

Chrysalis 541

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Chapter 541: War commences

Well nards. I mean, even with a sword sticking in me and an angry Golgari in a fancy suit of armour staring hatefully into my eyes, all I can think of is the unwinding consequences of this action. How many ants, how many creatures, will suffer as a result? All so unnecessary! These freakin' morons!

Luckily for me, my fellow colony members are not quite as upset at the prospect of the oncoming conflict. The moment the armoured stone giant strikes me, the hundreds of ants, not to mention my pets, leap into action. Acid and spells, held at the ready during the standoff, are now let fly. The air is suddenly full of sizzling liquid, fireballs and pheromones as the ants scream their war cries and rush headfirst into the conflict. Before I can even attempt to dislodge the blade from my carapace, Crinis has lashed the powerful Golgari warrior with a dozen limbs. A horrific grinding sound begins as she unsheathes her barbs and they begin to tear into his armour.

Tiny wastes no time and leaps into the thick of the fray, leading the ant charge, Invidia tagging along behind as every surface of the tunnel becomes a crawling mass of insect as they surge toward the enemy.

"FOR THE COLONY!"

"DESTROY THEM!"

"DEFEND THE ELDEST!"

The ants cry out relentlessly as they stream forward to battle, biting and chomping everything they can, utilising the group tactics that were drilled into them at the academy. The Golgari don't wait for death but instead spring forward like the trained professional warriors that they are. Against the swarming ants they deploy wide sweeping blades of sword light, trying to cut down as many of the onrushing monsters as they can. The result is probably not as impressive as they'd hoped. Big bodied tier four soldiers in the front lines perform their duty and throw themselves in harm's way to protect their more vulnerable kin. Their thick carapace' absorb the strikes, large rents appearing in their bodies, but they don't stop pushing forward.

The armoured Golgari and I remain locked in our own little world, each hardly moving. I can tell Crinis isn't having much luck breaking through that powerful armour, and I don't expect she will. The gear this guy is wearing puts him on another level and I don't think she'll be able to cut through to him at his current tier. I wonder what sort of ore someone this strong was able to secure for their skin? Something fancy no doubt, but surely not as strong as his armour.

[You killed a lot of your own people today,] I tell him.

[You're very confident for a bug,] he tells me. [Do you think we can't squash you as we please?]

[You've never seen anything like us before, rock-head. When you crawl back to your home, make sure you remember that this didn't have to happen!]

[CRINIS!]

At my mental shout, Crinis releases her grip on him and my mandibles crunch down on him, heedless of how his blade twists in my carapace. With the energy of the colony flooding out of the Vestibule and diffusing throughout my body, I truly feel as if my life force is boundless!

OMEN CHOMP! OMEN CHOMP! OMEN CHOMP!

Not holding back anymore, the dark mandibles manifest and slam down, rapid fire onto the glittering armour worn by the figure. Sensing my intent, he reacts to defend himself and the runes engraved in the metal flare to life, drawing on the mana in the air for the first time. As my jaws clamp down, I can feel them being repulsed by a force emanating outward from the armour. It's not really a problem though, since my jaws are far from the only weapons I have available.

I let the mind bridge dissolve and the mind mana construct with it. I don't see the point in talking to this guy any longer and I highly doubt someone as strong as he is will be vulnerable to my mental tricks. Instead, I draw on the fire-mana construct I prepared during our chat and give him a face full of blue flames. Rocks can melt, sucka! How do you like them toasty apples?

The heat from the flickering tongues of blue flame is intense, I can feel the moisture evaporating from my eyeballs even though I'm the one casting it! I can't imagine it's a whole lot of fun for the enemy. Indeed, after only a second of being wreathed in flame he moves once again. With that eerie, impossible speed, he withdraws the blade from my side and this time, rather than stab me, he batters the blade into my side with raw strength, diverting the flame away. I switch off the magic before I can roast my own siblings with it and allow the strike to turn my body around.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

I know the acid isn't going to do much to him, but it doesn't hurt to let him have a second serving! This also has the added benefit of shifting my core away from that damn sword and presenting him with the least vital section of my body. Which turns out to be a good thing since he stabs me there before I can turn around again. I grit my mandibles against the pain and trigger my healing gland again. I can only thank my bulk that his one handed sword isn't able to penetrate far enough to pierce my core from back there.

Determined, I swing myself back around to face him directly, my antennae blazing with laser focus to try and detect his moves before he can make them. When we come face to face once more, his sword is already in position to pierce my brain, but I don't respond, opening my jaws wide to unleash more fire. The blade flickers forwards, only to be slapped in mid-air by a Crinis tentacle. The figure's strength is still immense and she isn't able to divert the blade completely, but it's enough to turn the strike from my head.

He growls in frustration as his blade sinks into my thorax once again and the flames roar against his armour. I don't care how damn tough you are, this level of fire has got to hurt. I can feel a welling frustration building within him as well. I'm sure he wants to finish me off quickly and go help the rest of the Golgari, but I'm continuing to prove difficult to kill. Every second that passes the Colony gets closer to victory over the others. There's just no way that fourteen stone people are going to be able to hold off hundreds of tier three and four monsters who can work together. I can only hope that Granin and his triad are able to make it out alive. It would be rough if the only reward they received for helping me was an untimely end at the mandibles of my siblings.

Heh. You've got no chance of finishing me off fast enough to save them, punk. What are you gonna do about it? Isn't it time we took the gloves off?

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Chapter 542: Battle concludes

Like air in a bellows, I can feel the strength within this armored figure rise and fall as he tries to control it. I think he knows as well as I do, that he doesn't have any choice but to unleash it. What will it matter if some of his people become collateral damage, if none of them are going to survive anyway? The same proposition is looming before my multifaceted eyes as well. If I don't force this guy to retreat, he'll kill every ant here, or come very close to it. I'm going to have to pull out the big guns to get him out of here, and there's little chance I'll be able to prevent the rest of the colony from getting caught up in the crossfire. It's not a choice I like, but I'm just going to have to deal with it!

Come on then, block-head. Show me what you've got!

Power is surging through me as the Vestibule channels the will of every ant in range, thousands of individuals, into me as energy. Harnessing that, I push my body and minds further than I ever have before. One of my sub-brains weaves together a new elemental construct as I focus my energy on my jaws and lunge forward for another vicious chomp. I fight against the pain of the blade in my side as I fight to hold him still as he gets roasted by the intense heat of the blue flame that pours from my mouth. I feel the surge building before it comes, but rather than retreat, I step forward, bringing the Golgari even closer, so that I might shield my family from as much harm as possible.

Light blazes from the armour in front of me as an irresistible *wave* of force expands outwards from my foe, blasting everything away. I try to absorb the power of it and hold him down, but my legs give out, unable to hold on in the face of such strength. My mandibles are forced open and the sword is torn out of me as my huge body is blown backwards five metres as the very rock around us shakes from the force of the impact. When my vision clears I can see that the walls have been caved in around the figure, with many ants crushed against the stone from the Skill that was unleashed.

HRRRRR. Damn this moron! If he's so desperate for a war that'll kill thousands, then at the very least he should be one the first to fall!

My minds work in flawless harmony as I weave together two different elements to form an entirely new form of spell. Roaring heat from the fire mana construct held in my left brain melds with firm earth mana from my right to form a new mana, thick and bursting with raw power, my central sub-brain takes hold of this new energy and crafts a spell out of it, all in the blink of an eye.

The ability to form new types of mana is just one of the startling advances my spellcraft has made over the last few weeks! My capacity to manipulate mana has grown by leaps and bounds, not to mention that never ending, repetitive practice has driven these new patterns into my subconscious. I've been having dreams about them for Gandalf's sake. It all shows in the incredible ease I pull together this new magic.

EAT LAVA, SUCKA!

Five metres in front of me, the armoured Golgari is ablaze with energy. Mana floods into his armour and blade as he draws back to unleash a mighty blow toward me. Luckily, I can strike before he gets the

chance. Before my face, a sizzling ball of molten rock takes shape before it launches through the air and slams into the figure's chest. The physical force of it is enough to disrupt his balance, but far from enough to knock him down. That's what the next three are for! Lava bolt after lava bolt rockets toward him as he fights to hold his feet. As I hurl the magic, I also advance, step by step, never letting my focus waver. If I allow him a moment of respite he'll be able to unleash his Skill and who knows the devastation that he'll be able to cause with that? I can't give him the chance!

The battle continues to happen around me as ants rush into battle, pheromones flying through the air to rattle off my antennae. Cries of victory, calls for healers, requests for backup wash over me and slide past my consciousness. Sunk deep into meditation, my focus is absolute. I won't be distracted. Step. Step. My mandibles flex and open wide, charging with power as the dark mandibles bloom to life around them.

Omen Chomp!

With a shout of rage, the Golgari tightens his grip on the hilt of his sword and brings it down in a massive overhead strike. The moment it begins to move, the pressure it unleashes is absurd, nearly crushing me to the floor. With my very slight glimpse into the future, my senses scream at me that this blade means death. Even the sight of it is horrifying. His stamina has flooded the blade until it's bursting with light which extends from the tip of the blade through the ceiling of the tunnel. The runes along the blade are lit with pure mana and the energy in the air howls through the air form a vortex around the blade itself.

To be struck by the attack would kill me, I'm certain of that. Diamond carapace or no, this is still an ability above my grade. But I refuse to dodge! Acting against every instinct in my body, I don't roll to the side, or leap backwards. In that split second, hovering on the border of life and death, I *dash* forward.

The arm descends as my mandibles close.

SNAP!

BOOOOOM!

My mandibles crunch down on his arm, arresting its descent, but with a roar of rage, he forces the skill to fall. Using only his wrist, he directs the howling storm down through the blade and onto my back. In that last moment, I hear a resounding SNAP from his arm, and a final blast of lava sprays from my mouth across the figure's face, then the sword falls.

At first, I don't feel anything and I'm filled with relief. Then I realise that I don't feel *anything*. Before I can work out what the problem is, I still need to deal with this idiot in front of my face. He roars in pain as the molten stone slips through the gaps in his helmet to bubble against his true skin. Despite his grip remaining firm around his sword hilt, his wrist hangs loose, unable to exert strength. If I'm going to get a chance to finish off this chump, this is it!

I attack in a frenzy, my jaws pump furiously as I blast him with lava. At this point blank range, the bolts splash and almost as much of the stuff lands on me as slips through his armour. The molten stone hisses furiously as it superheats my carapace, but I pay it no mind, I can't afford to. I trigger my healing gland again and keep on biting. Desperate to fight me off, the Golgari uses his good hand to hammer at my head with his ferocious strength, trying to force my head away. My strength fading, I can't resist for long

and he eventually succeeds in smashing a fist down on my eye. Instantly blinded on that side, I reel in pain and my jaws slacken, allowing the Golgari loose.

He doesn't hesitate and explodes outwards with power, forcing me and every ant nearby back against the walls. With a final glance at the skittering horde of insects around him, he flickers and dashes away down the tunnel, smashing down any ant that gets in his way. As he fades from view, it's only then that I realise my abdomen is missing. As in, the whole thing.

DAMMIT! Closed for business?!

Then I pass out.

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Chapter 543: Incredible advances in medical technology

Turns out that the tier four healers have a whole new range of tricks up their carapace. Some of them have even replaced their acid production with a variant that allows them to shoot regenerative fluids instead. They've literally got medic guns! The things that are possible in this world, I tell you. When I come around, a group of healers is clustered around me, fussing over my injuries. I immediately glance back at my shattered rear-zone and sigh with relief when I see that it's started to regenerate. It doesn't look pretty, that's for sure. In fact, it looks anything but pretty. A pulsing blob of flesh, covered with a congealing layer of glittering, clear shell hangs off of my thorax. Yuck.

Luckily, it's growing and regenerating nicely. When I check my status, there's no change in my glands or organs, which is great. I'd have been majorly ticked off if all of the hard work I'd put into mutation, not to mention all the itching I'd put up with, had been lost in the business district. I'm feeling surprisingly good considering a third of my body was smashed to nothing. That strike was completely nuts, by far the most powerful Skill I've seen. The armoured Golgari are not to be messed with, that's become clear. Maybe after I've evolved again I'll be able to go up against them more evenly.

The Colony around me doesn't seem to share my relaxed attitude to my injury. There are at least twenty ants hovering around me right now, screaming constantly about the situation.

"We need more regenerating fluid! Hurry up with it!"

"I'm all out! There's a lot of healing that needs to get done around here!"

"THEN GET THE HECK OUT OF THE WAY!"

"Do any of you healers know healing magic? NONE of you?! Why the HELL don't we have magic healers in this group?!"

... I kind of feel nervous about telling them that I have a healing magic. I mean, I've been using it on myself, don't get me wrong, they just seem very tense. I could also let them know that Invidia is perfectly capable of healing, but I've got him out healing the injured ants in the tunnels and don't need him to be dragged back here to look after me.

"Let me through, step back a little, let me through."

A calm, authoritative voice broke through the babble and soon Propellant appeared next to me.

"You look a little worse for wear, Eldest."

"Ah, hey there. What's the damage like?"

I know we lost people. I just hope it wasn't too bad.

"Not as bad as you might expect, Eldest. The healers are doing great work, as they always do, and the overwhelming numbers advantage allowed us to effectively swarm the enemy."

"Fair enough," I sigh. "Were there any prisoners? Did anyone surrender?"

Please let Granin and the others have survived.

"We did actually have three surrender during the fight. They are under guard right now. I thought you might want to speak to them before we move on."

"Great! Fantastic news! Where are they?"

After getting directions, I ignore the shouting of the healers and start dragging my battered body towards my erstwhile allies. I find the three of them standing calmly, surrounded by dozens of monstrous ants. Tiny is there also, joking around with Corun as the two of them throw playful punches at each other. When I appear, Granin and Torrina turn towards me and I feel their combined minds reaching out to mine.

[Hey there, squad! I'm so glad you survived!] I greet them.

Granin huffs.

[You look like crap.]

I take in the slowly morphing blob of flesh hanging off my back-end.

[Well, I think I got off pretty light, all things considered.]

Granin brings his hands up to run over his face. He looks weary.

[A lot of my people have died here. This isn't going to turn out well, Anthony.]

[Hey, look. I tried. I offered to just let you guys walk away, back to your city where we would never be seen again. That moron insisted on battle, even if the situation was against you.]

[I figured,] Granin sighs, [it sucks, but it was predictable. The Nobles won't back down once they've been given a task. That's just how it goes.]

He eyes the rest of the ants around him and further down the tunnel.

[I can see what you've done here. You modified the Queen, didn't you?]

I fiddle my antennae and kick the dirt a little.

[I did,] I confess. [I wanted my Colony to thrive, to be successful. In this world, they're my family after all. Is that so wrong?]

Granin falls silent for a moment and Torrina steps forward to fill in the gap.

[It isn't like you did the wrong thing, Anthony, but you have to understand how others are going to react when they find out what you've done. A *normal* Colony of ants is considered a scourge. What you've created here will be seen as the enemy of all sapient life on Pangera.]

[But *why?*] I protest. [We haven't been the aggressors in any conflict. The Colony has just been doing its thing, raising young and exploring the Dungeon. We haven't done anything wrong!]

She only shakes her head.

[It doesn't matter. If you keep exploring, keep expanding, then you'll run into other Dungeon powers eventually. The lower you go, the more crowded it becomes. Battles for territory happen *all the time* down here and nobody wants to share. If your Colony shows up they are going to get violently rejected.]

[It's not only that,] Granin breaks in. [The Dungeon is all about resources. Experience, cores and rare materials.]

I'm not sure what that has to do with...

[Oh, heck. *We* are a resource.]

Granin nods.

[Big ant Colony? Tons of experience. And if I'm not mistaken, every one of these ants has a core. A walking fortune. Probably a lot of useable monster parts as well. Good chunk of carapace can make fine armour, in the right hands. People are going to fight for the chance to come and hunt you down.]

Well, dammit. I'd not considered it like that. This sucks.

[Now that things have come to this, once word gets back to the city, then things are going to start mobilising. You'll have a little time, but not much, before the Empire starts to move against you. If you're lucky, it'll just be them. If you're unlucky, they'll invite others as well.]

[Others?]

[Other kingdoms. Other forces and armies that occupy space in the Dungeon. You're lucky that the area you live in is so undeveloped, at the higher levels at least. But I guarantee that there are powerful groups taking up space below you.]

Hardly shocking, I suppose. Still, they paint a very depressing picture of almost endless conflict to come.

[So, what are you guys going to do?] I ask.

Granin pulls a face and spits to one side.

[Hell. There's basically no way for me to avoid the conflict to come. I'm not even sure how I'll explain our survival.]

[You can always come with me,] I offer.

[No thanks,] he rebuts, [I know you've been treated poorly, and that the coming conflict isn't on you, but I think I'll head back to the Shapers and try to get the Cult on firm footing. I'm not the sort of Golgari who can fight against his people.]

[Fair enough. I couldn't ask it of you.]

It's disappointing. Despite everything, Granin has become something of a mentor to me. But I understand his choice and can only wish the best for him.

[So, I'll be sending these two idiots with you instead,] he points at Torrina and Corun.

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Chapter 544: The long walk home

The tunnels are a complete mess. Huge cracks run through the stone and sections are collapsing all over the place. Before we even meet up with the main group, I know what's taken place. The moment I came under attack, the message was passed to enact the ambush on the Golgari in the other tunnel.

No point allowing the two groups of rock-people to reunite and fight together. Decisive action was called for. I objected to the Colony going to head to head against such a powerful enemy, but the other members of the council assured me that they had another strategy in mind. Which turned out to be collapsing the tunnel on top of the enemies' heads. Using earth mages and our natural predilection to tunnel digging, the council was able to arrange a fairly broad tunnel collapse in a matter of hours. After the stone came down, the ants moved in to fight whatever they could find, taking advantage of the less than ideal state of their opponents.

The fact that the armoured Golgari, the 'nobles', were in the center of the column would have played to our advantage. They should've taken the brunt of the fall, and been too far from the front to be in a position to fight the ants when they charged. Somehow, I doubt they died. With their Skills, armour and doubtlessly potent true skin, if anyone was going to survive a tunnel collapse it would be them. All the more reason to get ourselves out of here.

"Eldest! What a glorious injury you've received! I'm jealous..."

"Leeroy, you idiot. You're looking disappointingly healthy."

"I was unable to find an enemy during the battle. I wanted to start unearthing the Golgari but the others stopped me."

Her antennae droop sadly as she talks of saving the lives of our enemies, only so that she could end them in person.

"I'm tired, Leeroy. What did you want?"

"Right! The others were wondering if you wanted to discuss what was going to happen next? It's a little up in the air, from what I gather."

Up in the air? Why the heck would it be up in the air? Let's go home! Irritated, I drag my still regenerating backside around the tunnel until I find the other council members gathered in a huddle.

"What the heck is going on here?" I demand. "We need to get away from this place and go back to the nest! Why am I hearing about discussions regarding our 'plans'?"

The others make room for me as I barge forward, my larger frame taking up much of the room. Only the tier four soldiers can rival me for size but even they fall short of my bulk and I loom over the council. When I think about it, my eyes are probably at a similar height level to that of a tall human, my third body segment actually being the 'tallest' part of my body. It's in length that my true mass lies and I'm a fairly chunky ant at this point.

"Obviously the plan is to get back to the nest," Burke explains patiently, "but we need to do it in such a way that we don't get followed. At the very least we need to make tracking us as difficult as possible. The more time we can buy for the Colony to grow, the better."

Actually, that's a damn good point.

"Doesn't that just mean we keep going without using pheromones?" I ask.

"Look," Burke says, exasperated, "doing that isn't as simple as some of you seem to think. My scouts rely on those trails to move around and ensure that they stay on safe paths! We don't have mind magic to communicate, and it's too risky to drag a mage that far away from the main group. Long range scouting is basically impossible without pheromonal communication."

Ahh. I'm starting to see the problem.

"So that means we need to move slower in order to ensure we don't take any wrong turns and run into trouble," I say.

"Right," Burke agrees, "but we can't really afford to slow down that much."

"Not to mention," breaks in Sloan, "that we still don't know how they were tracking us once we ceased using our pheromones. Without that knowledge, it's impossible for us to be certain we can't be followed."

"Have either of the prisoners said anything?" I ask.

"Nothing!" declares Leeroy. "They won't even fight with me!"

"What about the two new Golgari you brought back with you?" Burke asks.

"How do you even know about that already?"

"I have my sources, Eldest."

"I bet. No, I'm not going to question them on anything that might be considered a betrayal of their own people. To be honest, I'm not even sure why they were sent with us. I'll have to work that out with them later. For now, let's put our antennae together and work out a plan."

The four of us rattle on for twenty minutes without coming to any conclusive path forward. It's frustrating, but we're dealing with something unknown, a Skill that we don't know about, perhaps. In the end, all we can do is try to limit our scent and move as quickly as possible. To that end, it's agreed that the main group will maintain 'radio silence' whilst the scouts roaming ahead would be able to put

down a limited number of trails to mark paths. Alongside this, an extensive network of false trails would be laid by splinter groups roving away from the main group before they returned.

"If we slow ourselves down too much worrying about something we don't understand, we're only shooting ourselves in the claw," I tell them.

"Right you are, Eldest."

"Sounds good!"

"If you don't mind, I'm going to try and finish healing myself as we start marching."

They agree that seems like a good idea and I pull away from the group to go find my pets. Predictably they're hanging out with Corun and Torrina, both of whom seem a little stunned to be where they've ended up. As I painfully crawl over, I whip up a mind bridge and extend it to both of them.

[He didn't tell you what he was going to do, did he?]

Torrina starts when my mind touches hers and turns her head to find me amongst the swarming ants.

[No, he didn't. I kind of had a feeling that something like this might happen though,] she replies.

[You did?!] Corun cries. [You might have said something. I had no idea...]

I'm also a little curious.

[Why did you think he would leave you behind?] I ask. [This is hardly a wonderful place to be for you guys. Your people are about to go to war with mine, for starters.]

Torrina thinks for a moment before she replies, the gleaming metal of her skin shining softly in the dark.

[Do you remember what the Cult of the Worm is all about, Anthony?]

[Finding the twentieth ancient? Or creating the twentieth, more accurately.]

[Right,] she nods, [it's not unusual for the Cult to appoint a mentor, a steward, to prospects that come under our care, which was done for you. The Cult placed Granin and his triad in charge of you.]

[So?]

I'm struggling to see where this is going.

[So you're still our responsibility as a candidate monster.]

[This seems a little far to go just to fulfill that responsibility, Torrina. I'm not buying it.]

[We take that a little more seriously than you seem to think we do. But there is more. I think that Granin has come to believe you actually have a chance.]

...

[WOT?!]

[That makes sense,] Corun muses. [For Granin to stick his neck out like this. To put the two of us in harm's way? He must really believe in you.]

[Ah, heck.]

So the old man was loopy in the end after all. No way I want something like becoming an ancient. Sounds like way too much work. Not to mention, I have no idea what's supposed to happen when twenty of them get together. Something big apparently. I can't be bothered thinking about this. I've got about a week of marching ahead of me.

[Invidia! Get over here and help me fix my butt. We start marching soon.]

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Chapter 545: The heart of the Legion pt 1

Morrelia groaned as she peeled her eyes open. Her eyelids had other ideas and refused to respond to orders. Her brain and muscles immediately fell into a battle, neither side willing to budge until at last, she triumphed and forced her eyes open. A victory, but hard fought. She was already exhausted and all she'd done was open her eyes.

She wouldn't be defeated like this, not before she'd even rolled out of bed! Slowly, she grit her teeth and began to move her arms and legs. Only slight movements, just a little twitch of a finger, or a curl of toe. Every time she made the attempt, her body would scream with protest and send jagged pokers of pain shooting down her nerves. She was nothing if not determined, or stubborn, her mother would say with a smile, so she persisted. Eventually she was able to clench her hands into fists, which was another win. Then, she was able to shift her feet without significant pain.

Sensing victory, she decided to attempt to leap from her bed in one go. She carefully gathered her strength, grit her teeth in determination and loosened her joints before she flung herself forward! Only to find she moved not a bit, since she was still strapped into the runic armour she'd had on yesterday. In fact, judging by the somewhat lowered perspective she currently enjoyed, it was entirely possible that when she collapsed into bed, the legs on it had broken.

"Crud," she muttered as her body continued to remind her of its numerous aches.

There was nothing for it. She stifled her groans and levered herself out of bed awkwardly, waddling like a turtle to shift the heavy plates of enchanted stone and metal. She might be strong, stronger than she'd ever been, but this stuff was heavy. Once she was up she was able to appreciate the areas of her skin where the leather strapping had chafed as she slept. A whole new type of pain for her to enjoy during today's training. Without much time to prepare herself, she grabbed her well-used pot of salve down from her shelf and awkwardly reached between the plates to try and cover the worst of her injuries.

All of the new Legionaries were sharing medicinal tips and this particular ointment had proven to be a boon. Cheap to requisition from the Legionary supply and effective for the price, the stuff was a godsend to Morrelia on a day like this. Ministrations complete, she stomped out of her room and into the corridor before making her way to the gathering square outside. Already, seven other newly promoted Legionaries in full armour stood to attention, watched over by a stone-still centurion. Cheering that she hadn't been the last to awake, she rushed to take her place in line, posture perfect and gaze determined.

It was another three minutes before the last unfortunates clattered out of the dorm and into the square, by which time the centurion was practically radiating his displeasure. The last to emerge took one frantic

glance around the square, which only confirmed her fate. Without even being ordered, she turned toward the parade ground and started running.

"Double it," the centurion said in clipped tones.

Each of the Legionaries stood in line winced at the fate of their comrade. Double the usual run? That's ten kilometres in full armour before training even begins! As the unfortunate clanked off, the metal of her boots jarring with each step, the rest of them awaited their instructions for the day. The centurion looked over them with a critical eye, making note of their appearance, their demeanor and how willing their glares were. He firmly believed that cultivating one's glare was a critical part of Legionary training. If you couldn't stare down a tier three monster then you shouldn't be let off the base.

"There aren't many Legionaries who arrive in the here without having completed their runic armour training," the centurion began, "but those that do receive the most vigorous and punishing regime the Legion has to offer. The Iron Temple does not produce weak Legionaries."

Morrelia and the rest nodded firmly. The lot of them had been promoted from all over Pangera and not one of them had gone through anything like what they'd experienced over the last month. Brutal, unforgiving, relentless, merciless centurions had driven them to the brink of breaking down and held them there for the entire duration of their stay. If they weren't undertaking endless physical drills, they were in the Dungeon, exhausted and fighting until they dropped. Only to get a splash of water in the face and sent back in.

It was madness, but it worked. Morrelia had experienced growth incomparable to anything she'd experienced before. Her stats, her levels, her Skills. All had exploded rapidly, a testament to the quality of training given here.

"Now for today's assignment, rest!" The centurion barked.

The Legionaries flinched before the words had a chance to soak in. When they had, they only looked confused. Rest? There was *never* rest! What the heck was this 'rest' that he spoke of?!

"Training course is done, Legionaries. Your Classes have reached the required level and your Skills have progressed to the point that you are no longer required to report here. Your time in the Iron Temple is done."

Relief washed over the faces of most of them, but not Morrelia. The centurion was amused to note a flicker of irritation on her face before it was replaced with a decidedly false smile.

"A report on your training progress and accomplishment will be sent to your commanders. You have two hours before you are expected to report to your divisions, until then, pack and clean your armour."

"What about the rest?" One of the Legionaries protested.

The centurion shot her a glare.

"That IS your rest! Or would you rather run?" He jerked a thumb at the still running member.

"No, sir!"

"That's what I thought. Legionary Faronicus, report to me. The rest of you are dismissed."

They each crashed a fist over their heart before moving to their duty, an excited babble of chatter rising as they went. Morrelia stepped toward the centurion warily. She hadn't tried to stand out during her training, but her father's surname carried certain connotations that she'd only become aware of once she'd arrived.

"Your situation is a little unusual, Legionary, in that your training report will end up in the hands of your father. Before I submit it, I want to be sure you are comfortable with that scenario."

Morrelia breathed a sigh of relief. If that was all it was, she didn't have a problem.

"No, that's fine," she said.

The centurion looked at the fierce young woman before with approval in his gaze. Commander Titus would no doubt be pleased by the glowing report about to land in his hands. His daughter would be a rare Legionary if she were given the chance to grow.

"Dismissed, Legionary. Good luck in your division."

"Thank you, centurion."

Morrelia turned and marched back to her rooms where she began the long and painful process of peeling herself out of her runic armour and cleaning down each individual piece. Before that though, another round of salve.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 546: The Heart of the Legion pt 2

Titus walked the long corridors of his new billet with a training report held in one hand, his face cast in stone as usual. It was difficult though, since the corner of his mouth kept threatening to curl up as he read of his daughter's training exploits. The centurions in charge of her training had used some interesting terms, 'manic dedication', 'boundless tolerance for bloodshed' and 'disturbing disregard for pain' where a few of his favorites.

The trainers in the Iron Temple didn't hand out praise lightly, an ornery group of veterans from the deep strata, they prided themselves on producing the best results and the most conditioned Legionaries. Judging by the numbers Morrelia had achieved in her new Class and the growth of her Skills, she'd excelled even by their standards. Pride tinged with sadness welled up within him. He was filled with joy to see Morrelia achieving her potential, but it was bittersweet that her brother would never receive the same opportunities.

He shook his head to shake off the creeping melancholy. Romanus wasn't served by him wallowing in self-pity and Titus wasn't about to allow it of himself. He finished reading the report and dropped it into the satchel by his side as he reached a door set into the stone wall. He knocked firmly and opened it without waiting for a reply.

At his entrance, three figures inside the room stood to attention once they caught sight of him. He snapped a quick salute, fist to heart, before waving for them to be at ease.

"Greetings all, just checking in with Aurillia."

The room was a typical office space in the Legion, sparse and militant, a desk, a bookshelf and a few chairs. Aurillia stood behind the desk, laden with papers whilst two of the younger Legionaries from Liria assisted with the tedious minutiae of administration. Titus had been all too willing to offload the paperwork to his long suffering adjutant, he simply didn't have the time to look after his own Legionaries since the upper brass were intent on having him run all over the temple for meeting after meeting.

"Any chance you've arrived to assist with these requisition forms, commander?" Aurillia asked with an arched brow.

"Not in a million years," he replied flatly and the faces of the two assistants fell.

Donnelan and Mirryn had been stuck in this office for days now, wading through the demanding beaurocracy of the Abyssal Legion. They'd never imagined that the Legion they'd signed up for so long ago would have such strict requirements for paperwork. When the tribune had pointed out that running an independent army on a global scale required as disciplined an approach to administration as it did to soldier training, they could only nod their heads and agree.

"How's progress rehoming our Legionaries?" Titus asked.

Aurillia sighed.

"Slow, commander. Very slow. There's hot spots flaring all over the Dungeon and every commander in the fortress is demanding supplies and reinforcements. Our request to reform our Legion has been accepted, but there seems to be an issue giving us the people we need."

Titus frowned.

"It's not unexpected," he said, "but still disappointing. We were understrength to start with, and after the defense at the Bulwark we are undermanned, but deserving."

"The last wave pushed a lot of garrisons hard, apparently. There just aren't enough recruits to go around, commander."

Titus' eyes glinted.

"I might have to make use of my connections if this thing is going to get done."

Aurillia blanched.

"You'd actually try it? With *her*?"

Titus nodded.

"She's not that scary," he said offhandedly, "you just have to get used to her."

"Maybe to *you* she's not," Aurillia shot back, "I haven't met her in ten years and she *still* scared me."

Donnelan and Myrrin stared at each other wide eyed. Who could the two officers possibly be talking about? Someone able to scare tribune Aurillia? Even intimidate the *commander*? What sort of legendary figure could this be?!

"Have you even been to see her since we arrived?" Aurillia asked.

"Of course I have," Titus said, impatient.

"How many times?" Aurillia was skeptical

"Three or four," Titus mused.

"That's all? That's your *wife*, Titus!"

"She's busy and so am I," he harrumphed, "you think I can just march into her office whenever I want?"

Aurillia blinked.

"You can't?"

"Of course not! If I show up there unannounced, she'd kick me out herself!"

"But now you think you can just wander in there and ask her to give us preferential treatment?"

"No. I have an appointment."

"You do?"

Titus shrugged.

"It was always going to come down to this. The Abyssal Legion has never had an abundance of resources, we squeeze every centimeter out of what we have. If nothing else, the brass know that whatever they place in my hands won't be wasted. So I planned ahead and set this up."

Aurillia ran her eyes over the stacks of paper heaped on her desk.

"Are you telling me," she said, her voice trembling with barely suppressed rage, "that I've been going to war with these *damned* forms for nothing?"

"No!" He hastened to assure her. "All of this stuff still needs to get done. If we don't toe the line, we won't get so much as a sword. If anything, these efforts have been central to our chances of success."

He ran an eye over his longest serving officer.

"Take a day off Aurillia. After today, our situation will change anyway. You can come back and tackle the paper once we know where we stand."

He turned to the two young Legionaries who looked as if they were trying to fade into the walls.

"I'll take these two with me. Minerva always had a soft spot for the young, up and comers. She won't get too nasty with them around. Get up you two. Time to go meet the Consul."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 547: The Heart of Legion pt 3

Even now, a month after arriving in the great fortress of the Legion, Myrrin still couldn't quite believe her eyes whenever she saw it. Along with Donnelan, she trailed behind her commander as they made their way out of the remote barracks she and her fellow refugees from Liria had been billeted in. When

the commander pushed open the door and strode through, the bright light flared in her eyes and she raised a hand to provide some relief. After several days straight of being locked indoors, the outside was a little too well lit for her to handle.

It was almost like stepping out when on the surface. Overhead was a truly vast space, far larger than even Rhyllah had contained. Numerous powerful crystals dotted the ceiling, flooding the enormous expanse with light. The entire space was arranged as an impregnable fortress, walls and towers in concentric rings radiated outward from the centre, every building was designed to be as defensible as possible, whilst also contributing to the overall layout. In the distance she could see the central tower rising like a mountain from the ground. Forged completely of red iron, the impossible tower dominated the entire expanse, dyeing the skyline a blood red, along with its eight siblings. The sister towers formed a great ring around the central pillar, rising to tremendous heights and standing guard over the fortress, iron spears of unbreakable will.

As impressive as the outer towers were, hundreds of metres tall and perfectly straight, they were like nothing any of the Lirian Legionaries had ever seen before, they faded into the background when compared to the central fort. It dominated the entire, vast expanse with ease. A brooding titan of rust red metal that climbed from the floor of the expanse to close to the ceiling, more than two kilometres high. Built in layers, the tower grew thinner as it rose, each new section protected by its own wall and defences. Even from this far away they could make out the enormous siege engines that dotted the walls. This vast structure was the very heart of the Abyssal Legion, wherein the highest ranking members made decisions that would be carried out by their legionaries across Pangera.

It was difficult not to imagine what secrets were contained within, what knowledge had been hidden away since the Legion had been founded. If there was anywhere that forbidden technologies and methods would be held, it would be there, the Red Mountain.

"I've never been in the Mountain," Myrrin muttered to Donnelan, "have you?"

His eyes were fastened on the looming fortress.

"Of course not," he rasped back, "you think they just allow anyone in there?"

She noticed her friend was unusually pale, and sweating as they walked.

"You look as if you've seen a ghost. What's wrong with you? Is the Red Mountain *that* intimidating?"

It certainly was to her. It's a freaking mountain made of metal! Who ever heard of such a demented thing?!

"You realise who we're going to go and see, right?" Donnelan hissed.

Myrrin's eyes widened.

"The commander's wife? I've never met her, she left Liria before I had the chance. Have you ever seen her?"

"Not that," he said, "the title. *Consul*. We're going to see the Consul!"

Myrrin allowed that to sink in for a moment.

"Sweet steel of home!" She suddenly cried out loud.

With a SNAP, the commander's boots halted on the road and he turned to face the two of them with a wry expression on his face.

"I can hear every word you've said back there."

Myrrin and Donnelan flushed red from embarrassment, but the commander just waved it off.

"Come walk up here next to me and we'll talk as we go. We don't want you embarrassing yourself in front of Minerva now do we?"

"Of course not, commander!" Myrrin snapped out a crisp salute.

"We wouldn't dream of it, sir!" Donnelan mirrored her movement perfectly.

Titus stared at them.

"Just relax a little," he told them, "you're making *me* nervous and I'm *married* to the woman."

He turned around and resumed walking as the two of them caught up to him.

"Look, Minerva might be one of the highest ranking members of the Legion on Pangera, sure. But she's not as terrifying as people make out."

"I don't know, commander," Donnelan said warily, "Aurillia seemed more than a little intimidated."

"Well, sure," he acknowledged, "but that's an isolated case, you'll see."

The two young legionaries weren't much mollified but they had little choice but to follow their leader as he marched onward toward the ever growing mountain in the distance. The streets of the fortress were built to the exacting standard of the Legion engineers. Straight, flat stone and wide paths allowed for the easy flow of traffic and there was plenty of that. Legionaries in armour moving goods to warehouses or delivering supplies to the innumerable barracks throughout the expanse, or moving out to the teleportation arrays for deployment. With so many soldiers and administration staff in one place, the fortress held as many civilians as any city, but here, nothing was allowed to distract from the military purpose of the fortress.

Alberton the loremaster had droned on and on about the place when they'd arrived, blinking through the teleportation gates, filling the head of every legionary who'd never been here with the history of the Abyssal Legion's seat of power.

This place had never been conquered, not even during the Cataclysm, she'd learned. This expanse had been found and claimed by the first Legion in the opening years of the Rending, and as the conflict raged on, they'd built it up to its current state and used it as a staging ground and central organising point for the entire war effort. Its location was an intensely held secret, Myrrin didn't even know what strata they were in, though from the extremely dense mana in the air, she was afraid that she could take a guess.

"Have you been to the forges yet? At the foot of the spears," Titus waved toward the great towers that pierced the sky, "that's where the best arms the Abyssal Legion has to offer are made, including my axe."

Myrrin felt her heart skip a beat with excitement at the news. She'd long admired the commander's axe, a weapon of incredible power. She'd love to see where it was made, but her enthusiasm quickly dimmed. The closer they got to the towering Mountain, the more its sheer size loomed over them, the more their hearts quailed. The size, scope and power of it was overwhelming. Only the commander was unaffected, his step getting lighter and his stride extending the closer they came to it.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 548: The Heart of the Legion pt 4

Donnelan and Myrrin struggled to breathe. They huddled together in a vain attempt to ward off the suffocating waves of pressure that emanated from the legionaries around them. There didn't seem to be a single guard standing at their post, or official running messages, who didn't seem as though they were a high level powerhouse with the stats of a top level delver. The two young legionaries felt as small as mice clinging to a toothpick in an ocean storm as they trailed in their commander's wake, desperately struggling not to succumb. For his part, Titus didn't appear to notice their plight. After they were allowed entrance through the yawning gate of the Iron Mountain they hastily made their way inside to find the interior bedecked in breathtaking marble, the wide open halls lined with incredible, life-like statues of long passed legionaries. The commander's steps only lengthened as he moved from place to place, giving his name at each checkpoint they crossed and gradually penetrating deeper into the heart of the fortress.

It took hours and by the end, Myrrin's head was spinning. She couldn't say where they were, who'd they'd met, or even why they were there anymore. Every time they moved from one chamber into the next, the strength of the legionaries on guard seemed to leap to a new tier. The soldiers standing on guard next to her were resplendent in the most impressive Legion armour that she'd ever seen. Trimmed in gold, the living rock plates wreathed precious metals and alive with veins of fire mana that seeped heat into the air as it trickled through the stone. She wasn't even able to look the man in the eye, and when she snuck a glance at Donnelan next to her, she found he was sweating profusely and shaking in his seat.

For goodness sake, commander! Why did you have to bring us with you?!

Oblivious to her suffering, Titus was talking quietly with an armoured official outside a grand set of double doors. The doors themselves were elaborately carved and decorated, set into an archway that extended fifteen metres high. A full squad of ten legionaries stood guard in formation outside the door, their dominant auras unrestrained, flooding the room with their thirst for battle. After a few moments, the official stepped through the cavernous door, leaving Titus by himself. He gazed at the door in silence before he turned back to his two, cowering young legionaries. He clicked his tongue before walking over and clapping them on the shoulder.

"Come one now, young ones. You need to show a little more mettle than this. Don't embarrass our legion."

The two of them stopped trembling and looked up at him, eyes filled with a kindling resolve.

"Don't forget," he said, "it's going to be way worse on the other side of the door."

He gave both of them a squeeze on the shoulder with his sausage fingered hands before he turned to walk back to the door, never noticing the crumbling confidence he left behind.

"I don't want to be here anymore," Donnelan moaned under his breath. "I curse the day I ever got curious about the inside of the Iron Mountain."

"Y-you're g-going to meet the c-consul! A-aren't you excited?"

"You're stuttering. I'm sweating like I've spent a day doing drills in amour. This isn't looking good."

"I-if I pass out in f-front of the consul, will I b-be discharged?" Myrrin whispered, horrified.

"Of course not. The commander will just hate you forever."

"Nooooo."

When the official stepped back through the oversized doors, they both jumped in their seats and shut their mouths, staring straight ahead. Titus exchanged a few short words before he returned to them.

"We're up. Step quickly, we don't get much of her time."

So saying he brushed down the shoulders of their uniforms with his palms as if they were unruly children before grabbing each of them by the arms and straightening their posture.

"It's going to be tough in there, show me what you're made of."

He shot each of them a hard stare, his cold blue eyes piercing through the mountainous pressure that suffocated them and stiffened their spines.

"Yes, commander!" Myrrin shouted unthinkingly and saluted him, Donnelan following suit a moment later.

A deafening silence fell in the chamber as the officials, guards and fellow waiting functionaries turned to stare at the young legionaries. The two of them froze in embarrassment, but Titus actually smiled. That rare sight was enough to focus the two and they followed at his heels as they walked up to the intimidating guards and that oversized door.

A little of the steel had leaked out of the guards as the trio walked through their ranks, the stiff youngsters trailing behind their stoic commander. They made a conscious effort to lighten the strength of their aura as they allowed them to walk through. Once they were gone, the guards resumed their full bore assault on everyone outside the door. Defending the consul was their responsibility and they would perform that duty to the death.

The moment Titus stepped through the door he felt a frozen air pierce straight through him to his bones. He braced himself against and allowed his eyes to take in this new room. The office of the consul was surprisingly small, given the door. The room was roughly ten metres wide, lined by columns decorated with mana infused gold, the stone itself seemed to glow with a soft metallic light. The ceiling was high, vaulted at the top with every inch carved with depictions of legion glory. There was the battle of Deep Field, the defeat of Galatrix, the siege at Crumbling Rock, each a legendary battle from the Rending. At the end of the room, a slight, dark haired woman sat behind a deep red, crystal desk. Every

inch of the walls and floor was exposed, stone or metal, without any softening furnishings at all. She refused to use them. The room felt cold and unyielding, rigid and formal, much like the legion.

And though no expression showed on her face, she radiated an air that let Titus know she was absolutely furious.

He stepped quickly through the door to allow his dual shields to step through, wide eyed as they stepped into the sparse office and he immediately felt the pressure on him ease. He allowed himself to unknot just a little as he stepped toward the desk, his boots clacking on the polished stone floor until he stood before his wife and offered her his salute.

"Commander Titus Faronicus!" He announced himself.

Donnelan and Myrrin hastened to offer their own salute.

"Myrrin Smithson!"

"Donnelan Branger!"

Minerva shot Titus a brief glare before she stood to return their salute. Had the man gone soft? Bringing in these two to protect him from her wrath?!

"Welcome to the office of the consul, legionaries. Be at ease."

Almost unconsciously she appraised the two young soldiers in front of her. Lirian stock, young and only recently promoted, she judged. She watched as they strove to maintain their cool and decided that Titus had trained them well. As he usually did.

"What happened to Liria was a tragedy, and a failure of the Abyssal Legion. Would you not agree, Titus?"

Titus stifled a wince, the lack of title was a warning sign.

"It was," he agreed, not breaking his posture. "The legion garrison was barely able to maintain the bulwark during the wave. We were totally unable to prevent what occurred on the surface."

"I know," Minerva nodded, then sighed. "We wanted to divert reinforcements, but the wave put pressure on us everywhere. If I'd had double the reserves we still may not have been able to relieve Liria. Please, allow me to extend an apology to you, children of that kingdom and loyal soldiers of our legion."

Myrrin and Donnelan stiffened in place before they wordlessly saluted once more, unable to speak. The destruction of their homeland had cut deeply. Even though they had fought as hard as they could in the depths to defend it, it hadn't been enough.

She stood from behind her desk and walked around it to face her husband and his "shields". She was dressed in regulation legion leathers, with solid boots on her feet and her well-toned arms free, as if she expected to swing a weapon at any moment. Her short, cropped hair seemed to bristle as she glared anew at Titus, her eyes very reminiscent of her daughter's.

"Don't think that bringing these two is going to save you, Titus!"

With no warning, she blurred in place, appearing directly in front of the commander, her fist sank deep into his stomach.

"Where is Morrelia?! Do you think I wouldn't know she was here?!"

To his credit, Titus straightened instantly, no sign of pain showing on his face.

"She went straight to the Temple after she arrived, she hadn't changed her class yet."

"She couldn't drop by on the way?"

"That was up to her."

"You couldn't *make* her?"

"I chose not to."

BAM!

Another brutal fist to the gut, this time sending the commander sliding back three metres, his boots screeching on the marble floor. He straightened once more, his face still placid.

"When you accepted a term as consul, raising the children was my responsibility. That's what we agreed."

Minerva stared hard at him before she nodded.

"That's true. Only a few more months and I'll be free of this blasted office."

She idly shook her wrist as she looked at her husband's stomach.

"Have you levelled up a few times?" she asked.

"Three times," he admitted.

She frowned.

"Defensive skills?"

"Iron skin."

"That makes sense. You've definitely toughened up."

"Lucky me," he said wryly.

His wife had always had a temper, much like his daughter. Being separated from her family had only sharpened it. Her guilt at not being with them when Romanus died fuelled much of her anger. Once she had accepted the post of consul, she was duty-bound to remain for the full, ten year term.

"I know why you're here. You want me to reform your legion and get you back out into the fight, and you want to take Morrelia with you. Am I right?"

"Yes, consul."

Minerva leaned back against the hard crystal of her desk.

"We're being pressed everywhere, even now. Mana levels haven't fallen like they should after the wave and some outposts in the deep are reporting they might be on the rise again. Things aren't right out there Titus."

"All the more reason to have good legionaries in the field."

"Hmm."

She looked at him steadily.

"It might be your lucky day. We had a report come in from the Empire of Stone. Ants. They appear to have made their nest somewhere beneath where Liria once stood."

Titus' eyes narrowed.

"I did report that an ant nest had been located."

"But there wasn't the capacity to deal with it right away. It was a problem we'd assumed we could put off for a time, perhaps the wave might have killed the colony off. Now it seems they're raiding locations more than a hundred kilometres away from where you found them. Your legion will be reformed and you'll get your new recruits. Head back to Liria and clean up this infestation, then return. We'll have need of you down here before long."

Titus nodded, his face serious. Ants were always a problem.

"Understood, Consul." He turned to leave.

"Not so fast," Minerva cut him off. "You two head outside. I need to have a ... private word with my husband. After all, Titus, it's been so long since we've *spoken*."

Titus felt a heat rise in his chest. This damned woman.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 549: Arriving home

It's a long 'ol march home, over a week before it's all said and done. It wasn't hard for me to find a use for the time, however, since there was the whole 'impending war of doom and death' looming over our heads. How on Pangera I manage to stumble from one of these disasters into the next I have no idea. Am I cursed by Gandalf, the almighty voice of the System? If so, please let me know! I'm worried I'm causing more harm than good by sticking around the Colony. The nagging thought that they'd be better off if I just wandered into the Dungeon and never came back pokes its way into my mind and refuses to go away.

On the other side of the coin, the endless whispers of the Colony that arrive through the Vestibule tickle at the edge of my awareness, pleading with me to stay, to help, to lead. It's so hard to refuse them, especially when there are so many of them nearby, the voices swell from a collection of whispers to a deafening chorus. What's it going to be like when we make it back to the main nest? I'm almost scared to find out.

Of course, no time can be wasted, even when marching through the Dungeon! Crinis, Invidia and myself devote our time to practicing our mana handling and developing our magic Skills. Crinis has been

diligent in her Shadow Magic practice and is starting to do some interesting things. Deadly, disturbing and horrific things, for sure, but also interesting. I encourage her to pick up mind magic affinity when she can, since she has the potential to reach an advanced enough stage that she could make use of the multi-layered mind construct technique the Shapers informed me of. It's clear from her evolution into the Tri-Maw Amorphous Horror, that she will pursue a balanced stat build, at least for now, which means that she may eventually reach the point of becoming a sincere magical threat. I think it's a build that suits her role in our little team, since she isn't really needed to output damage, that's more for Tiny and me, or even Invidia to do.

Invidia continues to develop and practice his defensive shield and healing magic. Whenever he gets the chance to cure an ant's wounds, he floats off shouting [*give your painss to meeeeeee!*] in a rather charming, yet display of care to his new insect brethren. The ants, for their part, respond with perfect calm in the face of the glowing green eyeball of doom. They don't seem to flinch no matter what pets I raise, simply accepting them as part of the Colony and moving on with life. His grotesque mental stats and potent magical Skills, coupled with his heavily caster focused collection of organs and mutations, allow him to progress rapidly as he just never seems to run out of mana, or the capacity to shape the stuff to his will.

I'm jealous dammit.

I have a long way to go before I manage to fuse my elemental casting Skills as the desired tier. I've come a long way, and learned a few new tricks, including the ability to weave the basic elements together. Pushing earth and fire together to create lava mana is way more taxing and far less efficient than simply fusing the two affinity Skills together to form Lava Magic Affinity, but right now I maintain the flexibility of using earth, fire *and* lava mana whenever I want. Hopefully when I eventually fuse all elements together, I'll still have access to those options. The idea is use the elemental magic as a stopgap until I get myself to the higher ranked stuff. Gravity magic is out there somewhere! I just need to keep on believing.

Invidia himself has an elemental fusion magic. Fire and Air coming together to form his combustion magic, which he can use to such devastating effect.

So I use the week to drill my weaker magic Skills, Air and Earth, successfully ranking them up to tier four and getting some decent levels towards rank five. Whenever I get a chance, I continue to grind at my Core Manipulation Skills as well. We seized quite a few valuable cores in our raid against the Shapers and I grab a couple every time we break to fiddle around with, still trying to master the fusion technique. I've no desire for more pets for myself, but the work is challenging and if I can master the technique, I'll be able to pass it on to the Core Shapers back at the nest.

Besides, if I manage to create a super cool new pet monster core, then I can just give it to another ant. Bella and Ellie back at the nest would be delighted to have a fancy new pet, I'm sure of it!

I can sense it when we begin to approach the nest. More and more ants have been flickering into existence within my Vestibule, tiny motes of energy appearing and drifting from the strange organ and into my body, nourishing me with their energy.

It's quite a thing to find that with so many ants around, I don't really get tired at all. The only fatigue build up I have to deal with is emotional, which seems fine. Even after grinding away at cores until my

head aches, it's a only a short time until I feel fresh one more, ready to go again. My grind capacity is starting to get out of control!

"Eldest, we're getting close to the new nest," Sloan comes over to let me know.

"I figured as much already," I tell him, "it's been a long haul."

"That it has."

I can only imagine what a pain it's been to try and organise our path as we escape, a burden that has fallen almost entirely onto the carapace of Sloan. She's borne up well, something for which I'm extremely grateful. If they'd tried to bring me into the planning, who knows what would have happened.

"Do you think they'll be able to track us, after all the measures we took?"

Decoy paths, detours through numerous expanse' and long stretches of pheromone free travel were just a few of the tricks we attempted during the journey. Burke was going crazy running all over the place, sending groups of scouts on *deep* side tunnels to try and muddy our trail.

"We can hope that they can't, but we have to assume that they can," Sloan sighed, a little of her weariness showing through. "If we don't start preparing then when they get here then we'll lose too much."

I can't help but feel guilt welling up within me at those words. If only I hadn't gotten caught...

"Don't mistake me, Eldest," Sloan breaks into my thoughts. "Regardless of the outcome, we still would have gone to save you. We all know that you would have done the same for us."

My eyes would be welling up with tears if that were something I could still do.

"Thanks, Sloan. I really appreciate that."

"Not at all, Eldest."

"Now, you make sure you get a proper rest once we get in the nest, alright?"

She flinches a little at hearing the dreaded word. I double down.

"And you spread the word to every member of this expedition. I expect a full twenty hours of torpor for each and every one of you."

"TWEN-"

"You heard me Sloan."

"They may not like being punished like this, Eldest..."

"I couldn't care less. Everyone is exhausted and exhausted workers are sloppy workers. Rest!"

"... fine," she mutters, but I can tell she's still unhappy.

"Come on then, Sloan. I'm really looking forward to seeing what the carvers have been up to down here. I wonder if they've learned any more about building in the time I've been gone."

Chrysalis

Chapter 550: The new nest

As we approach the nest I find myself in a huddle with Torrina, Corun and my pet gang in the centre of our column. I'm not sure where the prisoners are being held, somewhere toward the back, I imagine. Hopefully they can adjust to their new abode. I may not like them very much, but I don't want total suffering for them. Claws crossed we use them as part of a peace negotiation or something.

My Vestibule is sparking to life as more and more ants come into range and begin to provide their own trickle of energy. Frankly, the number of ants is already out of control and I don't think I've reached them all yet. I'd estimate close to five thousand are feeding me energy and I'm starting to buzz as if I just drank ten cups of coffee and followed it with a kilogram of raw sugar. Keeping my focus is... difficult. Perhaps a higher Will stat will help me resist this effect? I'll need to test it later.

The tunnel begins to widen out and flatten itself as the rocky protrusions are suddenly gone, as if sheared away by mandibles. The roof remains a little rough though and it takes me a little while to figure out why. Behind each carefully sloped bump is a well disguised hole behind which an ant could emerge without being seen. Clever stuff! In fact, when I look closer, the tunnel ceiling has been left deliberately rough, and not smoothed out like the floor. The ground has been smoothed out so well you could play marbles on here, but the small deviations and bumps that make the stone much easier to grip remain above my head.

[This is some good work,] Corun observes as he walks.

[What do you mean?] I ask him.

He pulls a face.

[Look closely at the floor and walls. Achieving this level of smoothness isn't easy with magic. It appears to have been compressed as well. Trying to get it compacted and remain this even? I'm impressed.]

He's right. My digging Skill is telling me the soil all around has been pressed hard, making it much harder to bite into. Yet it's super smooth, with nothing to grip or hold onto. Is that to make it harder to reach the roof tunnels from the ground?

[Wait a second, what's that?] Torrina breaks in. [Further up on the wall, it doesn't look as flat.]

She's right. As we approach it becomes clear that there's an image carved into the wall. The indentation is shallow, not enough to provide a foothold, but the image is sharp nonetheless. Magically done, no doubt.

[Look at that,] Torrina gasps, [it's so well done!]

[Very lifelike!] Corun admires the image, walking closer to take it in. [Looks like it was made with a combination of magic and carving. See here? You can see the residual scrape marks, even if only barely. A lot of effort went into this!]

From behind I can see the image is of a very impressive and dignified ant, standing proud with a well-shaped carapace and powerful mandibles clacking with determination. If I was in any doubt who it was meant to be, the small ape depicted riding on the ant's back would give it away.

[Is that meant to be Tiny?] Corun wonders, looking over at the big ape.

[That's me and Tiny just after he was reconstituted,] I tell them reluctantly.

They both look at me, then back at the carving, then back at me before they both turn away. They're trying to hide it but I can see both of their shoulders are shaking as they strain to repress their laughter.

[I didn't ask for them to do that! Alright?! Let's just keep moving!]

There's heaps of great ants in this Colony, carve someone else dammit! Like the Queen! Or Vibrant! Or anybody!

Sadly, that wasn't the last time I had to put up with the Golgari laughing. Turns out that wasn't the only carving that depicted me and my pets. I'm not sure which carver was the first to work out his technique, but they sure as hell went nuts with it! Every damn inch of the walls is covered with art!

There's me arriving at the Colony for the first time. Meeting with Mother. The development of Pheromone language, using traps to feed the Colony, hunting in groups. The first war of the hill is depicted in lavish detail, a series of enormous murals dedicated to scenes of the great battle.

Torrina and Corun can't help but become curious about the evolving story so I wind up having to explain the images as we go along, despite each of them glorifying my contributions far too much, something I hasten to assure them. Our escape during the wave, meeting Crinis, running into Beyn, it's all there.

Explaining the interactions we've had with the humans of Liria is awkward to say the least. Both of the Golgari have perplexed looks on their faces when that particular saga is done. Only for it to be followed with the war against Garralosh and her spawn.

[That is one big monster,] Corun gasps. [On the *surface*? That's insane!]

[Oh, she had help,] I assure him, and point an antenna to the place a lizard flanked by his six servants is shown.

[A Kaarmodo! She was a candidate?]

[Yes indeed,] I confirm. [That's the damnable lizard that told you lot about me, Granin informed me. Can't say I'm grateful.]

[Aww, but then you would have never met me!] Corun protests.

[You're making it worse,] Torrina jokes with him, before turning to me. [Did you absorb the core from that creature? If not, do you still have it?]

[I ... didn't absorb it, no. But I do still have it.]

I haven't wanted to think about that core ever since the fight.

She nods.

[That's good. I'd like to see it if possible,] she holds up her hands, [I won't interfere with it in any way. A chance to peer at the details of a candidate monster is a rare blessing.]

[I suppose I can arrange that,] I sigh.

With all the trouble looming, I'll have to focus on maxing out my core, which probably means absorbing that thing as soon as I can. Not looking forward to that...

Up ahead the tunnel narrows down to a limited opening on the right hand side and as we pass through, I can see that there are numerous defensive positions carved into the back of the opening, almost like a vertical wall which would allow ants to look out when clinging to the rock. Clever idea!

Shortly after passing through we're joined by two more busybodies.

[Can't we rest! I can only slither so much!] Jim complains.

The week of travel has been especially hard on the worm and more than once I've seen him looped around Sarah like a flabby scarf whilst she marched with us.

[I could get the ants to grip you with their mandibles and drag you,] I offer him, [although they might get a taste for your tender flesh.]

The giant worm shudders and the menacing bear that looms over all of us places a gentle claw on his back.

[Don't tease him, Anthony,] she says, [Jim's having a hard enough time moving into a nest full of predators.]

[He's never been safer in his life than now,] I scoff, [but I do understand. Soon enough you'll have your own comfy space and you can work out what you want to do with yourselves. No pressure from me.]

[Thanks, Anthony. For everything. By the way, have you seen these incredible carvings?] She nudges her nose toward a three metre tall depiction of me entering the second strata. [The details are incredible! You're telling me that *ants* did this? What else can they do?]

As she talks we approach a gigantic bound steel gate set into the tunnel. Numerous cores and enchantments hum with power across the surface and smack in the centre stands a proud image of an ant's head.

[Apparently, anything...] I tell her.

These damn siblings of mine?! Haven't they learned a bit too much!?