feel a lot more comfortable.

Back in the day, when I was a lot smaller, it wasn't that hard to move through a group or area without being ogled to quite such a degree. Now that I tower above every other ant and human, things have gotten a little more difficult.

Even here, beneath the stadium, I can hear the crowd gathering overhead. There's a steady drumbeat of feet, and a resonant click-clack of claws, for *hours*. In the chamber itself, I focus on keeping my core topped, pulling in the mana of the second stratum, to try and overcome the amount leaking out of me.

The mana in my core is so much more dense than that in the atmosphere around me, energy is constantly being drained by my highly evolved body, and the rate of replacement simply can't keep up. Only by actively seizing energy and pulling it in can I maintain an equilibrium. If that wasn't bad enough, I have the Call, more powerful than I've ever felt it before, yanking on my spirit, demanding I go deeper down into the Dungeon to meet the Ancients' requirements.

Those bums.

It's incredibly, mind-bendingly painful, but my willpower has grown strong! I can handle it. By... a bit. The sooner I can get this match over with and drag our new champion down into the depths with me, the better.

After stewing in the waiting room, I'm absolutely raring to get going by the time the match comes around. The noise overhead is deafening at this point, a constant dull roar. I have no idea how many people are out there, or ants, for that matter. I can feel the vibrations, through the walls. My antennae are steadily going crazy. So many vibrations, rattling through the stone, rumbling through the air. The fine hairs along my feelers are practically dancing.

"Eldest, we're ready for you."

“Finally...”

I pull my legs back under my body and push, levering myself up from the position I had flopped onto the ground. No need to waste energy.

I transform from a limp fish to a dignified Eldest in a second! Gweheheheh. Now to really dazzle the crowd!

I move into a narrow tunnel, in which I barely fit, that connects the waiting area to the pitch, weaving magic as I do. The exit from the tunnel is blazingly bright ahead of me, illuminating the field beyond. As I emerge into the open, my legs are barely touching the ground.

The roar that greets me as I leave the tunnel is unlike anything I’ve ever heard. There are thousands of humans here, perhaps tens of thousands. I didn’t even realise we had so many! Have we conquered more cities in the first and second strata without me even knowing about it?

And high above, covering the dome-shaped ceiling, there are thousands upon thousands of ants, a hundred thousand at least, rustling and climbing over each other as they clack their mandibles in approbation.

How could I let my audience down?

Rising majestically into the air, I float upward, pulled by a well I have cunningly inverted to disguise the spell. The crowd gasps in shock and admiration as I take to the skies, rising up to become level with the tiered rows of seating, and then higher still, until I can happily slap antennae with the ants on the roof!

BWAHAHAHAHA! Behold my flying majesty!

I gradually lower myself down, attempting to maintain a dignified pose in the air as I do so. Only then do I spy the Endless at the other end of the pitch, watching me drift down towards them with a clear and calm gleam to their eyes.

Oho.... Here are today’s victims. And I see Solant, right in the middle, her eyes revealing the calculations running at a million miles an hour within her mind.

No matter how much you think, it won’t be enough!

My claws finally touch down and I release the gravity well. Dominating entrance, successful.

Holy moly, my core is low....

The Endless approach the midline and I realise I’m supposed to meet them there, trundling forward even as I hastily suck in more mana to replace what I lost.

“Greetings, Eldest,” Leonidant says, stepping forward to greet me respectfully.

I look down at them.

“This is going to be an interesting day for you all. A lot of new experiences are coming your way.”

“I-I’m not sure what you mean?” Leonidant hesitates.

I rub my antennae together gleefully.

“You’ve never had a match quite like this, right? Ten against one? In front of a crowd like this?”

“That’s true,” she nods.

“And of course, you’ve never lost before either. Try to make things interesting, Solant. I didn’t come all the way up here to be bored! GWEHEHEHEH!”

I taunt them with a loud mandible clack, right in their faces.

“You can start on offence, if you want, Eldest,” Solant says suddenly.

“Gladly.”

I turn and make my way back to my side of the pitch. I can’t wait to unleash my power upon these opponents and send the crowd into glorious rapture!

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Chapter 1164: Match Begins

It was often stated by Jordant that her greatest regret was not being able to play against the Eldest. She was there when they played their one and only game, and could only say the match was... indescribable.

- Excerpt from ‘History of the Greatest’ by Commentant.

[Hello Peter, it’s nice to see you again for another live recording of this history-making match.]

“Commentant. Wonderful to be with you, as always, and I must say I can’t begin to describe the excitement here in the Stadium as these two teams make their final preparations.

“It’s a full house here, as you might expect, and to you, the listener at home, just listen to the rumbling and clacking of this crowd. I can barely hear myself speak and the match hasn’t even started yet.”

[Interesting you say ‘these teams’, when in fact, we only have one team here today. The Endless, undefeated, of course, have fielded a mage-heavy lineup, hoping to counteract the superior mana control of their singular opponent. The Eldest, of course, is totally by themselves! The strongest, most highly evolved, and the *first* of the formica sapiens, the Eldest holds a special place in the Colony, and I dare say most of my siblings are here today in support of their senior.]

“It’s a fascinating arrangement. This could be the only time in history that this Stadium sees a one-ant team take to the pitch. Tunnel Ball, as we all know, is a game of skills, strategy, cooperation and teamwork, but how could you put anyone on the same team as the... uh... Great One... as some humans refer to them?

“As large and powerful as they are, I’m not sure anyone else would fit on their end!”

[And who could keep up with them? As a tier seven monster, the Eldest is overwhelmingly stronger than any other ant in the Colony. The Endless, as we know, are all tier four. Such a massive disparity means that even ten against one, the odds are against them. We’ll need to see some strategic brilliance from them if they hope to succeed.]

“It looks... yes, it looks like we are just about to begin. The Great One is starting on offence, and I’m telling you, folks, the ball looks absolutely tiny in those gigantic mandibles.”

[The Endless are taking an aggressive formation on defence. High up the pitch. Looking at their double soldier frontline, I can't help but feel sorry for them. The Eldest towers over the pair of them, making them look like hatchlings.]

"The Great One has taken position. Ready to start their attack!"

CRUNCH!

ROAR!

[Unbelievable scenes here at the stadium! The Eldest has immediately shattered the ball in their mandibles, right in the faces of the Endless! Provocation of the highest order!]

"No team is willing to give up even the slightest opportunity against the Endless and here we have the Great One making a bold statement, right from the beginning of the match. 'I don't even need all of my turns on offence against you'. The Great One stares down the smaller ants before turning back to their own end, ready for their first turn on defence."

[I can only clack my mandibles in appreciation of how daring a statement that was. The crowd here is still going wild, and no play was even made!]

"Normally, it's the Endless who are playing mind games with their opponents, but now the script has been flipped! I'm fascinated to see how the elite, undefeated team responds to this."

[I'm sure we all are. I have to say, they appear unfazed as they take up their formation. This looks like a variation of the spear. Soldiers up front, with deep flanks to protect the ball and a solid group of mages around the ball.

Clearly, the Endless believe a magic attack is likely. They don't want to expose the ball early and lose their turn without learning something of what the Eldest is going to bring.

I'm a little surprised, Peter, I really thought they'd play wide and try to utilise their advantage in numbers. The Eldest is large and powerful, but can't be in multiple places at once. The Endless are known for their skilled passing game, and that feels like it should be their go-to.]

"We may still end up that way, remember which team we're talking about. A conservative formation could flip to all-out offence in the blink of an eye. More than any other, this team has displayed tactical flexibility.

"Both teams are set. And here we go!"

[Leonidant holds the ball as the team advances steadily. The mages are working double time, locking down the mana around the ball to defend it against interference. So far, the Eldest hasn't so much as twitched a muscle and it is DEAD SILENT here in the Stadium. The tension is as thick as a Brood Tender's affection, ladies and gentlemen. The Endless approach the midpoint, and still, the Eldest hasn't moved!]

"Sudden moves!"

ROAR!

“The flanks open up, and what’s this? A decoy ball! I have no idea when they made one, but they did! Absolute magic! One ball flipped to the left, one to the right as the scouts and soldiers charge!

“It’s impossible for the Eldest to cover the whole field and there are *two* balls. Which is the real one?!”

CRACK!

[I-I-I... what did I just see?!]

ROOAAAAAR!

“The crowd goes absolutely berserk here in the stadium! The Eldest moved so quickly I swear I didn’t see it. One second, they were standing in defence, the next, they had bowled over Washingtant on the right flank and had the ball in their mandibles, which they promptly shattered!”

[We’re just waiting to see... yes, the Endless have confirmed that was the correct ball and are returning to their end. Just like that, the Eldest has crushed their offence in a single move!]

“This is like something we’ve never seen before, Commentant. That was one of the quickest rounds I think I’ve ever seen, and I was there when the Blitz invented their patented Ant Rush. Before I could even blink my eyes, it was over. Washingtant still looks a little rattled, a bit unsteady on her legs, as if she’s not sure what just happened.”

[She isn't alone! Nobody in the crowd knows what happened either!]

“We’ve got a tiny bit of time before the Eldest has their second turn on offence, what did you think of the play from the Endless?”

[Brilliant, as always. The decoy ball was made completely out of sight and so quickly I didn’t catch even a hint of it, and I’m a mage! We saw two, delectable passes from the back of the formation, catching the scouts as they lunged forward at full speed. A dazzling offence that would have severely tested the best of teams.]

“And yet, crushed in an instant. Somehow, the Eldest identified the real ball, charged forward and seized it from Washingtant in, quite literally, the blink of an eye.”

[With speed like that, Vibrant will be jealous! I hope she never hears this recording!]

“The crowd is settling now, the Eldest has seized the ball in their mandibles, preparing to make their play.”

[Again, the Endless seem unfazed, with the possible exception of poor Washingtant. They take the same formation as before, preparing to defend high up the pitch.]

“Here we go, folks!”

CRACK!

ROAR!

“I. DO NOT. BELIEVE IT! The Eldest has shattered ANOTHER ball! This is beginning to turn from sending a message to straight up DISRESPECT!”

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This stupid ball! Why the heck is it so damn soft?!

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Chapter 1165: Leave it on the Pitch

I'd intended to score on every offence, but the damn ball is too soft. When I flex my legs and get ready to dash, my mandibles tense up and I crush the stupid thing in an instant! Isn't this supposed to be solid rock? Is there cheating involved? Has someone given me a hollow ball?!

Whatever. It's not like they beat me when I'm playing defence. My mind-constructs have picked out the ten ants on the field from the Vestibule, and I can read their streams of Will in real time.

Gweheheh.

A fake ball? Don't make me laugh! Make a million of the things, it won't matter!

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"Well, the Eldest did promise us a game unlike any we've had before," Leonidant remarked dryly.

"Even I didn't expect they would throw away two straight turns of offence," Solant mused. "I'd predicted the Eldest would attempt to crush us, trying to score every time they had the chance, and shutting us out, for the most dominant victory possible. In some ways, this is even more intimidating. If the Eldest throws every offence they have, except the last, and shuts us out to win 1-0 at the last moment, it'll be an entirely different statement."

"We won't let that happen, though."

"Of course not. One play and we've already confirmed a few things. First, the Eldest is taking us lightly, and that gives us a chance. Second, they really can detect our thoughts and intentions. The decoy ball was completely ignored."

"So that means..."

"Indeed. Even our thoughts need to be layered in deception...."

~~~

[It's time for the Endless to start their second turn on offence. Very short rounds in this match so far. I do hope we get to see some extended play, but right now, it doesn't seem likely.]

"If the Great One can smash any play as quickly as they did the first time, then I expect we may be in for an extremely short round. If any team was going to devise a counter measure, then it's this team in front of us right now, the Endless."

[I absolutely agree. As expected, they've adopted a completely different formation as they break out of the huddle. There's never been a team to change up their approach as much as this one, it'd almost be stranger if we saw them go with the spear once again.]

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw a different look from this team in every one of the ten rounds. Solant is positioned close to the front in centre, mages tight in behind with soldiers anchoring the formation and scouts out wide. This is almost a traditional look from the Endless, not something we’re used to seeing. Perhaps they intend to play wide, as you suggested they should?”

[It appears they might. The Eldest is sitting a little higher up the pitch this time and... here we go!

A rapid charge from the Eldest as they rush down the pitch, it’s insanely fast, but at least we can see them this time! Mages brace, defensive wall is going up. The Soldiers lower their heads and OHHHHHHHHH!]

ROAAAAAARRRRR!

“The Eldest has smashed through as if they weren’t even there. The stone flies and the crowd is shielded from the debris! What a hit. WHAT a hit. Absolutely chitin-crunching!”

[The soldiers appear down for the count as the Eldest barrels through. Solant looks like an aphid in front of the gigantic ant as she clutches the ball... OR DOES SHE? The pass, WHEN DID SHE PASS?]

“Who has the ball? I can’t even... LEONIDANT! She’s free! She’s running free down the left side of the pitch, totally unmarked... well of course she is, there’s only one opponent!”

[The Eldest turns, one clack of the mandibles... have they given up, are they unable to catch up? Leonidant is streaking to the touch line!]

RUMBLE!

“No you don’t, young one! The Eldest has conjured a wall of stone in front of the touch line. Even from that position in the middle of the pitch, it’s no problem at all! The Endless mages can’t contest at all!”

[Leonidant is trying to scale the wall, you aren’t allowed to completely obstruct the touch line, but... it’s no use! The Eldest is extending the wall further into the pitch, Leonidant is running straight towards them!]

CRUNCH!

“And just like that, it’s over! The Eldest has dashed in and seized the ball, crushing it to pieces! What a play, what a round!”

[It is high drama here at the Stadium and the crowd is absolutely loving it, Peter. At first, the Eldest was on the attack, crushing the enemy line like it wasn’t even there, but somehow, they lost track of the ball!]

“A brilliant play, yet again, from the Endless, Solant executing a pass under pressure, as their own defensive wall was being destroyed, absolutely flawlessly. A fantastic run from Leonidant, perfect balance, perfect speed, but it simply didn’t matter. Not only the largest, not only the strongest, the Eldest dominates the mana game as well, raising a defensive wall of their own in *seconds*. Without support to break through, Leonidant had nowhere to go and fell straight into the waiting mandibles of the Eldest.”

[Absolutely stunning scenes here and we are only getting started. The Eldest will be back on offence in a few short moments, taking hold of the ball as we speak and situating themselves in the centre of their own zone.]

“So far, the Eldest has destroyed their own ball two out of two rounds of offence. They only get ten. Do you think they’ll break it for nine rounds straight and then attempt to score on the last?”

[I wouldn’t think so. The Eldest is known to send a strong message, but has a spirit of fair play. I think we’ll see proper attacking play from them in this round.]

“An exciting prospect. I still have chills from that last *crunching* charge. With a frontline of only two soldiers, it really seems like the Endless are going to struggle to prevent the Eldest from running straight through them.”

[I see your point, but it really wouldn’t matter if they fielded ten soldiers. If they’re going to stop this offence, then they need to produce something special.]

“Here we go. Ohhhhh, interesting! The Great One is taking steps to reinforce the ball, clearly anticipating a magic based attack and interference on the ball itself! They must have doubled, no tripled the size and density of that ball!”

[Modifying the ball to that extent is illegal, as I’m sure you know. The Eldest hasn’t changed the ball itself, but created a hollow protective shell around it. A few flexes of the mandibles to check their work and we are off!]

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1166: Domination

Gweheheh, with the ball reinforced like this, I won’t break the damn thing in my mandibles. If I’m not sabotaging myself, I really wonder how my little opponents can possibly hope to handle me?

With the ball gripped firmly (but not too firmly!) in my mandibles, I begin to stride forward. The Endless are arrayed before me and I can already feel them trying to attack the ball and break it down from within the shell I’ve constructed for it.

No chance!

I dedicate a group of mind constructs to maintaining the ball and prepare to finish this attack in the least possible time. With the Call yanking at me, I don’t want to be up here any longer than I need to be, even if my adoring public is enjoying seeing me go to work as much as they are.

~~~

“They’re coming,” Washingtant said, intently watching the Eldest’s movements.

“Let’s see what they have in store for us,” Solant replied. “Continue the magic attack, we need to be testing the Eldest’s resources, even if it seems like we aren’t getting anywhere. The more we learn about our opponent, the stronger we become.”

Up front, the two soldiers, Sumant and Taylant, grit their mandibles and dug in their claws.

After the first hit they'd received from the Eldest, they weren't optimistic about their ability to take any more. The difference in size and power was plain for anyone to see.

Thankfully, Solant had developed a strategy that didn't rely on them to hold their gigantic sibling back.

~~~

"Ball gripped tight, the Great One is lowering their stance."

[We might get a better look at that *insane* dash speed we saw earlier! I can practically feel the Eldest pulling in their energy and then....]

BOOOOOOM!

ROAAAAAR!

"There it is! Once again, I simply cannot describe what is happening on the pitch! I can't see a thing!"

[A flash of light, a shattering crunch and now a cloud of dust and stone has filled the pit! There's destruction and chaos down there! What has the Eldest done, the defensive end of the Endless has been completely annihilated!]

"Mages are settling the dust now... and... we can... oh wow, we can see the carnage. The Endless are fine, if a little confused, I want to assure the listeners of that, but the stone wall of the pit behind them is a shattered ruin. The Eldest can't be seen at all!"

[I think you'll see them shortly. The rubble is shifting, and... yes! The Eldest stands tall! Shouldering aside the boulders as if they weren't even there, the Eldest stands tall and defiant! A charge so fast, we couldn't even see it! A charge so strong, even the stone wall couldn't resist it!]

"The Endless have moved to one side of the pitch, getting out of the way as officials descend to reconstruct the pit. We've often seen damage to the pit during play, but not quite to this extent!"

[The Eldest still has the ball gripped in their mandibles as they proudly march back toward their own end. What a dominant display!]

"The Great One continues to dazzle and befuddle the Endless. Previously, we saw them shatter the ball twice, leading to no points scored, and now we see them shatter the touchline, which obviously means no points are scored. I almost feel as if the Eldest is telling them 'your rules can't constrain me. Look what would happen if this game wasn't protecting you from me!'"

[I wonder how many rounds the Eldest is going to persist with this strategy, refusing to score even though they obviously could. Will this be successful in rattling the mental solidarity of the Endless? They're an indomitable team, but they've never been on the pitch with an opponent like this one!]

~~~

"I'm not sure if I can block a charge I can't even see," Sumant said drily.

"There was never any hope of us being able to pin down the Eldest anyway," Solant waved off her concerns.

“The real question,” Washingtant wondered, “is when the Eldest is going to start to score, because it seems like we don’t have any way to stop them.”

“Not yet,” Solant corrected her. “We still have cards to play. Besides, our best hope in this game was always going to be finding a way to score. Let’s focus on that.”

~~~

I wonder how they liked *those* apples. An altar infused charge, smashing through five metres of solid reinforced rock. It wasn’t easy to spot a path through them so I didn’t end up hurting anyone, but those little ants must be shaking in their boots after seeing something like that!

Heh.

Let’s take a look at that scoreboard.

....

What? WHERE’S MY POINT?!

~~~

[The Endless are forming up once again, and just look at the intimidating sight in front of them!]

“The Great One is pacing back and forth, antennae flicking and waving dangerously! I wouldn’t want to be trying to advance into that!”

[It certainly seems like the Eldest is done mucking around. They are ready to play and I can’t help but feel sorry for the opposition.]

“The repairs are complete and I’m told the Eldest has received an official warning for excessive damage to the pit, so we are ready to go!”

[Solant in possession of the ball, the Endless advance, what’s the play? How are they going to attack this time?]

“And how is the Eldest going to defend? The Great One advances!”

[Rapid passing from the Endless! The ball is flicking between them so seamlessly, I can’t believe my eyes! An amazing feat of skill unlike anything we’ve seen before!]

“And the counter? It’s the Eldest conjuring something... a storm! A powerful wind has descended and the Endless are holding on!”

[Or are they? NO!]

**ROAR!**

[They are not! The team goes flying and so does the ball! I don’t care how fast you can move that ball, you can’t outrun the wind!]

“The Eldest has thrown down the gauntlet! Defend yourself against my magic or you’ll never see this side of the midline again!”



## Chrysalis

### Chapter 1167: Back and Forth

Gweheheh. With my superior magic, I don't even need to worry about chasing my opponents down. If I can keep them in their defensive half without even moving, then that seems like it would be the logical way to play.

I wonder if there's a way for them to deal with it? I wouldn't think so, given my higher ranked Skills and mind constructs. These young ants will gain those things in time, but for now, I hold the advantage of being older! I've had more time to work on this stuff!

I wonder if I can use my magic on the offence as well?

~~~

"That's going to cause a few problems," Leonidant remarked as the Endless picked themselves back up.

"I quite agree. The Eldest overwhelms us in both magic and physical ability."

"Then why do you seem so excited?"

"Let's just say I'm happy this match is living up to my expectations."

~~~

[The Eldest has certainly displayed their magical prowess and I'm certain the Endless must be at least a little shaken by that. They've brought a mage-heavy team here today and it doesn't seem to be helping them at all!

At tier seven, the Eldest has a huge advantage that doesn't seem to be offset by being outnumbered at all. One versus ten, and they are crushing this game!]

"I have to admit, I'm a little awed by what we've seen in this match so far. You may be a little more experienced with powerful monsters, but I've never seen what a creature as highly evolved as the Great One can do."

[It certainly is impressive. Speaking of which, I believe we may be just about to see the Eldest begin their next offence. Will we see another of those unstoppable charges? Or something different?]

"The Great One appears... to be utilising their magic! They've taken hold of the ball using wind mana. The Endless seamlessly flow into a defence. Walls are going up, they've conjured a wind barrier of their own. Looks like a meeting of the minds here today!"

[What exactly is the Eldest going to do? They hold the ball aloft, teasing, taunting as it drifts left and right... wait a second....]

**BOOM!**

**ROAAAAR!**

"Oh, wow! What did we just witness?!"

[A lightning bolt! The Eldest has used their magic to catapult the ball directly through the defences of the Endless! The wall has crumbled, the wind dispersed and the ball has been buried two metres into the touchline!]

“STILL, the Great One continues to show their opponents the difference in power, and the Endless are absolutely helpless to prevent the ball from going wherever their opponent wants it to go!”

[No score of course, you have to be physically in contact with the ball for the touch to count, but the message continues to be sent!]

“We switch to the Endless now, who prepare to make their next offensive play. It’s a daunting task ahead of them. If the Eldest simply repeats what they did a moment before, how can they be expected to get through?”

And... yes indeed! The moment play resumes, the Eldest has once again conjured a mighty wind, daring the opposition to advance into that gale.”

[What a storm. If that wind there was any stronger, it’d start to chip away at the rock! The Endless appear more prepared for it this time. They’ve formed a windbreak and are reinforcing it with all they have as the team huddles in shelter.

Grouped up like this, they are completely vulnerable to a charge from the Eldest, but they don’t appear inclined to move. Instead, they stand astride their defensive end like a colossus. What on Pangera are the Endless going to do in this situation?]

“They have to progress the ball somehow, otherwise they’ll be timed out. There is movement down there, I can see them shifting, and, knowing this team, there is *definitely* some thought or strategy at play down there.”

[Oh! I sense it!]

“What’s happening?”

[They’re reaching out and trying to seize hold of a portion of wind, not that much, just a thread. What could they possibly hope to... wait?!]

“Solant has leaped up with the ball gripped in her mandibles and... HOW?!”

**ROAAAAAAAAR!!!!**

[With that thin stream of wind, the Endless have catapulted their leader and sent her rocketing toward the touchline! Brilliant! Ingenious! They’ve taken the storm produced by the Eldest and turned its power against them!]

“Such speed!”

**ROAAAARRRRRRRRRR!!!!**

“BUT NO! The Great One says NO! Despite the frankly *dangerous* velocity Solant was moving, the Great One simply sticks out one leg and snags her from the air. Those reflexes are simply... I want to

say *inhuman*, but that much is obvious. Absurd. Unbelievable. It happened in the blink of an eye, folks, and still, the Eldest has snatched the ball and Solant clean from the air.”

~~~

I stare at the little champion as she grips the ball in her mandibles still. Right now, she’s dangling in mid air, since I’m holding up the ball, and I inspect her up close for the first time.

“Interesting idea,” I tell her.

Using my own magic against me like that.... Clever little thing. Since they can’t match my strength, they tried to find a way they could turn my own against me.

“Not quite interesting enough,” she replies. “Are you going to put me down?”

Chomp!

Crack!

I shatter the ball with a casual chomp and Solant drops down to the ground, where I loom over her to a ridiculous degree. Even for a general, she’s quite small, which leads me to believe her evolutionary energy has been poured into her brain, and perhaps specialised organs that help with tactics, or perhaps battlefield vision?

“You’ve got a lesson to learn here, Solant, so I hope you’re paying attention.”

“What lesson is that, Eldest?” she asks innocently.

I clack my mandibles in disapproval and she ducks her head slightly. As if I don’t know that giving her information helps her side. I bring my head down closer.

“In the face of overwhelming power, tricks are useless. You can delay, you can nibble at their strength, you can fight on the run, lay traps, do the unexpected... but eventually, there is nowhere to go, no more tricks to pull, and it’s over.”

“Is that why you refuse to score? You want to push us into a corner with the score at 0-0 to see what we will do?”

Wait... what do you mean no score? I glance up at the scoreboard and sure enough... nothing.

DAMMIT! Just how many rules did that idiot forget to tell me?! Although... I probably should have asked more questions....

“You’re the smart one,” I poke her with an antenna longer than her entire body. “You figure it out.”

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1168: The Presence of the Eldest

[I’m hearing from my sources on the dome that my siblings are absolutely riveted by what they’ve seen so far.]

“I’m not one of your siblings, but I’m definitely in that camp. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

[The Colony will welcome you as a sister in spirit, Peter.]

“You’re very kind.”

[For the majority of us, myself included, we’ve never seen the Eldest in person, or if we have, we’ve never seen them fight. There aren’t many still in the second stratum who were present in the fight against Garralosh, for example. And back then, the Eldest was only tier five.]

For us, it’s especially thrilling to see our oldest and strongest member in action. There are many clacking their mandibles up there in pride and appreciation seeing just how far the family has come.]

“Well, we are just about to reach halftime, so the Biomass, tea and biscuits are soon going to hit the field and there’ll be a chance to really dig into what the crowd here today is thinking. I’m so pleased that the crew up on the dome are appreciating this match just as much as I am. Despite it being so short!”

[A record pace, there’s no doubt about it. With teams this unbalanced, it doesn’t suit either side to take things slow and try to grind it out. The Eldest can push the ball whenever they want on offence, and the Endless can’t afford to play slow against such an overwhelming opponent.]

“Well, the Great One is attacking again and the story of this game so far has been the refusal to score, despite being able to. Is the Eldest of the Colony going to continue to give up chances to score, or are they going to start putting points on the board?”

[That is indeed the question. And here we go! The Eldest is once again protecting the ball from outside interference, surrounding it in a hard, protective shell.]

“A change in behaviour from the Endless, though! They are charging across the field, unwilling to wait for their opponent to prepare the ball!”

[Sumant and Taylant lead the way as they dash up the pitch. A very aggressive formation. Any reaction from the Eldest? Not so much, they continue to focus on the ball.]

“Will they be able to? The soldiers advance, bracing themselves for the collision!”

ROOAAAAR!

“A HUGE hit from the two soldiers, and a sneaky, underhanded strategy! They’ve both gone for the same leg, trying to bring down the much larger ant!”

[Usually a tactic that’s looked down on, given the weakness of our legs, but the Eldest stands firm! In fact, they didn’t even budge! Here comes the rest of the team! Scouts on the flanks, Leonidant dashing low, going *under* the Eldest, and hitting another leg!]

“The mages group together, earth magic taking shape! Another strike! They deliver a spire of rock directly into the rear left leg of the Great One, WHO STILL WON’T BUDGE!”

[With ten ants, the entire team of the Endless trying to knock them down, the Eldest stands strong! No! THEY MOVE FORWARD!]

“With slow and steady steps, the Eldest continues to advance. One leg, then the next. The Endless are powerless to stop this implacable momentum as the Great One literally *drags* them across the field!”

[This isn't a good look for the Endless! Are they running out of tactics? A direct confrontation of strength was only going to end one way.

OHO! What's this? The Eldest steps forward and the ground gives way! A pitfall trap! When did they create that?!

"I have no idea, a brilliant play! Totally unexpected, but the effect is negligible at best. Barely off balance, the Great One continues to walk forward, dragging the opposition behind."

[I have to admit, I'd underestimated the Endless there for a moment, they *never* run out of new plays and will keep trying right to the end of the match! What have they got up their carapace to stop this steady advance?]

"Surely something. Another trap! But no effect! The Eldest is just brushing them off now, not surprised in the slightest. The Endless seem to be repositioning... not that it's having much effect.... Another trap! Is this the biggest yet!?"

[AND THEY PUSH!]

ROAAAAAAR!!!!

[In a brilliant move, the Endless reform in one clack of the mandibles and they unite to push the Eldest down! A focused, unified push of earth magic, soldiers and scouts try to topple this enormous foe!]

"Is it working? IS THE ELDEST TEETERING?! NO! NOT IN THE SLIGHTEST!"

[What was that dramatic pause? Is the Eldest just toying with them? Just like that, the oldest and strongest of the Colony has marched across the pitch, cracked the shell around the ball and hit the touchline!]

ROOOOOOOAAAAAARRRR!!!!

CLACKCLACKCLACKCLACKCLACK!!!!!!

"We can hear the appreciation from the dome as the ants let their mandibles be heard! We finally have a score in this game as the Eldest performs the ridiculous feat of dragging the entire opposing team behind them to the touchline. There were some traps and tricks in there, but it simply wasn't enough. The raw power of the Great One is too much for the Endless, and not even with their genius, surprise tactics were they able to halt their opponent."

[Finally, the scoreboard has something to do in this match... and there it is. The score is officially 1-0 and we have one more play from the Endless to end the half.]

"After such a demoralising display, I wonder what the play will be? Do they still have an avenue to score?"

[We are about to find out. They set their formation... and they're off!]

CRUNCH!

ROAAAAAARRRR!

“THE GREAT ONE SAYS NO! Another blinding dash, another shattered ball! No more playing around, no more funny business, the Eldest has put their foot down!”

Chrysalis

Chapter 1169: Tea Time

[And there you have it, folks. We bring the first half to a close in record time. Blisteringly fast rounds here at the stadium, but I’m certain none of the crowd are disappointed with the action.]

“Absolutely not. We are witnessing history here today, and I for one am just thankful we get another half of this incredible spectacle.”

[You really have to give it to the Endless. Every round, on offence or defence, they’ve tried something different and shown us some incredible play. Fast passing, decoy balls, innovative trap setups, unique formations. Against any other opposition, they would be dominating this game.]

“I quite agree. This is a performance that lives up to the team and its formidable reputation, but despite outnumbering their opponent ten to one, despite their experience and superior tactics, it simply isn’t enough to overcome the difference. If all *twenty* of them were out there, I’m not sure it would be enough.”

[Well, it’s break time. Tea and biscuits are being served here in the recording booth and down on the field to the players. It looks like... yes, actually, someone has gone ahead and made the Eldest a cake! What a lovely touch, making sure they feel welcome here on the second stratum of the Dungeon.]

“And WHAT a cake! You could feed three weddings with that thing, but it still looks tiny before the Great One. Hopefully they don’t overeat before we head into the second half. Commentant and I will take a brief rest, and then we’ll be back to analyse the first half and bring you all the action in the second.”

~~~

Holy moly. I can’t believe those little ants almost managed to knock me over!

I came within a whisker of being dumped into a hole by ants so small I can walk over them. What a grand sight that would have been, the mighty Eldest knocked over by hatchlings barely out of their cocoons. I would have had to retire to the fourth stratum and bury myself in a hole to escape the embarrassment!

Thankfully, I managed to hold my ground and make it look like it wasn’t close. I don’t feel quite so bad with that point on the board. If the first half had ended without me scoring a point....

Stupid rules!

But it’s halftime, which I understand involves a break in proceedings, which is nice. I’ll just flop down onto the ground.

*CRUNCH!*

Ahhhh. Nice. It’s good to stretch out the legs every now and again, give them a bit of a wiggle in the air. Across from me, the Endless are similarly resting, though not as efficiently as I am, the fools. Solant is talking to everyone, probably gathering information, or talking about mixing up their strategies.

All of it useless! Muahahaha!

I told her it wouldn't matter in the face of overwhelming power, and then I proved it. There's nothing they can do to stop me repeating the same idea over and over again.

Wait, there's stuff being delivered out to the field? What's this?

Before my bewildered eyes, a team of ants and humans delivers a table right in front me, upon which they place the largest cup of tea I've ever seen, along with oversized biscuits!

I mean... what?

Peter did tell me it was the tea and biscuits break, but I thought that was just phrasing! Are you telling me this is *literally* a tea and biscuits break?

I glance over at the Endless and they're already chomping away at their own biscuits and sipping from their cups of tea, lowering their heads with dainty movements to sip from the cups.

Well, if they can do it, there's no reason I can't.... It feels weird, though. The biscuits look lovely, a golden colour indicating they'll have a nice crunch, and the tea smells nice, but... I've never eaten human food since becoming a monster. I have no idea if the taste buds even work the same way....

Here goes nothing....

I lower my head toward the cup, letting my mouth come into contact with the cup, and I take a hesitant sip.

HOT!

But tasty....

This tea is quite refreshing! A certain depth of flavour that leaves the palate feeling cleansed whilst the drink warms me all the way to my stomach. Delectable!

Might as well give these biscuits a try.

*Nibble.*

Hmmmm. Tasty! Nice crunch and that sugary flavour I haven't tasted in this entire lifetime. It's almost enough to bring a tear to my eyes.

And what's this?!

Along comes another group of ants, transporting a massive, MASSIVE, decorated cake. It still looks small to me, but this cake must be almost the size of a person. That's an absurd amount of cake. Who the heck made this thing? It's frosted and decorated and everything!

I look closely and I can see that the characters and scenes rendered with remarkable skill on the icing are mostly pictures of me during my various exploits.... I can even recognise a few motifs that I've seen before.

Michaelangelant! You fiend! Not satisfied with plastering my face on every bit of flat rock you can get your mandibles on, now you've started on *cake decorating!* I recognise this handiwork anywhere!

I'll get that ant one of these days... I swear it!

But... since the cake is here anyway, I might as well take a bite. I barely got to eat any cake as a human, so this is quite the treat! Even across two lives, a cake is a rare event!

~~~

"Are you sure about this, Solant?" Leonidant asked, looking at the Eldest. "This doesn't seem right."

"I agree," the general said, "attempting to inhibit the Eldest's performance through underhanded means is completely against the spirit of the game, as well as being morally wrong, in my opinion."

"Then why? Why are we feeding the Eldest this... cake... thing?"

"For victory," the small ant said, her eyes burning with a furious intensity. "If I cannot win within the bounds of fair play, then I will go outside of those bounds without hesitation. I have vowed that we will never know defeat, and there is nothing I won't do in order to make that a reality."

"We may win, but at what cost? What will the Colony think if they learn what we've done? Or the humans? Our reputation will be damaged, *your* reputation will be damaged. You're the brightest strategic mind in the Colony, and because of this, you may never see a real command position."

Solant turned to her loyal scout.

"You misunderstand me. I don't care about reputation, I don't care about what I may accomplish in the future. I care about *victory*. Cost is irrelevant! Other concerns are irrelevant!"

"Uhhh, you two?"

"What is it, Sumant?" Leonidant sighed.

"The Eldest sent us half of the cake."

Solant slowly turned and saw the giant ant at the other side of the pitch wave a friendly antenna at them as they happily munched on half of the enormous cake. The other half was right next to them.

"Do you think they read our minds and realised what we were doing?"

"It's possible," Solant muttered, staring at the Eldest. "But for some reason, I don't think so."

She'd been careful to almost never think of this plan, and she had never mentioned it to the others. The Eldest was probably just... sharing.

"So, what do we do?" Sumant asked. "We can't *not* eat it... right?"

Solant thought furiously.

"Dammit," she muttered.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 1170: Treachery and the Price That Must Be Paid

My hope gleams in the darkness, a diamond shining in the night.

My hope is a builder, a shifter of earth and stone.

My hope is a seer, who glimpses that which is yet to come.

My hope is a speaker, their words know no boundaries.

My hope defends, protects and shields, a barrier between the light and the dark.

My hope bears the weight of the world upon their carapace, and controls that weight.

My hope sleeps, but will rise again in glory.

- Excerpt from 'Prayers of the Faithful.'

That cake, seriously delicious. I'm pleasantly surprised by how nice it tasted, to be honest. I don't know what I expected, whether my monstrous body would just reject tasty things, or if I lacked the ability to taste sweet. There's been a distinct lack of it in my food thus far, I have to say!

It truly is shocking just how quickly you adjust to things. When I started out, the idea of eating Biomass was almost unbearably disgusting. Monster remains are not pleasant to eat, or look at, or smell, or generally be around in any capacity. After a while, though, it's just what you eat, so you get used to it and move on.

Now, I've learned that, apparently, the Colony has a thriving baking industry! Not to mention this delicious tea!

All around the stadium, there are humans enjoying a cup and munching happily on a bikkie. Even more shocking, the ants above me on the dome are also enjoying a tea break. It's a little more difficult to manage, since they're upside down, but somehow they've managed it, deploying some sort of pulley system to manoeuvre the beverages and snacks across the roof.

Holy moly. To supply this entire stadium with baked goods and tea, just how many ants are dedicating themselves to the production of tea leaves and sugary treats?!

Should I be surprised, though...? Even on Earth, ants love sugar. In fact, there's really only two things you need to feed an ant colony: protein, for the grubs and the queens, and sugar water, for hydration and energy. When I could afford it, I'd give my own pet nest a treat and let them have honey.

I haven't thought of that colony in a long time.... I hope they're doing alright.

Right now, I have another colony to take care of. Even better, I'm in it! When is this game going to start again?

And when are the Endless going to dig into their cake? Right now, they appear to be standing around it awkwardly.

Are they lactose intolerant? I hope not, I sent them that half as a gesture of goodwill, but I may have offended them by neglecting their dietary requirements!

Claws crossed that isn't the case.... In fact, even if they can't eat it, they may feel forced to since it was me that sent it over! That would be a disaster! I'd better check what's going on over there, that way, I can gracefully head over and take the cake back, sparing them from an embarrassing public episode.

Let me see....

Hmmmm. Ah. Oh. Hmmmmm.

Interesting, to say the least. A devious stratagem, an underhanded method. I've been compromised, poisoned, and bamboozled. They tricked me with a tainted cake! I would never have expected a member of my family to break the rules looking for a way to win! I wouldn't say that the Colony is honourable, per se, it's more like they don't think in such roundabout ways, they behave honourably almost by accident. Their path to a solution is almost always straightforward and open, whereas this....

The layers of deception create yet another, metaphorical cake, one baked with betrayal, and filled with chocolatey treacherousness.

I don't actually feel any different, though, so either this poison hasn't taken effect yet or I'm simply too huge for it to do anything. Regardless, the kid gloves are certainly off. If they want to break the rules, then I'm more than happy to oblige.

Time for the Eldest to teach a lesson....

~~~

"The Eldest knows now," Solant stated.

"Are you sure?" Leonidant asked.

The general stared at the giant standing across the pitch from them. She could almost feel the seething energy boiling off that frame.

"Yes, I'm sure."

~~~

"And we are back, ready for the second half to start!"

[The Stadium is absolutely buzzing with anticipation and I simply can't wait. We had such a dramatic finish to the first half, and although I can't quite bring myself to believe it, we may be about to see the Endless lose for the first time ever.]

"That's the story, but I really don't think many people will blame them, considering who they're up against. It almost seems impossible that the Eldest would lose from this point, but if there is one team that I *expect* to surprise me, then it's this one."

[So true. The Eldest is on offence again and I can't wait to see what they do.]

CRACK!

"I... I don't believe it, they shattered the ball again!"

CLACK. CLACK. CLACK. CLACK.

[The Eldest is slamming their mandibles together with such power the noise is reverberating through the entire stadium! Come at me! The Eldest is demanding the Endless come and fight it out!]