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Chapter 611: The work of war

The ants were not aware of the age old adage from Earth "battles are won on the training ground", but they certainly knew how to throw their efforts into wholehearted preparations regardless. Not that much changed once the invasion forces had been spotted, the Colony had been working full throttle on building capacity and shoring up their defences already. It was however, undeniable that the imminent threat added a certain *frisson* to the air.

Perhaps the mandatory rest observers were a little less diligent, perhaps a few more workers decided to push their next torpor back a few hours, perhaps those teams training in the various expanses within the Colony's territory took a few more risks. Everyone pushed that little bit harder, trying to eke out that final edge that would help the family to survive.

As the workers, crafters and soldiers raced to complete their tasks, far to the East of the Colony, the initial skirmishes had already begun.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

"SHOT OUT!"

"Two kilometre clearance! GO! GO! GO!"

"Next team in five! Five! Keep clear of the sight lanes and watch your abdomens. I want those antennae sharp and eyes focused. I'm talking every lens!"

The last team to fire their long range acid barrage raced through the tunnels, putting a solid distance between themselves and the enemy as stealth specialist scouts kept an eye on the response from the Golgari. Most scouts took extensive range extensions in their acid setup, but not all invested in extensive acid setups like the Eldest. Those that did chose to divert Biomass investment away from more typical mutations, like improving the mandibles or carapace, and instead poured those points into becoming dedicated acid artillery.

"Did we hit?" One scout asked her sibling as they ran to the clearance zone. "I didn't even see them."

"The spotter had us lined up pretty well. Even if it wasn't a direct hit, with that much acid in the air, *something* must have gotten hit," the other reasoned.

"Quiet back there!" The larger scout running in front sent back to them. "You're clogging up the tunnel with scent. Just run!"

They continued to run in silence, the ten scouts keeping to a tight formation, their heavily mutated legs whipping through the air and sending the terrain flashing past. When they finally arrived at their destination, they found dozens of teams resting in groups around the tunnel, some clearly preparing to head back to the front.

In the centre of it all stood an ant larger than the others, one of the council members, Burke.

"Well done team," she welcomed the newly arrived group, "head to the back and rest your legs. We have a stash of Biomass back there, make sure you fill up, mutate if you can and get ready. When it's your turn to head back, I'll let you know."

The scouts saluted their elder with an antenna snapped to their head and scuttled away to take their place amongst the hundreds of other ants. Burke watched them go for a moment before turning back to eastward facing tunnel entrance, waiting on the next group.

"How goes it?" Advant asked, approaching from across the ceiling.

"Why are you up there?"

"I've been training my grip. I've let it stagnate for too long, so I'm sticking to ceilings as much as possible."

Grip was an important Skill for Soldiers, since they had the most mass of all the castes, they needed higher ranks of Grip to compensate in order to be able to traverse walls and roofs as they wanted. They could solve the problem by improving the strength of the gripping claws on the end of their legs during evolution, but no soldier was willing to spend the energy on something that didn't directly improve their combat capability.

"So, how's it going?" Advant asked again.

Burke sighed, or at least, unleashed the pheromone equivalent.

"It's hard to say. We aren't allowed to get close enough to really assess what's happening, so we don't really know if we are achieving anything at all. These are maximum range strikes. Most of the scouts can't even see what they're aiming at."

"The idea isn't to inflict damage, remember. The whole point is try and fatigue the enemy."

"I know."

It had been Frances, the healer's idea, oddly enough. The ants had an enormous advantage, from what they'd seen, in numbers over the enemy, which meant they could afford to be profligate in their use of each ant's energy. If ten ants were able to wear down a single Golgari, that would be a worthy trade. The healer had pointed out that fatigue would be a far greater danger for the sapient than it was for the Colony. By constantly threatening the enemy and forcing them to defend against an endless acid barrage, the council aimed at sapping energy from the invaders, bit by bit.

"I just wish we could engage them more directly," Burke said, "it feels like we aren't doing enough."

"You're starting to sound like Leeroy," Advant joked, "be patient. We aren't going to be able to beat these block-heads without fighting smart. If it comes down to it and we have to swarm them through the tunnel walls, we will, but until we don't have a choice, we need to explore every possible advantage we can get our mandibles on."

"I know, I know. Imagine a scout being lectured by a soldier on patience."

"Had to happen sometime," the two of them clacked their mandibles in a quick laugh as another team raced through the tunnel toward them.

"Good work!" Burke greeted them before asking them to take their place. "Next team away!" She called, sending another group of scouts running back to the front to repeat the never ending cycle.

"What to do you think about what Sloan said?" Advant asked.

"About the tunnel collapses? I think it makes sense. We have to try and think about countering things we haven't seen yet, and she made a good argument."

"I suppose," the soldier didn't sound convinced, "I just don't know how they could counter an entire tunnel dropping on their head."

"Just because it worked for us once, doesn't mean it's going to work every time," the scout lectured her sister, "I'm with the generals on this one. There's *no way* they don't have a method to detect or prevent tunnel collapses. They live down here. I think the only reason we managed to pull it off last time is because they didn't expect it. They certainly will now."

"Alright, fine. I suppose you're right. How do you think the other scout teams are finding things in the deep?"

"I have no idea, but I'll tell you what, I'd rather be me than Wills right now."

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Chapter 612: A determined enemy

They're digging in for the long haul, and I hate it. I hate it! I don't want them to be this sensible! Constructing a fortified position? Securing their supply lines? Pushing forward with caution? No! This isn't what I want to see! I want them to charge ahead, frothing at the mouth and underestimating us to the point of stupidity!

I can wish, can't I?

After digging our way out of the tunnel and healing up our injuries, my pets and I retraced our steps until we met up with the relay scouts. After sending word back to the Colony, I decided we'd be best served here, keeping an eye on this new threat, determining how severe it was, and sucking up all the XP in the area. The more we take for ourselves, the less that they'll get. Not to mention, the number of levels I need to complete my fusion, my next big power spike, is getting lower and lower.

But spying on this mystery army is proving to be a right pain in the rear-zone. We can't get anywhere close to them. Their guard is up so high I can't even see over the top of it. Those stupid monster detecting crystals are in place, they have mages in every patrol around the outside of their camp, a camp they built with almost ant-like efficiency, I might add. It seems as though they have every method of monster detection I know of installed already, as well as a few I don't. When I sent one of my babysitters to go investigate as best, they could, even they were detected before making it much past the guards.

How the heck were they able to detect them?! There must be some method I haven't heard of yet... Since then, they've been relatively quiet, but it's been less than a day. They send out patrols to investigate the nearby tunnels, but they don't go far. Certainly not far enough that I feel comfortable trying to engage them, they're just too close to the reinforcements.

Their numbers are another thing we don't know. There's more of them than I initially thought, and the camp that's been set up certainly seems like it would hold hundreds, but I just don't *know* enough.

And Morrelia. I'd kind of hoped that she'd come out here I'd have a chance to talk with her, ask a question or two. Like, "Hey Morrelia, how have you been? Why are you with these armoured murder-bots who are trying to take my head off?" When was this something that happened?!

Too many questions and I have no answers.

I find myself seated in a disgruntled tangle of legs, my senses focused on the tunnel ahead which twists and turns and after three kilometres leads to the zone inhabited by those tin cans when a fresh scout approaches.

"Eldest! Word has come from the Colony!"

"Finally! What's happening up there?"

I've been waiting a long time for this! Although, I have to admit that the relay system the scouts have worked out is lightning fast. These poor scouts have run a heck of a long way to the Colony and back.

"The Golgari invasion force has been sighted, and preliminary engagements are taking place."

"Holy moly!"

"Indeed. Only indirect combat is the information I have at this time, Eldest."

"Do we have a picture of the strength of their force?"

"I'm not aware of it if we do, Eldest."

Dammit.

"Alright, thanks. I appreciate your hard work."

The weary scout tips her antennae to me and stumbles back to her waiting post, clearly on her last six legs. So much to think about. Thinking isn't my speciality! To be honest, I'm not entirely sure what my speciality is... I can work that out later! Gah! I'm going crazy just standing around here cleaning my antennae, watching this mystery force entrench themselves whilst I can't do anything about it. I need to move.

Problem is, the place where the Colony is clashing with the Golgari is ages away. If I were to rush there, it'd take hours to get there, and then what if something terrible happened here whilst I was on my way?! We have two areas of conflict, and as far as I know, I can't be in two places at once! I didn't think it was possible, but my irritation at Morrelia's new goon squad has risen to an even higher pitch. I address the team.

[Let's get going. There's no point sitting here banging our heads against the wall. We need levels and Biomass, and if these punks are going to give us time to get it, I'm not going to say no.]

My pets are ready to go in a moment, stepping forward (or floating, or just hanging onto my carapace) eager to go into battle once more.

"I'm going to keep grinding," I tell the scouts nearby. "If something happens, come and get me, I'll leave a pheromone trail, but I want you all to be very careful. We don't know enough about what's happening here, and I don't want to see my siblings waste their lives."

The ants acknowledge my scent and go back to their careful monitoring of the tunnels, and I head upwards, ready to dig into more Biomass and harvest some experience.

Nearby.

"Keep focused you daft boy! Things are happening!"

Donnelan shook his head slightly to clear the cobwebs and refocused his attention on the array. Braxis nodded in satisfaction, not taking his eyes or mind from the enchanted device.

"We have movement," he muttered, "but who, and where?"

The younger mage worked hard to sync his mind, not only with the crystal monster detection array in front of him but also on his own mage-armor. The enchantments and cores woven into the bulky metal and stone plates enhanced his ability to direct his thoughts and control mana, but only if he properly harnessed them.

"What are you sensing, boy?" the grizzled senior mage asked the young man.

Donnelan pushed his mind harder, right to the point where pain spiked through his brain before backing off with a sigh.

"The big one. The signal is fading, I think it's rising, along with a lot of others. I'm not sure how many."

Braxis grunted.

"Yeah well, they're pretty damn hard to find with a field array, even for me. Almost all of them are moving out, in five minutes they'll be out of range. There's still a few around though. Must be keeping an eye on us, the cheeky buggers."

The old man chuckled at his own horrible joke, whilst Donnelan forced out a weak grin. Braxis was a veteran mage of the Legion and certainly a far higher level than new blood like him. It paid to not get on his bad side.

"All right then. I'll keep an eye here, you go report to the commander. I get the feeling he'll want to know what's going on."

Forcing down his nerves, Donnelan gathered his courage, saluted his officer and made his way out of their tent and into the darkness of the frenetic camp. Legionaries ran every which way, carting stone, shifting supplies, getting ready to patrol or organising the rapid expansion and construction. In only a few hours a random section of tunnel had been transformed into a proto-base. He and the other mages had worked themselves to the bone shaping stone, flattening areas, raising others and blocking off the entrances. The moment he'd finished that shift, he'd been dragged in to help man the monster sensing array. His head was pounding after so many hours of continuous spellcraft.

Hopefully, the commander would let him rest soon.

He pushed through the camp and made his way to the command tent, the centre of activity in the camp. After making himself known to a legate, stating his business and waiting in line for ten minutes, he stepped inside to find Titus looming over a table, a crude map of the tunnel structure around their location spread out before him.

Donnelan crashed his fist to his heart in a brisk salute, and the commander glanced up at him and nodded. Behind that powerful figure, hulking in his massive armour, stood his personal guard. He got the unnerving feeling that each of them watched him, and somehow every corner of the tent at the same time.

"At ease young Legionary. What has old Braxis got for us?"

"Movement from the enemy, sir. The first ant we'd spotted, the high tier one, has moved upward, taking the pets and stealthed ants with them. He expects they'll be beyond our range in five."

The commander grunted, his eyes dropping back to the map as he traced his finger along a tunnel above their current position.

"Any of them still here?" he asked without looking up.

"Yes, sir. A half dozen, not many."

"Keeping an eye on us. Watching and waiting."

Titus straightened to his full height.

"Good work Donnelan. Go get yourself some rest, you'll be needed on rotation in five hours."

The relief that had risen within the Legionary at the word 'rest' barely had time to grow before it was ruthlessly crushed by his commander. Five hours?! What was he, a monster? Grumbling to himself, Donnelan turned neatly on his heel and walked out, then staggered the rest of the way to his own bunk. He didn't even bother unstrapping and powering down his armour when he got there, he just collapsed into his roll, asleep before his head touched the blankets.

Back in the command tent, Titus was disturbed. These ants didn't behave as ants should. Even the presence of an abomination wasn't enough to fully account for it. He had a gnawing feeling in his gut that wasn't going away. He'd learned to trust that feeling over the years, he wasn't about to ignore it now. In another six hours, he'd have contact with the Golgari, and he intended to ask them some very pointed questions.

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Chapter 613: The stone endures

What is mana? It was an embarrassingly long time before the tower had anything even remotely approaching a satisfying answer to this question. Even now, we have no real way of knowing if we are correct, since we don't know where it comes from, how it's made or where it goes. We know that it existed on Pangera before the Dungeon broke the surface. It's possible that mana has always existed on Pangera since the pre-history times, but that's another thing we cannot confirm.

The deeper one goes into the Dungeon, the more dense it becomes. This, we have known for a long time. There has been a lot of argument over whether the mana was emanating outward from the centre of the

planet, or being drawn from the outside inward. A great deal of effort was put into tracing the mana flows on the surface and most studies have been inconclusive on this issue.

As to the nature of mana itself, who knows? It's a type of energy. It's malleable. It can be changed into a massive variety of other forms of mana, each with their own attributes, strengths and weaknesses. It's tied into the natural world, as it replicates things that are possible without it. Sometimes. Other times it achieves things that are impossible without its use.

To this day it baffles us, though we use it extensively in our daily lives and research.

- *Grand Mage Trissitan of the tower.*

The mana was rising. It wasn't a dramatic issue in the present moment, but should this extermination drag out, it might cause problems. The spawn rates have already begun to rise, if it were to become another Wave...

The High Blade shook his head. It wouldn't come to that, so soon after a wave had just completed. There hadn't been two such events so close together in the history of the Empire of Stone. It would be foolish to adjust his strategy to accommodate such a freak occurrence. The levels were still within tolerance, no doubt they would peak soon and then continue to decline until mana levels returned to what they should be.

He dismissed the thoughts from his mind with practiced ease and sank himself further into the meditative state necessary for the ritual. All concerns and awareness faded from view. The mission no longer existed, the tent around him turned to black and even the myriad of sounds of the camp that had intruded so rudely a moment before were gone.

All that remained was the stillness, and the blade.

With smooth, practiced motions, the High Blade withdrew the container of stone seed. The precious mineral, ground into a glittering dust, flickered in the near perfect darkness, the only significant source of light within the tent. With care, the Warrior drew his blade and placed in on the prepared cloth spread before him. Once, twice, thrice he cleaned its surface, ensuring that not a speck of dust marred it's perfect surface. Only then did he take the stone seed and slowly tap a small amount into the palm of his hand.

He could feel the mana within the dust, strong and vibrant, through the rock of his true skin. It was tantalising. Sunk deep into meditation, he ignored it and stretched his hand out to the blade. Before he opened his hand, he could already feel the hunger wake within the blade, the living stone keen for sustenance.

Lapisvitae, the stone of life. As he allowed the seed to trickle from his palm onto the surface of the blade it greedily drank it in, absorbing the mineral and the mana it contained to strengthen and sustain itself. It was almost a waste to awaken the blade only to cut insect trash, a pathetic breed of monster, unworthy of his talents. But his circle had been slighted, his people attacked. Nothing but the obliteration of his enemies would satisfy his rage.

The sword emitted a faint light as he slid it back into its sheath. It would take time to digest the meal he had given it, but in time it would put forth a measure of its true power. Ritual complete, the High Blade

rose and relaxed his meditative state. Once again the mundane world impugned his senses, the noise, mess and pain. He would deal with it as he always did: without complaint, mercy or hesitation.

Kooranon of the house Balta rose to his full height and marched from his tent. He was tired of these pests spitting at his camp, it was time they endured his wrath.

Vibrant was running. She wasn't exactly sure where to, or what she was going to do when she got there, but wherever and whatever was going to happen, she wanted to make sure it was going to happen *fast*. Problems seemed to sort themselves out so long as she was quick enough. It was one of the reasons her mutations continued to emphasise speed. The faster she went, the easier things got, so why not just keep getting faster? She couldn't wait until her next evolution. The sort of speed she'd be able to achieve then would truly be something to behold!

"Vibrant! Senior! Where are we going?" Emilia, her loyal general asked.

Vibrant laughed.

"I'm not sure! Down I suppose? Isn't it good to go down? Better than sitting around in a council room. That's boring!"

They were racing through the tunnels, her and her loyal followers, each and every one of them built for speed. The entire group was tier four now, a fearsome group of insects to be sure. They fell upon everything in their way with ferocious, coordinated strikes and devoured the Biomass like a school of sharks before sprinting to catch up with the lead group. In this way they accrued experience and Biomass at a great pace.

"I believe the Eldest is down here somewhere! Do you think we should join forces with them?" Emilia shouted, desperate to keep pace with her leader.

"Cris-cris! I wonder what she's up to? Something fun, I'm sure! That's a good idea Emilia! Well done!"

The general tried to suppress the flood of joy at being praised by this erratic, scatterbrained leader she had chosen to follow. She needed to focus! The Colony was at war and Vibrant would need her advice and strategic nous if the squad was going to perform at its best.

Vibrant spied a shadow beast slinking across the tunnel in front of her and *dashed* for it, her mandibles smashing shut around the creature's neck, inflicting massive damage. The beast snarled, shocked at the horrendous speed the enemy had displayed. Moving a body that large so quickly wasn't easy, even in the Dungeon!

"Food-food!" Crinis cackled and chomped down once more.

In a few more chomps, the bulk of the Biomass was gone and Vibrant was off and running once again. Ever since she'd reached the fifth rank of dash, using the instantaneous burst of speed to surprise her enemies had become her favourite tactic.

Behind her the sound of two hundred ants pounding the stone with their claws echoed along the chamber, along with the crunch and crack of mandibles closing around hapless foes. The Colony was on the move.

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Chapter 614: Marshal the colony

It was almost funny, Mendant thought to herself, that such a highly anticipated and foreshadowed invasion would result in such frantic activity on the part of the Colony. None of them were surprised, and yet all them managed to be in the wrong place and behind the pace when the enemy finally arrived. She herself was rushing through the main nest, organising teams of healers about to depart for the front lines.

Or what were soon to be the front lines. The real fighting was yet to begin, and like every time the Colony started a fight, there would be many, many of her siblings that needed healing. Her other priority for the moment, the construction of the massive 'hospital' inside the nest, was behind schedule also.

The idea of a central location in which to tend the most severely wounded made sense to Mendant, though she hadn't realised that there existed a term for such a facility until recently. The hospital was intended to house those that would require an extended period of time and a preponderance of resources to bring back to full strength. Being monsters, even the most severe injuries would heal quickly, given the application of healing fluid, magic and a hearty feed of Biomass, but the regeneration process could take days. Also, the discovery that more highly evolved and mutated members of the family were more difficult to heal had come as something of a shock to the Colony.

Perhaps the Queen was the first high tier ant to be injured, but none could remember that time, before the Colony had truly come into being. The Eldest had recovered from severe injuries during the escape from Golgari territory and the amount of healing fluid used to heal those wounds was incredible. This had led to the disturbing discovery of increased healing times for the growing number of tier four ants in the Colony.

Thus the hospital. The worst injured might need a full week to recover, and drain resource that would not be available at the front. Alas, the carvers were being pushed the brink, constructing two whole new nests, new surface nests, myriad layers of defences throughout Colony territory as well as major construction projects here in the main nest.

The last team departed, loaded with precious Biomass containers to fuel the troops on the frontlines and Mendant turned to run back to the construction site. The healers would be just as busy as the carvers soon enough.

Something that Cobalt would likely dispute. She herself hadn't entered torpor in three days, and had been forced to flee from rest enforcers twice in that time. She was pushing her limits right to the edge and she knew it, but circumstances were forcing her hand. The amount of construction going on in Colony territory was mind boggling. Managing the flow of resources, the extraction, processing and installation of each and every piece was a nightmare of logistics that (in her opinion) put the grand strategy of the generals to shame in its complexity.

Hundreds of tons of material were moved by carvers each and every hour, thousands of them, hauling stone and ore with their mandibles, shaping the Dungeon with their magics. That didn't even include the dozens of ongoing research projects! Forcing Dungeon veins from an area? Top priority, according to the council! Unravelling gate technology? Top priority! Developing new rune combinations for combat enchantments? Top priority! Better gates! Stronger doors! More cunning traps! It never ended!

The carver focused her mind and tried to shake away her complaints. They didn't matter! Only the work mattered! She herself was deep into the process of designing another addition to the nest. The Colony's intake of materials from the resource gathering outposts would soon outstrip their current capacity to process and refine them. They could expand it, obviously, but such a solution was inelegant and inefficient, something that would twist in her guts like a knife. If they took that approach, the carvers would need to constantly be adding onto a system on the brink of failure forever. It would take up too much space, weaken the internal defences of the nest and fail to process the materials in a timely manner, which would hamper the war effort.

No, a new system was needed. And since the forges, smelters and refiners within the nest were being redesigned, why not the mining stations? And if the mining stations were being rebuilt, why not develop a better transport method?

Alone in a chamber, Cobalt slumped to the stone, slipping into torpor against her will. In the centre of the large chamber stood a grand stone carving, ten metres by ten metres it depicted the carver's section of the nest, not as it was, but as it would be. A revolution was coming.

The mages were flagging. In the lead up to the invasion, Propellant and Coolant had led their caste in a concerted drive to raise combat effectiveness as high as possible in the shortest possible time frame. This had necessitated that the mages begin active combat training, mage against mage. The injuries had been... more extensive than anticipated, but the results were worth it. The rest of their caste was engaged in research alongside the carvers, desperately bending their minds to pry open the secrets of gates and Dungeon 'folding' as they had come to refer to it.

The final push had been a twenty four hour duelling marathon in which mages had slung spells at each other without pause, until their brains had almost started leaking out of their ears. Every ounce of experience they could gain had been squeezed out of the exhausted ants until they'd collapsed into torpor. Now that the enemy had arrived, the troops were being woken and organised, Propellant moved through the rest chambers and training areas, designating each and every individual a deployment plan according to the arranged schedule. In ones and twos, the mage ants of the Colony filed out of the nest, met up with teams of scouts, soldiers and healers, before moving out to the front line.

Wills was in a good position to see it happen. Outside the main nest a flood of ants poured out the main thoroughfares, dashing past the open gates and into the Dungeon in a tide of soldiers. Tens of thousands of them, row after row, marched past her, formed into their assigned teams and left. They would travel as fast as they could to make it to their assigned positions in the plan, the pheromone trails had already been laid, ready to lead them to their place.

The sight of her family marching to war gave the lithe scout mixed feelings. There was no fear in them, no regrets or hesitation. Many of them were only weeks old, didn't even recall a time when the grand nest in the second strata didn't exist. Now they went to defend it with their lives against an unknown enemy.

She cleaned her antennae in the elbow joint of her legs. A soothing gesture. What would come would come. There wasn't anything they could do more than they had already done. Preparations had occurred at a frenzied pace, ants working themselves into the dirt. All that was left was to measure their strength against what Pangera would throw at them.

The Colony would triumph, as they always did, of this she was sure. With the Eldest to lead them, how could they fail?

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Chapter 615: A chat with Titus

Titus hated dressing up. But the Golgari High Blades were notorious sticklers for protocol and tradition, so his hands were tied. He'd be damned if he'd put on his full dress uniform though, absolutely no chance. The jumped up pile of rocks would have to be satisfied with him giving his armour a solid polish. So it was that in the final hours of the bridge relay being assembled, Titus took off his elaborate Legion Runic Armour, sat in front of the command tent and attended to the buckles, plates and stone whilst directing his Legion.

His hands worked the leather straps, polished the buckles and cleaned the stone almost automatically, not really having to look at what he was doing, his eyes instead roving over the camp. There wasn't a single Legionary with five years of experience who couldn't clean their armour in their sleep, and Titus had far more than that.

When the job was done, he put the suit back on, almost feeling a sense of relief when the final plate snapped into place, sealing him in.

"Feeling more comfortable commander?" Alberton asked from his seat nearby.

Titus shrugged his shoulders, feeling the heavy suit fall into place on his frame.

"It doesn't feel right being in the field without being armoured up," Titus said.

He performed a few rapid checks with hands, pulling on a plate here, shoving with his palms there, testing the joints and straps. The Loremaster frowned.

"Be careful of the mana ..." he began.

"I know," Titus cut him off and continued his meticulous checks.

Alberton was silent for a moment before he continued quietly.

"I worry sometimes, old friend. Just be careful."

Titus didn't look up from his inspection and after a long moment Alberton sighed and rose from his seat, checking every strap and seal on the back of the suit.

"Flawless as always commander," he said, slapping him on the pauldron with one wrinkled hand.

"Are you going to suit up?"

The Loremaster snorted.

"What for? My Skills are in research and documents, not swords and sorcery."

Titus turned and looked his friend in the eye.

"Put it on," he ordered, "something isn't quite right on this mission and I don't want to lose anyone. In fact, pass the order, I want all personnel to be battle ready at all times. No exceptions."

Without pausing to listen to the Loremaster's spluttering protestations, Titus turned and strode toward the communications tent. As he walked he managed to loosen his jaw and tamp down his anger. It wasn't Alberton's fault. The mana was rising and the armour drank it in, pouring it into his infused body. He made a mental note to have the medics do regular checks on every member of the Legion, including himself.

The effect of mana on the human body had many implications. Mana sickness was just the most common of these. Once adapted to a certain level of mana, withdrawal became the next concern, wasting away just like a monster would. What the old Legionary worried about was something only high level individuals had to be wary of: addiction.

Titus brushed through the opening of the stiff canvas tent to find Braxis fussing over a core as it was lowered into the array.

"Careful, careful! That thing cracks and it's six months pay for a louse like you!"

"This would be a lot easier if you'd stop shouting at me."

"Shut up and work!"

The youngster, Donnelan, rolled his eyes as he placed the precious core into its housing. The moment it clicked into place, the entire array hummed to life, accompanied by an inward whoosh of mana as the core began to drain it.

"Is it ready?" Titus rumbled from the entrance.

"Ah, Commander. Just in time, it's ready to roll. Give it a second to charge and I'll engage the Bridge. Shouldn't take long."

Titus nodded and strode around the tent to stand in front of the device. This was far from the first time he'd used a Bridge Relay. As he waited for the mage to finish his work, the younger Legionary watching attentively over his shoulder, Titus thought about the current campaign. The more he thought, the higher his temper flared until he forced it down again.

Hiding information? From the Legion? The Legionem Abyssis were not to be lied to, something the Empire of Stone appeared to have forgotten.

"I'm through, commander," Braxis' voice sounded distant and eyes seemed to be open but saw nothing. Titus knew he was reaching through the array with his mind, seeking out the connection to the Golgari camp. "You're speaking now."

So saying, Braxis turned his blank eyes onto his commander and Titus felt his mind reach out to his own. Relaxing his will, he allowed himself to be carried out of his own body. There was a feeling of being dragged, and a rush of distance, then he stood before the High Blade Balta, surrounded by swirling darkness and mist.

Eyes cold, the Golgari drew his blade, lay it across his palms and bowed over it.

"Before the living stone I greet you, Titus of the Legion."

Titus returned the gesture with a Legionary salute, crashing his right fist into his chest plate, right over his heart.

"The Abyssal Legion sends its greetings, High Blade," Titus said.

The barest minimum of decorum addressed, the two men settled on their heels and weighed each other. Titus was familiar with the Golgari, they were a martial people, numerous within the Legion, he knew exactly what he was looking at.

As if sensing the tinge of contempt from his opposite's expression, the High Blade Balta sneered as he addressed his ally.

"You have come calling so soon, commander. Has the Legion run into difficulty already? Are the insects too difficult and you must request my help?"

Titus didn't answer immediately, he just stared, hard, at the Golgari. To his credit, Balta appeared unruffled, his demeanour condescending and superior.

"The Legionem Abyssi does not appreciate when information is withheld."

That got a raised eyebrow.

"You accuse the Empire of Stone of withholding knowledge from you? This is a bold claim you make, commander. By your honour, I trust you have proof," his voice sharpened by the end.

The word honour from the mouth of this snake curdled Titus' gut, but he kept his face smooth, even as he allowed a little heat to enter his eyes.

"If I decide that your Empire has misled us, then I will petition the Consul for a punitive expedition to be dispatched immediately," Titus spoke evenly, "perhaps after we put a few cities to the torch your people will remember how to treat their allies."

"You would dare?!"

"It wouldn't be my first time."

The two leaders glared at each other, hands twitching as they longed to grasp weapons that didn't truly exist here in this mind space. After a long, tense moment, Titus crossed his arms and settled back on his heels.

"However, I don't believe it was the Empire that provided false information to us."

He didn't bother clarifying his accusation. If he spoke aloud his suspicions of the High Blade, Balta would be honour bound to defend himself. Better to let those words hang in the air, unspoken.

"Your Legion has forgotten their place, it would seem. You were requested to join this expedition to support the Empire in crushing this infestation. Instead you arrive here with threats and accusations."

"We encountered an abomination."

The reaction was immediate. Rage flared in the eyes of the High Blade, only to quickly cool to simmering anger.

"Where?"

"You didn't tell us there was an abomination. One being here changes the nature of the conflict significantly."

"Where?!" Balta raged.

Titus didn't answer. He simply stood and stared at his opposite. After a moment the Golgari calmed himself.

"That creature has insulted my family, injured my kin and brought shame to my house. I will destroy that filth with my own hands, slowly. Where did you find it?" He demanded.

Titus sighed internally. Petty feuds and grudges. It was always like this with the Golgari. They were as stubborn and hard headed as their own skin.

"I need to make something clear to you at the beginning of this cooperation," Titus spoke slowly, "you have a personal stake in this expedition, I understand that now, but I want to make something very clear."

He leaned forward.

"I don't care."

A pause.

"The Legion has come here, at your request, to exterminate this nest before it gets out of control. With or without your help, that is exactly what we are going to do. If you get in my way, I'll cut you down myself."

Titus spoke flatly, without emotion, as if he were discussing the weather. It wasn't an opinion, it was simply fact.

"Now tell me everything that you should have told me before, or I'll go hunt your precious quarry myself, kill it with mercy and dignity, then bury it with honour. It's right outside my camp, after all."

The High Blade's eyes glittered with malice.

"Fine."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 616: The Rage

When the bellow of pure rage shook the stone around the Legion camp, Aurillia was one of the few who didn't start wildly staring around themselves, trying to understand what had happened. She'd soldiered with the commander for a long time, and it wasn't the first time she heard him get angry. She was surprised, to be sure, that roar had shaken everyone, such was the sheer volume and depth of anger contained within it. She just wasn't confused, she knew what had happened.

"What was that?!"

Aurillia turned to see Titus' daughter, the young Morrelia, approach her. The berserker's eyes were wide, as if she wasn't quite believing what she was hearing.

Aurillia raised a brow.

"You've never heard your father get angry before?"

She shook her head.

"No, never."

The tribune was initially surprised at this, but then, considering her parents, it was most likely the mother who'd displayed the most temper. Only in the field did Titus experience these sorts of eruptions. The man himself then appeared, storming out of the communications tent, the rage rolling off him in waves. So powerful was his aura that even experienced Legionaries were forced to draw back.

Morrelia watched, wide eyed, as her usually unflappable father stormed across the camp, his face a mask of black rage. When he reached the stone wall of the tunnel, he pulled back one fist and slammed it into the rock so quickly she couldn't see his hand move.

BOOM!

The stone *exploded*, sending chips flying throughout the camp and leaving the enraged commander with his arm buried up to the shoulder. With inhuman strength, he yanked it out in one solid pull and shook it, clearly irritated by the dust now coating the armour which had only moments ago been pristine. Aurillia decided to seize the moment whilst Titus was distracted to approach.

Expression carefully neutral, she marched in front of the commander and offered a crisp salute.

"Commander Titus, tribune Aurillia reporting."

"Stop it," he grunted.

She maintained her parade ground perfect form, feet flat, shoulders down, the exact angle on the saluting arm.

"I don't know what you mean, commander."

"Every time I lose my temper, you march over, as formal as possible in a misguided attempt to inject some calm. It's irritating."

"But effective."

"That's why it's irritating."

Titus closed his eyes and drew a deep, slow breath. He focused his mind and concentrated on pushing his anger away, forcing it out of his clenched muscles and pounding heart, out of his racing blood and into his lungs. From his lungs, he imagined forcing the emotion into the air contained therein, which he then breathed out. It only took a moment, but he was noticeably more calm. The almost physical pressure he'd exerted had eased, if not completely, at least enough that it was more comfortable standing close to him.

Though she tried to hide it, Aurillia breathed out a sigh of relief as the waves of anger stopped battering against her consciousness. Whatever had set him off this time, it must have been bad.

"I presume you've just finished communicating with our valued allies?" She enquired as Morrelia tentatively approached.

At the mention of the Golgari, Titus' face twisted once more, but only for an instant before he was able to smooth it back to its normal state of smooth stone.

"I have."

He paused for a moment, ensuring he had mastered himself before he continued.

"When they requested the Legion assist them in this endeavour, it would appear that the House communicating with us withheld some information."

Morrelia came and stood beside the tribune, a worried expression on her face. She tentatively tried to speak up.

"Fathe -"

"How bad is it?" Aurillia asked.

"Bad," Titus ground out. "Not only did they *not* tell us there is an abomination in this Colony of insects, apparently *two* others might be present, as they have somehow joined forces within Golgari territory."

"Quite a coincidence."

"Indeed," he spat. "If that were all, it would be bad enough. I'd have brought a second Legion on this extermination, just to be sure."

"There's more?" Aurillia sounded appalled.

Keeping information from the Legion simply wasn't done. What sort of colossal moron had decided it was a good idea this time?

"The ant abomination has modified the core of at least one Queen and turned the whole damn Colony Sapient."

There was a moment of silence as the tribune absorbed that.

"WHAT?!" She bellowed.

"That's what I said," Titus nodded.

Morrelia winced at Aurillia's outburst, but mustered her courage and tried to inject herself into the conversation again.

"Comman -,"

"The species is apparently called *Formica Sapiens*. Numerous tier three, some tier four specimens spotted, and that was weeks ago. We can expect far more fours and possibly some fives mixed in. On top of that, there are magic capable ants, as well as some with their own pets and healers in the mix."

The tribune was aghast.

"This is a disaster! The potential damage from such a swarm is.. is... monstrous!"

She was staggered by the sheer scale of the disaster. A normal ant colony, when left unchecked, was enough to tear down kingdoms, destroy cities and consume tens of thousands of lives. A Colony where every single insect was intelligent?

Titus breathed out slowly.

"Yes. If I'd been told this ahead of time, I'd have brought five Legions. Cornering the Colony and ensuring none of the damned monsters escape to continue to the species is going to be a nightmare with our numbers. Even managing to engage the filthy beasts is going to be a pain."

Expression grim, Titus began to think about what he needed to do.

"Alright. Aurillia, I want you to assemble the officers. Ten minutes. We have to redraw the parameters of our campaign here. We'll try and get reinforcements, though I think it'll be a struggle to get the numbers I want. That means every soldier is going to have to carry more weight. I want the troops informed of a shift in policy within the hour. Things are going to get rough and they need to be warned."

"Yes, Commander."

The tribune offered a crisp salute before she turned on her heel and walked swiftly away, leaving Titus and Morrelia alone together. The commander offered his daughter a weary smile.

"I apologise for losing my temper. I always tried to control it around you and your brother."

Suddenly addressed by the person she was trying to speak to moments ago, Morrelia could only nod.

Titus sighed.

"Things are going to get ugly here. Sentient monsters are a nasty fight at the best of times. The sort of numbers we're dealing with here? We're going to lose good people. Dead Legionaries, all thanks to that prideful trash pile."

He reached out and placed a hand on his daughter's shoulder.

"Get some rest while you can. There's a lot of killing to do soon. It's not going to be easy, but it's necessary to keep people safe."

So saying, he removed his hand, squared his shoulders and marched forward into the camp. He had work to do.

Morrelia slumped her shoulders.

"Ah, hell," she said.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 617: Easy breezy

Abyssal Legion Armour is known by many names, Runic Armour, Legion Plate, Abyssal Armour. As far as I can determine, no 'official' nomenclature exists. At least, if one did in the past, it has since been lost. Instead, the terms used tend to vary from region to region, or Legion to Legion.

For the purposes of this text, I shall use the term Abyssal Armour, as that is the most commonly used in my own deployment.

Legion records from The Rending are surprisingly robust in some areas. Fortunately, the creation of the armour is one such field of study. Though others would doubtless refute such a claim, the Legion was the first surface dwelling organisation to penetrate deep into the Dungeon. Desperate to survive, the early leadership would reach out to any branch that they thought would pull them from the surging currents. A great deal was discovered, and utilised, that is now forbidden.

What they eventually learned was that in order to survive, it wasn't enough to just defend the surface. The means and materials required to destroy the monsters weren't to be found there, but deep in the Dungeon itself. It was the confluence of several discoveries that led to the development of the first suits.

Lapisvitae. The living stone. Harder than steel, highly responsive to mana and able to be grown to a desired shape, the material was perfect for creating arms and armour that would respond well to enchantment. Unlike others, the Legion has never prioritised using the stone for weapons, but instead highly prized its defensive properties and included it in our armour. The usage can vary, depending on where the armour was forged, but most typically Lapisvitae is used to form the chest plate, thigh guards and gorget. The slabs of living stone are grown to the desired shape and fused to the metal using means I shall not elaborate on here.

The second major discovery was what came to be known as Abyssal Iron. Difficult to mine, impossible to work, the stuff was so highly prized by the early Legion that they founded their central fortress on top of the only known node. Not all suits of Abyssal Armour are made out of this metal, it's too rare for that, but the best ones are. Despite being notoriously hard to work with, the Iron possessed several properties that the Legion prizes. First, it's indescribably tough. Second, it conducts mana to an absurd degree, whilst also being resistant to magical damage, a contradiction I cannot begin to explain. Third, it was discovered that the Iron could hold captive the 'essence' or 'soul' of a monster. Trapped within, the creature would lend a portion of its own strength and will to metal, turning the monster's strength against its own kind.

The third discovery was the baptism through which each Legionary is reborn, their bodies adapted to accept the flow of mana to a higher degree than other mortals. On its own this wasn't relevant, but when both Baptism and Abyssal Armour became common within the Legion, a method was developed where the one would connect to the other. A feedback loop, where the armour would feed mana into the body, through the channels forged by the absorption of liquid mana, where it strengthened the Legionary, and then back into the armour, powering its enchantments.

In this way the Legion solidified its already considerable strength and paved the way for modern patterns of Abyssal armour. Though much has changed over the centuries, (the types of enchantments used, the preferred shape and layout of the armour, the monster core array) the basic three components remain the same. Living Stone plate. Abyssal Iron frame. A Legionary with mana in their veins.

- *Excerpt from 'Origins of the Legion - a reflection' by Alberton. Loremaster of the Liria*

"Dammit Vibrant! It's not my fault if Crinis doesn't want to go play with you!"

"Is-is! The only reason she won't come is because she's worried about you! If you weren't the sort of ant that vanished into pits, or, or got captured, or vanished into thin air and needed others to save you, or -- _"

"ALRIGHT! FINE!"

[Crinis, go and play with this moron for a while would you?]

"Yay-yay!"

[Master, I'm not sure. This isn't really a good time...]

[Crinis, I'm so fed up with her whinging, I'll order you if I have to. I promise I won't fight the invaders and I'll retreat if they find me, alright? Just go have fun.]

[... Alright. But be careful! I won't be far away!]

[Okay, okay.]

The void of infinite darkness and suffering peels herself off my carapace and latches onto Vibrant who continues to dance around like a gigantic, hideous insect-child. With her new passenger on board, the energetic ant speeds away into the Dungeon with Crinis' tentacles fluttering in the wind.

FINALLY!

Some peace and quiet. I don't know how she manages to cram so many words into such a small amount of time. And she never seems to run out! I actually believe she's mutated her pheromone gland to increase her supply so she doesn't have to worry about running out! Otherwise there would be no way she could possibly go on as much as she does.

With the pest no longer polluting the air and smothering my antennae with her irritating scent, I can finally concentrate. I give my idle sub-brains a kick and they almost begrudgingly get back to work, spinning together the Gas magic construct, the advanced form of the basic air construct. I form two at once and have each of my smaller sub-brains maintain them as the central sub-brain and my main mind get to work operating them and weaving the spells I need together.

It's a shame that Vibrant wouldn't shut up long enough for me to try this little trick on her. Ah well, Tiny gets a kick out of it.

[You ready, big guy?]

The giant bat-faced ape shakes his shoulders as he gives me a thumbs up with one of his engine sized fists, a broad grin splitting his face. The two spells aren't that hard to weave really, I mean, not compared to some others. Creating a blade of wind so sharp it can cut stone takes a bit of work after all. The first spell anchors to Tiny (a trick that took quite a while for me to get a hold on. Invidia helped a lot) and sits right in front of him. It basically splits the air ahead of him and causes it to pass by his sides.

The second is similar. It anchors behind Tiny and takes hold of the air passing around him, and then accelerates it. The net effect is that he goes *super* fast.

[Alright then, you're set to go! Invidia, stick close to him.]

[I am ssssspeeed.]

[You're about to be. GO!]

And he's off! Dashing away he leaves only a blurred outline of himself, a small orb with wings hanging onto his back. That'll keep him occupied for a while. More alone time for me to work on my magic.

[Gas Magic Affinity has reached level 32!]

Whoo! Nice! Eight more levels and I'll be ready to fuse! I'm sure our invading friends will be calm enough to wait until I reach that milestone...

Chrysalis

Chapter 618: The Press

"Hold the line!" Advant flooded the surrounding space with her pheromones.

"FOR THE COLONY!" The ants roared back.

BOOM!

Another explosion rocked the tunnel, sending Colony members sprawling in the dust. Healers rushed forward, antennae darting over the fallen, checking for pheromones indicating injury or distress. The medics had to be careful, too many soldiers were hiding their injuries, or at least refusing to acknowledge them.

Once they'd identified those in need, they pulled them back from the front line and began to administer emergency treatment

"Mages! Return fire!" Advant continued to flood the combat zone with instructions, trying to bring some order to the chaos. "Another acid barrage! Where's my artillery!?"

A team of ants pressed forward, collectively raising their business districts and unleashing a flood of acid at the enemies in the distance. With dust, spells, smoke and the acrid haze of acid filling the tunnel, it was almost impossible to see what was happening in the distance. Advant strained to see, frustrated by her inability to determine the enemy's movements.

"They're advancing!" Called her spotter.

"Fall back!" she roared, "Give ground, steady pace! Healers to the rear!"

The ants organise themselves instantly, tiny bursts of pheromones flying between them as they communicate rapidly. Every member was constantly aware of where their neighbours were. Compound eyes, antennae firing with the scent messages, the Colony members were in constant communication with each other.

The healers scurried to pull the injured back until larger soldiers moved to join them. Their wounded family members clung to their back with mandibles and claws and they made an organized retreat.

"Ready the collapse!" Advant ordered and the gathered mages got to work quickly.

Mana flowed and shifted in the air. Great torrents of the stuff, drilling into the ceiling, softening the rock in places, splitting it apart in others. The mages were guided by their digging Skill, helping them to ascertain how to best perform their work.

Advant watched them carefully, waiting. It was subtle at first, one mage, then another twitched as if poked, their hold on the mana slipping from their grasp.

"They're pushing back!" One of them announced. "I've lost control of the stone!"

"Don't force it! Pull back with the others. Quickly!"

The mages broke off their working as the ceiling of the tunnel continued to groan and shift above their heads. The powerful Soldier was the last to retreat, watchful for any pursuit, but none came. The Stone people had been advancing for a day, frustrating the Colony's attempts to hold them back. Somehow they were even able to overpower the ant mages and prevent them from collapsing the tunnels when they tried it. With their superior command of earth magic, it was even possible that they could drop the tunnel ceilings right on the Colony's heads, but they didn't want a few crushed ants, they wanted to continue to push forward. Toward the nest.

The forward combat group fell back two kilometres until they reached the next defence point, a joining of three sizeable tunnels to form one major arterial passage. The Carvers had been hard at work here, ambush tunnels, thick walls enchanted against damage, a significant narrowing of the passage. They would make a major stand here.

Weary and in need of healing, Advant led her group into the defences, directing her members to rest and eat.

"There's plenty more fighting to do," she warned them, "anyone skipping torpor will be sent straight back to the nest. Maybe you can explain to mother why you thought you knew better than to do as the Colony asked of you."

The ants shrank back visibly from that threat. Getting a dressing down from the Queen was something few ants got to experience, but all dreaded. Only the Eldest had demonstrated any capacity to withstand the pressure, just another legendary aspect of their existence.

"That's an effective way to threaten the troops," another scent commented, "I might have to try that one on the mages."

Advant turned to see Propellant walk over. The mage looked exhausted, her antennae drooping against her will, her legs barely holding her abdomen off the ground.

"I think I need to use it on you," Advant observed, "it seems you're in need of some torpor yourself."

The mage waved one antennae wearily.

"I would if I could. I assume you know what's been happening?"

"The tunnels not collapsing?"

The smaller ant nodded.

"It's not as if it was central to our strategy, but it has exposed a weakness. They are stronger than us when we fight them directly without bringing our advantage in numbers to bear. This goes for the soldiers as well as the mages."

"It's not as if we didn't know that already," Advant pointed out.

"True, but I don't think we were prepared for how great the gap would be. I don't even think collapsing the tunnels would slow them that much, only hours perhaps, but they refuse to give us even that much. We aren't even able to succeed at tunnelling behind them. They can sense us as we move through the stone."

Advant knew this much. Once the golgari had begun to press forward, they'd been relentless. The Colony had no desire to throw lives away battling to the death over stretches of tunnel so far from their nests, so their delaying strategy had been put into play. Slow down the advance, wear them out, never let them rest. It was too early to say it wasn't having any effect, but Advant wasn't as confident as she had been.

"Have you had word from the other fronts?" she asked.

Propellant nodded.

"I caught up with Burke on my way here. It's the same on every angle they're pushing forward. Every now and again they send out splinter groups to feel out the side passages, but never far enough that we can cut them off. They're hunting the nest, they don't care about anything else."

"They know we'll never retreat from the brood," Advant guessed, "they believe we'll stand and fight when they get close enough."

"Which is why I think they invited the second force," the mage shared, "a pincer, to make it more difficult for us to simply retreat away from the golgari with the young."

The conflict had only begun, one day of fighting with almost no casualties, yet already Advant was feeling pressured.

"Stay cool," Propellant advised, "and you know it's serious if it's me saying that. We have a long road and a lot of battle ahead. Things can change faster than you think. Be ready."

"Good advice," the soldier conceded, "let's both of us get some torpor whilst we can, sister. The battle here is going to be fierce."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 619: In the dark, but not alone

It took a long time before we actually began to fight as the sapient do. The gift the Eldest bestowed on us seemed natural, once we had it. Our old forms fell away and were replaced by the new in such a seamless way, we never considered what that transition really meant for an embarrassingly long time. Although the Colony learned at a tremendously fast pace, and developed in many different directions at once, in battle, too often we defaulted to the behaviour of monsters without thinking.

To the monster, fighting is for territory, food or preservation. Using all the tools at their disposal, monsters fight in a brutal fashion to meet their needs. We thought we were brutal. We crushed our prey with horrific violence, never giving them the chance to fight back. What were we, if not apex predators?

The sapient showed us different ways and reasons to battle. For hate, for revenge, for power, as punishment and as reward. In truth, there are a thousand reasons why they fight, a thousand times a thousand, almost all of them unimportant or nonsensical in the eyes of the Colony. But the way they fought, even against each other...

Savage, merciless, pitiless. They would go further than any monster would in seeking the destruction of their enemies, chase them to the end of the world and laugh the whole way. The Colony had to learn to treat them the same way, if we wanted to survive. The records show the discontent these actions caused amongst our family, it was unnatural to engage in such a profligate waste of resources. To push an already defeated foe into the dirt, in case they might one day rise up again? The Colony did not fear the defeated as the sapients did. What had fallen to the Colony once, would only fall harder the second time. What we discovered over time is that our actions were interpreted as 'mercy' and 'weakness', a sign that we were prey, not predator.

What we learned was how to finally teach the foolish who we really were.

- Excerpt from 'The History of Warfare in the Colony' by Historiant

Granin sighed. He was tired. He could feel it in his bones. Beneath the granite that covered him, beneath the flesh and right in the core of him, he was tired. It wasn't the two days he'd been awake that was draining him, though it didn't help. He could push for a week if he needed to, and it was starting to look as if he did. The perpetual posturing and bickering within the Shaper Circle wasn't the main issue, though it certainly grated on him. How a race with such affinity to the common building blocks of the world became such posers he had no idea, but it was reality. Not even the constant suppression of the Warriors had drained him to this point. He was so accustomed to it that he almost didn't notice that the Shapers were the last to be fed, the last to get water, the first to wake and the last to sleep.

It was the Nobles.

Granin had decided that he hated the nobles. Those High Ladies and Lords, the Blades of this house or that, their true-skin inevitably formed of such rare minerals that they gleamed in the darkness of second strata, dragging everyone else through the mud it was plain unnecessary.

He himself had little doubt that the only reason he was here was so his body could be left in a ditch on the way home in order to expunge whatever shame the House of Balta had decided Anthony had inflicted on them. He knew it wasn't likely, but if he lived to see the day when Anthony chomped a few of these pompous morons in half, he'd be able to die a happy golgari.

"Lazus! You awake?" A callous voice called.

"Why wouldn't I be? Haven't been given permission to sleep," the old Shaper grumbled, careful to pitch his voice low. "Over here," he called.

The figure stumbled in the dark and cursed as he made his way over. The Shapers didn't warrant the expense of lights on this expedition apparently. This kind of suppression was a touch unusual, but not unheard of. Though it would probably end the way it always did.

"You Lazus?" the voice asked.

"That's me."

"They want you at the front immediately."

The barely concealed sneer in his voice told Granin all he needed to know about this messenger. Warrior, snobbish, highly skilled and stupid. Just like everyone else on this damn mission.

"Alright then," he hauled himself to his feet, "I wouldn't want to keep them waiting."

As they made their way through the camp it grew progressively brighter as they left the Shapers Circle behind, entered the Warriors and then the Nobles. Here the pride of House Balta rested, Shield Guardians, Blade Saints, Sword Dancers, veterans of waves, internecine House conflicts and more than a few from the last Wood War.

To his surprise, Granin wasn't stopped here, but instead directed through the centre of the camp and toward the front. He heard it before he saw it, shouted orders, the ring of Skills and explosions of magic. He almost sighed. He'd been here not that long ago, pitting his Will against the ants as they tried to push back and hold against the golgari or, failing that, causing rock falls to delay them. He almost chuckled at that. The monsters had no need to worry about angering the Church of the Path by disfiguring the 'holy' order of the Dungeon. Not like the golgari didn't indulge in a little collapse every now and again. All was well as long as there wasn't proof.

As they advanced they walked past a number of mages, each with their eyes closed and senses extended, watching the stone with their minds. It was draining work that required constant concentration, something no Warrior would appreciate. He shook his head to try and clear away his sluggish thoughts. Damn, he needed some sleep.

At the rear of the line, a tall, decorated golgari watched the action with a critical eye. It was toward him that Granin was led. The closer they got, the more he could make out of the battle taking place. Mana flares lit the area, penetrating the hideous dark, illuminating the two fronts. Disciplined rows of golgari were exchanging fire with a walled defence a hundred metres away that positively bristled with ants. From the other side they unleashed a flood of acid and spells. There must be thousands of them over there.

Just what the heck has Anthony done over there?

"Right pain in the backside," a voice broke his concentration.

The old Shaper started when he realised it was the authoritative figure speaking to him. The Warrior eyed him with a critical eye before he turned back to the scene unfolding before him.

"Who would have thought these bloody insects would be building forts?"

Granin shifted on his feet a little. He'd known it, that's for sure. The next sentence took him by surprise.

"Ready to join the charge?"

"Crud."

Chrysalis

Chapter 620: In the mouth of madness

He sensed them before they came. The Shapers had been ordered to keep their senses tuned for just such an ambush, but the ants were getting clever. They must have placed dampeners or some other form of mana suppression in the tunnels, which meant he didn't have a whole lot of time once he detected the tell-tale signs through the ground.

"Contact!" Granin hollered, "beneath! Above! And in the damn walls!"

His voice didn't carry far above the din, but enough heard him to make a difference.

Shields went up, exploding with shimmering light that expanded to cover the golgari force on the flanks even as Shapers wove together shields. Flares of light arched from mage's hands into the rock around the tunnel, bringing points of illumination to the oppressive darkness.

What they saw wasn't pretty. From well concealed points on the walls and ceiling came a flood of insects, their antennae twitching furiously, lidless eyes staring as they launched their attack. Acid and magic came at the invaders from all sides, hammering into shields and coating them with hissing goo.

"Hold the line!" A voice roared, cutting through the noise. "Nothing here we didn't expect! Push forward! PUSH damn you!"

Granin could only shake his head. Low Blade Hironus Balta led this offensive, hoping to cover himself with glory in the eyes of his House and clan. Why the minor noble felt it necessary to drag an exhausted Shaper into the middle of the fight, he had a few suspicions, none of them good. Not much he could do about it now. Granin had known something like this would happen when he sent his triad away. He hoped those two kids were doing alright. More than that, he hoped Anthony was living up to the promise that the old Shaper had seen in him.

The tunnel was wide, close to two hundred metres at its widest point when the multiple passages came together, but the golgari hadn't spread to cover that space as they pushed toward the walled fort the ants had created. The attacking force was a thousand members strong, but they were outnumbered at least five to one.

He forced his tired mind to work, splitting off his mental constructs and tasking each of them with a role. Pain spiked through his head and he stifled a wince. He was pushing his limits here. Insanity had erupted in the tunnel and there was too much to take in. Mana swirled wildly through the air as hundreds of mages drew on the energy and cast it back out in a different form. Granin dedicated his own resources to firming up the shields on the left flank where he stood. Offensive magic was just as likely to hurt as harm in a situation like this. With acid covering the shields, he wouldn't be able to see what he was aiming at.

The ants weren't committing so far, hanging back and not closing with the deadly blades of the golgari. It made for a slow, grinding battle where neither side wanted to commit. At least, so far. It was only a matter of time until someone declared the charge.

"SHIELD WALL!" Came a deafening shout. "ANCHOR YOURSELVES!"

What? Granin almost did a double take but forced himself not to turn his attention to the front. He had his own role to play and he knew better than to split his focus when he was already so drained.

The Low Blade almost wished he were able to avert his eyes, he wasn't quite able to parse exactly what he was looking at. The golgari had been making slow and steady progress toward the ant fort. The moment they'd closed the distance, the insects would have been forced to retreat or die throwing themselves against a wall of swords.

It was clear the ants were pursuing a strategy of attrition, trying to wear down their betters. The very idea made Balta curl his lip. The Warriors of House Balta were indefatigable! They would push forward for weeks if necessary! The battle progressed exactly as he imagined it, right up until the ants defending the wall of their fort had parted and a host of armoured monstrosities had charged forth.

Huge ants covered in steel rushed forward with almost palpable glee, their mandibles eagerly gnashing and chomping at the air. From behind those behemoths came a tidal wave of insects, thousands of them, blasting acid overhead as they ran upon the floor and ceiling,

A quiver of fear rose in his chest but he ruthlessly quashed it. A noble of the Houses wouldn't falter in the face of these damned insects! He gave the orders to hold the line and a host of huge, broad shouldered Warriors stepped forward, massive tower shields mounted on their arms. Together they activated their defensive Skills as the front line stepped in behind them.

"LET THEM TASTE YOUR SWORD!" He ordered and stepped forward himself, blade in hand.

Such was the weight and power of the insect charge that the ground under their feet was shaking, but the golgari held firm. Balta tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword and centred himself, allowing his emotions to fade as he channelled his energy into the blade. When he felt the technique reach its peak he bellowed and the sword blade flashed, tracing a brilliant arc of light in the air.

It was just one of a torrent of sword light that flew forward from the golgari lines towards the onrushing ants. Balta eagerly waited to see the result of their barrage. In his mind's eye he could already see the bugs cut to pieces, their charge dying in its infancy.

What he didn't expect, was for the armoured figures to *throw* themselves onto the sword light. He almost didn't believe it, but he swore he saw two of them thud into each other, trying to push the other aside so *they* could be the one to take the blow for the other.

The sword light struck home and the screech of metal filled the air as the ant-armour was rent and cut, causing the leading figures to stumble, but they didn't stop. Before the golgari could take another breath, the ants crashed into their line and all hell broke loose.