

Chrysalis 621

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 621: Blissful danger

"LEEEEEEROOOOOOOOOOOY!"

What a day! WHAT A GLORIOUS DAY! The Immortals unleashed their war cry, the name of their great leader, as they charged toward what would surely be their useful deaths! The golgari formed a fortress before them, their combined shields creating a wall of golden light that the ants just couldn't wait to run into.

"No!" roared Leeroy as she battered aside one of her subordinates with a vicious shoulder check. "I will be the one to die!"

The soldier watched the powerful arc of sword light descend on her as if it moved in slow motion. Perhaps this would be her chance, maybe this was her moment! The armour was an extension of her own body. She felt it, as the beam of condensed energy crunched into the steel, cutting deep rents in the folded metal and sending shockwaves of pressure through her carapace. There was pain, she was scarred, but she did not find oblivion. A disappointment.

"THE SEARCH GOES ON, SISTERS!"

"WE SEEK!"

The Immortals charged with renewed vigour, the mighty enemy arrayed before them igniting a flame in their hearts and cores that burned like a sun.

"You lot are weird," muttered a small voice.

Clung underneath Leeroy, her claws dug into special grooves cut for purpose and her head protected behind a curve of folded steel, the healer had to wonder who had thought it was a good idea to send these crazed siblings into battle.

Leeroy cared nothing for the opinion of others. She cared only for this moment, this charge and this enemy. The wall loomed before them, the golgari stood firm against their massed charge, confident in the strength of their defence. She hoped they were right.

Closer. Closer! CLOSER!

Tons of metal encased ant continued to endure the blows that rained down on them as they closed with the enemy, the rest of the Colony's attack force following close behind. At the last possible moment, Leeroy synched her three pairs of legs, ready to unleash the new technique she had discovered.

DASH! DASH! DASH!

Firing each pair of legs just off time with each other, the Immortals push their thin ant legs to the breaking point, three separate dashes executed almost at once. The sheer force almost shattered their joints but pushed the armoured titans to the peak of their speed. The heavily armoured insects time their charge perfectly, crashing home into the golden shield line like a wave of steel.

Please! Leeroy hoped.

Nope! The medic declared, releasing her grip and dropping to the ground along with her sisters who appeared from under the other armoured figures. Once on the ground they turned their mandibles to the dirt, burrowing down as the rest of the attack wave flowed over their backs.

Leeroy turned her body and felt her carapace crunch into the golgari defence. A test of the hardest the Colony could produce and the shield wall of the golgari. Despite her pounding heart and screaming soul, it was the shield that broke first, the enormous shield of energy cracked, then shattered under the combined weight of the Immortals.

Carried forward by her momentum, Leeroy smashed into the golgari themselves, splintering shields and stumbling to the ground, her legs giving way beneath her. The Colony swarmed forward over her back as the soldier took a moment to check her body and collect her thoughts.

She was injured. The impact against the shield had crumpled her armour and a web of stress fractures had appeared on her carapace. Yet, she lived. Still, she lived. Her body protested as she forced her legs to the ground and pushed herself up, regenerative fluid already sloshing through her body. The pain was intense, but she ignored it, hope igniting within her once more. The battle still continued, after all.

"THE SEARCH GOES ON, SISTERS!"

The battered Immortals responded in chorus.

"WE SEEK!"

Advant, directing the fight from close to the front could only twitch her antennae, a mix of irritation and bemusement rising inside her. At first it seemed like a good idea to take those soldiers who, like Leeroy, struggled with the concept of valuing their own lives and put them together with Leeroy in the Immortals. Armoured to the utmost limit of the Colony's skills, they were the hardest to kill of any soldier after all. Instead, Leeroy had turned their lack of care into a fanatical desire for a glorious death.

When the Eldest got back, they weren't going to be pleased.

She shook off the stray thoughts. The battle raged around her and she had a job to do. The golgari were surrounded on three sides, the Colony closing into melee on every front. It had been a deliberate decision not to surround them completely, they still weren't sure of the fighting strength the golgari possessed and it had been deemed wise not to find out when they were given no escape.

Advant climbed a nearby rock to better see the conflict. The ants pressed hard, the barrage of acid and magic never ending. Though their front shield was destroyed, there must be mages maintaining the barriers on the flanks, since the acid barrage isn't getting through. The ants are though. From her elevated position, she could see soldiers pressing forward and engaging the enemy with their mandibles.

Details were hard to make out, smoke and steam had begun to fill the tunnel, but the fighting must have been fierce. She could see healers working hard, dragging injured ants out of the conflict, risking their lives to fetch their wounded siblings back to the pits they'd prepared. With that tiny bit of cover, they set about administering what treatment they could. From behind, Advant could see reinforcements still pouring from the fort behind her, the ants crawling over each other and every surface of the tunnel in order to close with their opponents.

The Colony had committed five thousand ants to this battle, the first real test against the golgari. Not a number that could contend with the full force brought against them, but enough to take a fight if it presented itself. When the enemy had dared to advance with only a small portion of their numbers against them, Advant and her siblings had decided they had no choice but to commit.

The main battle ground was a heaving mess in her eyes, the small details of the conflict were completely lost in the crush. But that wasn't what she was looking for. All of her senses strained to their utmost as she focused, trying to see the overall picture of the battlefield. The golgari were shocked by the charge of the Immortals, but they were holding their formation. The ants increased the pressure, gripping their enemy in the mandibles formed by their three pronged assault, and slowly the golgari began to pull back. A fighting retreat.

Advant watched, tense as a bowstring, for thirty minutes as the fighting raged until finally there was a response from the golgari camp. Massed ranks began to appear, led by figures in gleaming armour in the distance. It was time to sound the retreat.

"PULL BACK!" She roared, her pheromones flooding the area around her.

In moments her message had been relayed, blowing away the other scents in the tunnel as every ant passed it on. In an instant, the seething mass of insects that had pressed the golgari from multiple sides broke away and ran, carrying their wounded with them as they went. The acid and magic barrage continued as the soldiers retreated, until that too was over and the ants vanished into their hidden tunnels.

In ten seconds, what had moments ago been a raging battle was eerily silent. Advant watched their enemy closely. The golgari appeared confused, several wanting to press forward to take advantage of the open field, others pulling back and yet more milling about in confusion. After observing for a few long moments, she too made her withdrawal, the first major battle of the conflict complete. There would be much to discuss and analyse, no doubt the generals would have much to say. For the moment, the enemy advance had been halted.

A victory for the Colony.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 622: Ah, nards

She's really gonna kill me this time. I mean, Crinis was clingy to an absurd degree before based on my last disappearance, what's going to happen this time. I'm afraid, afraid GANDALF! The image of Crinis burrowing her tentacles through my carapace and taking residence within my skeleton rises in my mind, causing me to shudder.

She would do that! She would totally do that!

Nononono. Having her stuck to my carapace all the time was bad enough! It was like having a second skin that disapprove of my every decision. Imagine what that's like! A disagreeable SKIN! I can't handle it getting worse, I just can't!

BOOM!

An impact detonates under my claws, sending me sprawling and I scramble to get my legs back under me and run. Can't you guys leave me alone? I'm trying to deal with real problems here!

The five heavily armoured soldiers chasing me don't seem all that sympathetic to my plight. In fact they seem rather insistent that they continue trying to poke holes in me with various pointy implements. Having foreign objects inside my carapace is exactly what I'm worried about right now. I don't need this as well!

I fire a quick air blade hoping to scatter them, but the big one steps forward with his shield, absorbing the impact as the others run around to flanking positions. Come on! How is this fair? If I had my full squad here, I'd show you!

With my legs under me once more, it's time to DASH! Blows slash into my carapace, carving deep slices into the precious diamond as I run down the tunnel, fleeing into the dark. Stop marking my shiny exterior, dammit! How am I supposed to lie to Crinis about this if she sees me covered in blade marks?!

DASH! DASH! DASH!

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

Acid launches from the rear zone as I run away into the darkness, trying to shake my pursuers. Just my luck that I decide to poke my antennae at the camp right when a patrol was coming back. How the heck was I supposed to know?! All I wanted was a little peek, just to see if I was needed, and I was being careful! They must have been using some kind of Skill or technique, because they practically tripped over me before I noticed they were there.

Not even heat signatures! How the heck are these people so damn cold?!

HAP!

BOOM!

I leap just in time to avoid a vicious thrust that fired a ray of sword light straight for my head. These people don't play around. In fact, with their bulky armour and helmets covering their faces, it's hard to believe that they aren't the monsters rather than me!

How do you like this then?

With a sound of tearing wind, I unleash three wind spears at once, the spells twisting and warping the air in the tunnel and spreading the acid in all directions. Chance! I've explored these tunnels before, at least somewhat, and I know that the tunnel wall right over there is super thin! I run with all speed, firing more acid and wind magic as I go, trying to conceal my movements.

Made it to the wall! Here we go!

CHOMP! CHOMP!

I rip into the stone with wild abandon and in only a few bites I manage to open up a hole and dive into it! Only to get my abdomen stuck...

Again with this?! Am I fat?! Are you calling me fat, you stupid Dungeon!? Dammit, legs! PUSH! I force with my legs until I squeeze through the gap with a 'pop!' and land on the other side.

Gweheheheh.

With this gap, surely they won't be able to catch up to me. Dash!

BOOM!

Next to me the wall explodes as another arc of blade light cuts through the rock and cuts a deep gash on the opposite wall of the tunnel.

DAMMIT!

RUNRUNRUNRUNRUNRUN!

Part of me really wants to turn and shape up to these pests, but I'm worried. I'm too close to their base for one (not my fault, by the way) and I don't know that I would win, especially without my pets! Gah! They've forced me into unknown Dungeon territory here. This is all unexplored terrain. As I speed through, firing wind magic (gotta push for those levels, combat always helps!) I try to look for anything that might lend me an advantage.

All I find are the usual things, shadow beasts, stupid seaweed and deadly spike plants all over the place. Not to mention a decent number of what I've started to call 'dead fish'. Smaller creatures full of Death Mana that can swim through the air riding on the mana currents. They're a right pain in the backside, but I've not time to deal with them now. I'm sure a few will latch onto my carapace and I'll have to blast them off later.

Just another irritating thing caused by these damn murder hobos!

I cut around the corner just in time to avoid another coordinated strike that slices into the rock as if it were paper. Yikes! Not keen to test my head against that level of strike... Aha! What's that?

Up ahead I notice the tunnel opens up into a major passage and lo and behold, right in the middle, I find a HUGE root that connects the roof to the floor. I've never seen anything like this around this area, but this could be my chance! The soil around tree roots is usually far more loose than other places, since the ground gets broken up by the roots pushing through. I might be onto something here!

I zig and zag as I run and then skirt around the blind side of the root. This thing is massive, it must be thirty metres in diameter at least! Easily enough to block sight of me. Once there, I coil my legs and spring into the air! As I descend, I pull back my mandibles as I spin together an earth mana construct.

I land head first, digging into the soil in a frenzy of biting and shovelling with my legs even as my sub-brains weave mana to help drill into the ground as fast as possible. DIG! DIG! DIG! Gotta get as deep as possible! No chances can be taken!

Fully immersing myself in the power of zen, I dig with all of the efficiency that my ant body can muster, burrowing into the soil at a rate that would make Jim proud. Only when the business district has been fully submerged do I feel even remotely safe, but even then I don't stop digging.

Once I feel I've reached a significant enough depth, I freeze, hoping against hope that they won't be able to find me. I expand all of my senses, trying to get a sense of what is going on around me, only then do I notice something I really should have picked up on before.

This root, has a metric truck load of mana inside it... Like, holy moly that is a lot of mana. When I push my awareness inside the root, it's almost as if the pure, dense mana is slowly moving inside like sap within a tree.

What the heck *is* this thing? And why, if it's so loaded with mana and totally defenceless, aren't monsters chomping it to bits trying to get at the energy within? I raced around the thing rather quickly, but I don't think I saw a single monster close to it...

I'm getting a bad feeling about this.

Deciding to take my chances, I angle myself and dig my way back up, squeezing myself out between the root and the soil. To my vast surprise, I don't see any soldiers trying to cut me down, or indeed any monsters nearby. Did my digging ruse work?

Being exceptionally careful this time, I sneak my way back to where my pets left me, collapsing in a relieved heap the moment I make it. Not five minutes later, Crinis and Vibrant return.

[Hey there, Crinis,] I say, desperately acting casual, [did you have fun?]

I'm sure I'm okay. I even triggered my healing gland on the way back to take care of any minor wounds and I thoroughly cleaned myself. Please, for the love of the bearded one, let me get away with this!

[I did. Thank you, Master.]

The mass of tentacles and death unfolds from Vibrant's back and once again takes up residence wrapped around my abdomen.

[Did you manage to stay out of trouble, Master?]

[Trouble? Me? Of course not! Just practicing magic is all I've been doing.]

[Hmm. Alright then.]

PHEW!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 623: The enemy advances

The Empire of Stone endures forever. That is their claim, at least. It's no secret that the rock-people are a proud and stubborn people, proud of their history as one of the 'Old Races' of Pangera. They are survivors, hardy and tough, their natural advantages and the Classes that tie to their race have proven to be enough to bring them through the Cataclysm, as well as the chaos that followed.

Golgari youth are born much as human children are, indeed, they are similar in size, strength and develop at a comparable pace. The children of the golgari are rarely seen by outsiders, particularly within the Empire. Without those who have chosen to live away from the stronghold of their people, it's unlikely anyone would have ever seen the natural skin colour of their children (it's grey).

When they mature, the rock-people begin to differ more and more from a standard human. They are significantly taller and heavier. The mean height for goglari is over seven feet, with exceptionally tall individuals standing over nine. They are physically stronger as well, their mass reaching over two hundred kilograms even without their 'true-skin', the name they give the mineral coating they wear.

When they come of age, young goglari participate in a bonding ceremony that fuses their skin with a rock covering. A unique property of their skin allows it to form a strong bond with minerals that melds the two substances together, essentially forming a new skin. It is a misconception that the stone outer covering is a 'second layer' of skin, one that the goglari themselves usually don't bother to correct.

Their affinity to stone goes beyond their capacity to make it part of themselves. Goglari society as a whole is stratified and rigidly divided. Families are divided into Houses and Clans, each in constant competition with each other. Individuals are separated into Circles based on aptitude and Class. Due to their powerful physical properties and martial history, Warriors, those who fight with stamina and weapons, are esteemed, whilst those who manipulate mana are generally disparaged. The Crafting Circle, Merchant Circle, even the Growers Circle enjoy a position of higher prestige than the mages. This is a feature almost unique to the goglari in Pangera, as generally mages are venerated, or at the very least highly respected for their prowess.

Finally, we must address the goglari affinity for working in groups, or teams of three, which they refer to as 'triads', a time honoured tradition, the origins of which cannot be determined. It is possible that not even the goglari themselves know. Only those individuals who rise to prominence in the Warriors Circle are accepted to operate outside of a triad for an extended period, having proven their exceptionality. Such individuals are greatly respected and given the title of Blade. These are the Nobles, leaders of the Houses, generals and strategists of note.

The rock-people continue to be a force to be reckoned with inside the Dungeon. Despite their stubbornness, their infighting and their somewhat archaic views, they endure against pressure better than almost any other society.

- *Excerpt from 'Notes on the Old Races' - by Arritrea.*

High Blade Balta was displeased. He had marshalled the forces of his House, called in favours and splashed coin to ensure he would lead this expedition. He had done all he could to pull in veteran Warriors and equip them with the best available gear he could find. Time had constrained him in this regard, as well as the remote location. Deeper in the core of the Empire, he would have been able to muster double the numbers with higher levels and better classes, but he'd been satisfied with what he'd managed to assemble.

Ants, even intelligent ones, should have stood no chance against the goglari might he had brought to crush them. Yet here he stood, looking down at his nephew who knelt at his feet, reporting that the insects had pushed him back when he had attempted to claim their pathetic fort.

"I do not want to hear words of failure from your mouth, nephew. Failure is not something that we accept in our House. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The younger goglari Blade trembled under the simmering anger of his elder that lurked just beneath the surface. He had been brash and taken his force to assault the insects without waiting for the other

commanders to organise their forces. Had he been victorious, the glory would have belonged to himself alone. In failure, he received all of the shame that went with his defeat.

"Where you not of my own House, I would have expelled you from this expedition and sent you home in disgrace," High Blade Balta spat.

"Please, uncle, give me another chance!"

"You weren't given a chance! You just decided to seize one for yourself! Arrogance is only accepted when it is backed by ability! You have proven you lack the latter but hold an abundance of the former!"

Real anger blazed in the eyes of the elder now. This promising youth had achieved the rank of Low Blade at a young age. The House had great expectations for him, only for the fool to grow impatient and make himself a laughing stock. Defeated in pitched battle by *ants*.

"A hundred of our people lie dead due to your ambition and stupidity. *That* is the price of your arrogance. I will give you another chance. Not to lead, but to demonstrate your ability with a sword is not as useless as your head. When the next assault goes, you will lead the charge personally."

"I hear and obey!"

Hironus Balta, on his knees before the leader of his House, tried to disguise his sigh of relief. Had the High Blade wanted he could have done far worse. He would get a chance to prove to his rivals that he deserved his rank. It would suffice.

In the East, the other half of this invasion force was progressing in their advance, though with less haste and more success. Yet Titus wasn't pleased with what he heard.

"A root of the One Tree? You're sure?" He asked.

"I've seen them before, commander. It's hard to mistake something like that."

Titus could only nod. It's true, the One Tree wasn't the sort of thing that could be described as small, or be accused of blending in.

"So what happened?"

"The target fled towards the root and burrowed itself in the soil in an obvious and slightly ridiculous way. We decided it best not to disturb the root and retreated."

"Wise," Titus acknowledged the squad leader with a nod, "take your team to the mess and get some food in you. You'll be back out there soon enough."

With a crisp salute, the man left Titus to his thoughts.

"I don't like it Titus," Aurillia warned her commander, "a root showing up here? This isn't going to be good."

"We don't know if it's going to be active," he cautioned.

"After that idiotic creature burrowed down next to it? I'd be shocked if it didn't start sprouting *tomorrow*."

As much as he hated to admit it, his Tribune was most likely correct. From the moment his Legion had first engaged the enemy, things had not gone according to plan. An intelligent Colony, likely a wave coming, his allies had proven untrustworthy and now this. Another variable into the mix was the last thing he needed.

Titus growled in frustration. He'd feel a lot better once he started cutting down insects. It was time he headed out on patrol. His axe was thirsty.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 624: Death Comes

The Old Races against the New is a troubling rivalry that has arisen in the centuries since the Cataclysm. Perhaps it is understandable that those who existed on Pangera in a time before the Dungeon would view those that came after with suspicion. They know for a fact, after all, that they are free of the corruption that the Dungeon brought to the world, whereas the same cannot be said for those who came later.

The New Races, on the other hand, rose to sapience and formed their societies after the surface was breached and damaged by spawned creatures. Their peoples have never known a world without monsters, never walked the surface without fear and indeed, do not value the surface in the way their elders do.

The Humans, Kaarmodo, Golgari, Brathian initially viewed the newcomers with hostility and attempted to push them out of the Dungeon. The Sophos who fell, originally an Old Race, were hunted to the brink of extinction once the Cataclysm subsided and conquest of the Dungeon begun. When contact was first made between Old and New, conflict erupted immediately. Only after the New Races had demonstrated their ability to defend themselves and their interests (also once they had come into contact with each other and formed a mutual cooperation agreement) did the Old and New begin to enter discussions and de escalate.

The Bruanchii, The Folk and the Krath, being the most prominent among the New, have proven to be bold players in the fierce competition for resources that goes on in the Dungeon. Sometimes working together, sometimes in opposition, they have displayed a fearlessness and willingness to take on great risks that their elders would avoid. Some argue that this is due to their lower intelligence or lack of stable foundations, whilst others believe it to be a necessity, given that they arose so much more recently than their competitors and need to catch up.

The origins of most New Races is still a contested matter amongst many academics. The Bruanchii, for example arose within the wildlands of the south, though it is not known exactly where, or when. The Folk are a loose amalgamation of many peoples with a similar philosophy, and were first encountered in the Dungeon itself, leading many to believe they are monstrous in nature. It has since been proven that they are able to live and thrive on the surface, taking away the credence of that theory.

How the people of Pangera will coexist moving forward, no credible theorist is willing to say. Shifts and changes within the Dungeon are capable of shattering centuries old alliances in a matter of days. Nothing is permanent and all is in flux. It is safe to wager, however, that the Old and New races will continue to hold to their own for the most part, preferring to trust in those similar to themselves.

- *Excerpt from 'Musing on the Races of Pangera' by Tirino*

The conflict was proving to be a nightmare for Sloan, one that she simply couldn't wake from.

"News from the front, general!" Announced an exhausted runner, crawling into the command post.

"Which front?" Sloan snapped.

"The deeper front! The enemy advance has shattered the first outpost. Casualties were heavy."

Ice struck the general's heart, but she steeled herself against it. She resisted the urge to indulge in her nature like Leeroy and throw herself out of the command post, rush to the front line to die with her siblings. She could do more good for her family here, so here she would remain.

It was hard, but she would do it.

"What about the Eldest?" She asked.

"The Eldest and all Guardians were able to retreat safely. Only thanks to their intervention were any saved at all."

That bad?

"Is there a full report coming?"

"Yes, general. Should only be a few hours behind me."

The weary scout stood on shaking legs, having pushed herself to the limit to bring this dire news to the nest. Runners like her were racing through the Colony's territory without pause during this conflict, hundreds at a time.

"Go rest, scout. You've done well."

Sloan saluted the exhausted ant with one antenna and nodded when the gesture was returned. Medics rushed forward to tend to the scout before she collapsed and the council member turned back to the war map. The enormous sculpture took almost ten cubic metres of space in the centre of the open command post. A host of carvers crawled over and inside the thing, being careful not to damage the incredible piece of work. Using Tunnel Maps and Earth Magic, the carvers had created a vast statue of stone that accurately depicted the territory of the Colony.

Even the fine details were accounted for, the defences and gates, the location of forces and even a special flag to indicate the location of the Eldest was present. Sloan watched with interest as one of the carvers responded to the most recent news and grasp that flag in her mandibles and shifted it closer to the nest.

"What did I miss?" Victor asked, rushing into the chamber.

"Assault on the deeper front. The first outer fort has fallen. How was your rest?"

"Terrible. It's impossible to enjoy torpor with all of this mess running through your head."

Victor gestured with one mandible to the flurry of activity that surrounded them.

"And I'll save you a bit of trouble, the enemy has broken through in the East as well, I intercepted the scout on the way in. You know the weirdest thing? Not a single one of the Immortals was killed in the retreat."

Sloan stared.

"How is that even possible? They volunteered to be the front of every conflict!"

Her fellow general could only shrug her antennae.

"They *are* supposed to be 'Immortal' right? Say what you want about that armour, but it does a good job of protecting them. After the beating they received in training, their armour Skills should be decent as well."

"They are going to be even more insufferable when they get back."

"... you're right."

They both turned to view the territory of the Colony, making calculations as the little flags which represented their enemies advanced closer to the nest.

"The first ring of defences has fallen and many of our siblings have fallen," Victor observed.

"I don't want to sound callous, but more have graduated since the beginning of the conflict than have died. In terms of numbers, our situation has improved, not gotten worse."

"I don't think the Eldest would like that thinking."

"I doubt they would, but we have to deal in realities. There is no way the Colony will be able to survive without sacrifice."

"I understand that. You and I have been given the job of observing the conflict as a whole. The Eldest on the other hand... They might take things a bit more personally."

Sloan had to agree, the Eldest had always placed a high priority on the lives of the Colony. Higher than the individual ants themselves ever did.

"You don't think the Eldest will do something... unwise... do you?" She asked tentatively.

"Think? No... I'd bet on it."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 625: Vengeance

It was already personal. Now it's... more personal. When the armoured death machines had started to advance, the scouts had alerted me and I'd gathered the troops and headed to the first defensive position. The carvers had been working overtime, throwing up walls, forts and all sorts of little traps throughout the entirety of the Colony's territory.

When the killers arrived, they'd cut through our defensive line with ease. Hundreds of them had advanced against our position, weapons aglow with deadly light and armour pulsing with mana. They

had been visible, even through the thick darkness of the second strata. Magic hadn't affected them much, acid hadn't slowed them down, they just kept coming.

When the leader drew close enough, they'd drawn back with a massive axe and unleashed something I'd never seen before. It wasn't a slash, or an arc of blade light. It was more like a freakin' WALL. When it closed in on me, it was like the entire world went white. I'd tried to protect my siblings by leaping in front of those near me and the resulting wounds had put me out of the fight. Without Invidia shielding and healing me, I might not have made it out at all.

Those damn metal bucket murderers! Hundreds of my siblings died in the chaos after that! They charged and cut through the lines. Protectant and her group appeared and dragged me out, right when I was getting my guts back inside --- I mean warmed up!

Geh.

It was a defeat. A total defeat. The rest of the Colony fell back to the next defensive position, ready to try again, undeterred by the deaths. Not me though. I have too much rage! WAY too much rage!

"I don't think this is wise, Eldest..."

I won't be satisfied until I inflict damage on the enemy. My mandibles must rend. REND I SAY.

"Eldest..."

I can't take on hundreds of them at once... no. That would be suicide, even for me. What I CAN do is ambush one of their patrols. With my pets and Protectant's crew, we should be able to overpower and finish them off before reinforcements can come.

"I don't think the Council would approve..."

Who cares if these stupid tin cans get angry? They're already here killing us! Time to return the treatment back to them, with extreme vengeance. A second of my baby-sitters materialises out of nowhere.

"I agree with Protectant. This isn't a good idea."

I've been ignoring Protectant, as is my policy when she offers advice, but who the heck is this?

"I've never seen you before. Why are you popping out now?"

The ant shifts uncomfortably, unhappy to be out of the shadows.

"It didn't seem like you were listening and I felt our point of view needed to be emphasised."

"What's your name?"

"Defendant."

Seriously?!

"Look. Our Colony members have been killed and I am determined to seek righteous vengeance! Justice! What can you possibly have against that?!"

"You would be better served to join with the rest of the Colony and assist in the defence. Your capacity to punish the enemy will surely be higher there, not to mention your own safety..."

"Safety be damned! This is about attack! Aggressive moves to let them know that they can't kill us with impunity!"

Protectant and Defendant share a nervous twitch and I can tell they are watching each other carefully. I cut them off before they can start to organise against me.

"Let's discuss this rationally," I begin, "I want to establish a few things first, though."

The two ants nod.

"Alright. I'm not sure exactly what the council has ordered you to do, so let me ask this: Do you have to follow me wherever I go?"

"Yes," the two answer immediately.

"Okay. Thanks. Secondly..."

DASH!

I'm off!

[Let's go Tiny! Invidia! It's time to strike a blow against the tin cans!]

Full of a desire to inflict pain on the invaders, I rush down the tunnel at top speed, my pets hot on my heels. I don't even need to turn my head to see the two baby-sitters freeze in shock before chasing after me in a panic. Gweheheh. No matter what, you'll get dragged into my schemes! You think the council will be able to prevent me from quenching the fires of rage that burn inside my heart?!

The sight of my family members broken and dying on the ground around me refuses to leave my mind. I refuse to not strike back!

I have to be careful about it, I understand that much. If I get caught by a large number of those armoured soldiers then I'm going to get myself killed, which isn't going to help the Colony at all. The tiny voices that trickle through my Vestibule demand that I fight though, and I'm fully inclined to listen to them. We make a wide loop around, trying to avoid the front and circle into position between the fort where we last fought and the camp occupied by the enemy.

I've spent hours running through all of this area and adding it to my Tunnel Map whilst they built their stupid camp, I have it well mapped out. Only a small portion of this remains dark to me, mostly around that weird root that I found. I'm still interested in investigating that a bit further, but first I must attend to my business.

Once we come close enough, I engage full stealth mode, creeping as much as possible from cover to cover and sending Crinis ahead to scout, hiding in the shadows. The soldiers frequently sent scouts out into this area, usually in teams of five. By myself, I wouldn't be able to take them on, but with my full crew, I have confidence. As long as some unholy demon like that axe wielding freak doesn't come, we'll be able to win.

It's not a fair fight after all, it's an ambush!

Dishonourable? Who cares about dishonourable?! My dead family members don't care! When we come to a likely location, I carefully begin to dig a hidey hole for us whilst employing my new Skill. That's right! The technology of the ant is always evolving! I think this Skill became unlocked when I ranked up external mana manipulation last but I didn't notice until recently.

The Skill? Mana Masking! This Skill grants knowledge of how to conceal mana signatures of monsters and other sources from detection. Although it's only rank one since I just bought it, this is going to come in handy. I have to dedicate a sub-brain to managing the load, but it'll be worth it. Perhaps if the Skill was high enough, I'd be able to hide a Gravity Bomb from detection, but there's no way it can do that now. I only hope it'll fool the soldiers long enough for them to come close.

With our hiding place dug and my brains busily constructing a false mana impression around us, we settle in and wait. Crinis extends tentacles into the shadows, using her advanced senses to keep watch whilst we wait.

Fortunately, we only have to wait an hour before Crinis passes word.

[Master, five are coming.]

Chrysalis

Chapter 626: Short ... and sharp

With Crinis' announcement, my entire carapace tenses (metaphorically). It's time, I'm ready for action, my entire spirit is primed and filled with ire. These tin-people have hurt my family and now I'm going to give the pain back to them.

[Steady, Master. Control the mana.]

My ever faithful Crinis provides a timely warning and I check myself. My emotions had begun to get the better of me and my mana disguise was fluctuating. Cursing myself for my carelessness, I sink deep into the meditation Skill, pushing my distractions away and sharpening my minds to their limit. No mistakes, no emotions.

My main mind runs a quick check of preparations. Gas mana construct is ready to go, my first spell already constructed and held in waiting. My legs are flexed, like coiled springs, ready to leap from the hiding place in half a second. All I need is the word.

[How long, Crinis?]

[They're coming. I don't think they sense me, or if they have they're pretending. I am ready to strike at any time, Master.]

[Wait for the rest of us.]

[Yes, Master.]

A tense silence.

I feel another mind intrude on my own.

[Fight?] Tiny asks.

[Almost.]

[Fight...] he responds, despondent.

[Just wait ten seconds you thick ape! Just how badly do you want to punch something?!]

He looks at me seriously, a thoughtful expression on his face as he considers my question. After a second he holds up ten fingers and nods solemnly.

[A ten. Is that out of ten?]

He nods again.

[So you reaaaaaally want to fight?]

Another nod.

[I have just one more question. Just a quick one. If I were to ask you the same question another time, do you think you'd ever, under any circumstances, give me an answer *other* than ten?]

A slight pause, then a slow headshake.

This idiot.

[They are slowing down. I think they sense something! Master!]

[Attack!] I send the mental roar at my pets as my legs fire and I rocket out of the hole.

Still fifty metres away stand five heavily armoured figures, their weapons up having sensed something was off about this stretch of tunnel. Too late!

With a thought I unleash the spell I had prepared, blasting out a fierce tornado toward the soldiers. The sharp winds cut into the rocks, sending stone shards into the air and destroying visibility. Not that I minded.

[Tiny! Move it!]

The ape was slower than me at getting out of our cramped in little hole, but once he finds his feet, his wings unfurl and he bounds forward, hands outstretched, Invidia riding on his back. The soldiers respond quickly, barriers forming as they raise their shields and activate their defensive Skills to fend off my spell. It's all the time we need to close the distance.

POW! POW! POW! POW! BOOM!

Acid flies and explosions ring out the moment the wind dissipates. The noise is sure to bring attention down on us swiftly, but I've decided that we will hold nothing back in order to achieve a swift victory. We close the distance in a flash, my mandibles wide open and the Doom Chomp already forming.

CRUNCH!

The soldiers are disciplined and show no fear, slashing out with their weapons and attempting to get into formation, but we don't let them. I've noticed that these people are far more powerful when they

work effectively together, which means disrupting their teamwork is our top priority. This is the role Tiny is playing to perfection as the enraged ape lashes out with lightning coated fists and smashes everything in his way. His absurd strength is on display as he crashes through the soldiers as they attempt to dodge and duck out of the way, treating him like a bull.

CHOMP! CHOMP! CHOMP!

My sub-brains continue to pump out wind blades, firing them every moment I can find a target. The only thing I really have to be careful of is hitting Tiny. Not that he'd notice, he's way too pumped up. In the frenzy of battle, all of my minds are razor focused on the task of destruction.

Two soldiers have taken a position in front of me, their powerful armour deterring my mandibles, for now at least. The Doom Chomp isn't to be underestimated! This powerful rank five Skill, along with my heavily mutated mandibles are more than capable of punching through this armour...

Eventually.

"Get in here and help already, Protectant!" I yell.

I detect the whiff of a sigh from above me before all twenty of the hidden babysitters materialise on the ceiling. After a brief moment they launch from their perches to strike at the soldiers, neatly dividing themselves between the five enemies, four ants for each. They don't try and defeat them on their own, but instead disrupt and distract, acting much like ants on Earth would, grabbing at limbs and trying to pin the enemy down. It's an effective tactic and the pressure on us eases for a critical moment.

"We need to hurry, Eldest," Protectant warns me, "let's finish this quickly and hurry back to the Colony."

She's right, this is taking too long already.

I turn my sub-minds away from the wind construct and instead draw on my gravity mana, flooding my mandibles with the powerful energy and forming multiple bolts at a time.

POW! POW! POW! POW!

In the next ten seconds I smash the soldier in front of me with gravity bolts until they can no longer move effectively, only releasing them from my mandibles when I'm sure they can no longer fight. Distracted and separated, the others can't prevent me from using the YOINK ability of the gravity infused mandibles to pull them to me.

One by one, I bring all of the armoured soldiers down in this way, the baby-sitters club, Tiny, Crinis and Invidia keeping them off balance and unable to retaliate. No longer able to defend themselves, the soldiers strain to lift their weapons and activate their Skills, still desperate to fight for their lives.

[The magic will wear off if we don't act soon, Master. Do you want me to--- ?]

[No,] I say, [I'll do it myself.]

Using my mandibles, I take their helmets off and end them in one swift bite. They stare at me with hatred and rage, not an ounce of fear in them as I do it. Sunk deep into the meditation Skill, there is little emotion, except the whispers that echo throughout my body that trickle through the Vestibule. They tell me something I need to hear. They tell me something that pushes away the tremors in my heart.

They say: "Good Work."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 627: Growth, then growth

As we flee from the scene of the battle with all haste, I take a moment to let the System messages from the battle roll over me.

[You have slain Level 54 Legionem Shieldbearer (Human)]

[You have slain Level 44 Legionem Armoured Scout (Human)]

[You have slain Level 45 Legionem Shieldbearer (Human)]

[You have slain Level 58 Legionem Swordsman (Human)]

[You have slain Level 42 Legionem Armoured Scout (Human)]

[You have gained experience]

[You have reached level 58]

A lot of experience was gained there. Also, the next evolution is getting a lot closer. Another twenty two levels and I'll reach that mythical level 80 that seemed so far away after I'd evolved. It's a shame to leave their armour and technology behind, but I don't want any delays. I believe it's likely they'll have a way to know when their people go down. All in all, this ambush was highly successful, but still, I can't shake the feeling that my mandibles are unclean.

[They have come to kill you, Master. Don't worry over them when they wouldn't do the same for you,] Crinis' voice echoes in my mind.

I twitch, startled by her sudden words. How well is she able to read my mood? I still have meditation active! I hardly even have a mood!

[What do you mean?] I ask her, [why would I be feeling anything other than triumph right now?]

A pause as Crinis considers her reply.

[I have been your servant for a long time now, Master. I have watched carefully and I see more than you think. I know that you do not want to hurt the humans. You didn't really want to hurt the golgari either. Even though they are *filth* that treated Master so poorly! They should be burned... burned! They should be flung into a pit of ten thousand mouths and ---]

[Crisis!]

[---ah. I'm sorry. I just felt that defeating this enemy would make you sad, so I spoke. I hope I have not disturbed you for no reason.]

I sigh.

[No, Crinis. You're totally right, as you usually are. I felt as though... I felt like we could be a bit better than this, with monsters for everyone to fight against, why would they go out of their way to fight us? I

thought if the Colony was peaceful and didn't attack anyone, then we'd be left alone. At least, that's what I'd hoped. It appears as though I was just being foolish from the beginning.]

I can feel Crinis bristle on my carapace.

[Master isn't wrong! Everyone else is wrong! What reason do they have to attack your family? None! These trash have no excuse for their behaviour!]

She's riled up. I can feel the teeth of her tentacles grinding against my perfect diamond shell. I wince. Please don't scratch me! It heals up pretty fast, but it hurts my heart.

[I guess it doesn't matter who's wrong or right now,] I try to soothe her, [this is the situation that we're in and we're going to have to deal with it. I can't be half-assed anymore, it's them or us, and we weren't the ones to push it to that point.]

[Master?]

[Yes?]

[What's an ass?]

[...]

How could I even explain it... monsters don't have butts!

I deflect as best I can as we wind our way through the narrow tunnels until we come to the point I'd been looking for. That weird root had appeared in this location and I want to take another gander at it before it becomes too hard for us to make it into this area. It doesn't take long for us to arrive at the location, although I don't recognise it at first.

Where first there had been a regular, second strata tunnel, filled with darkness and the scent of death, grasping plants and shadow beasts, is now a totally different scene. Green vegetation has exploded along the walls, thick and vibrant. The four of us pull up out of reach of the vines and strangely grasping branches in surprise.

"What the heck is this?" I ask nobody in particular.

"A-are you talking to us?" Protectant asks from over my head. "We have no idea."

"No, I wasn't ---. Doesn't matter I suppose. Should we try and push into this?"

We're still some distance from the root itself and I can't even see it, but I can't imagine anything else is responsible for this explosion of greenery. Seeing this amount of bright plant life, is just so weird for this part of the Dungeon, it's almost surreal looking at it. Why the heck would it be green anyway? I don't think photosynthesis is happening down here!

[I'm not going to lie,] I announce to my pets, [but I've got a bad feeling about this place. I'm not sure that I want to meet whatever it was that caused this to happen.]

Whatever did this might be a scary thing, which is fine with me, since that would mean that those stupid soldiers will have to deal with it, not me. Still, I can't say I'm not curious about it, just not enough to take any risks right now.

[Let's get the heck out of here,] I say as I turn around and make my way back.

We'll loop around and regroup with the Colony, ready to defend the next fort. When those metal encased chumps come back, I hope they're prepared to accept a gravity bomb to the face! To be honest, it wouldn't shock me if they had some sort of countermeasure for hyper-condensed spells. Come to think of it, I hope we do too. Surely someone has thought of that, no way I'm the first.

We make good time looping back to the Colony and manage to arrive before another major offensive, what's more, we find some timely reinforcements have returned from their training trip.

"Eldest, nice to see you again!" Bella calls, hopping with excitement.

"Ellie, Bella! Good to see you too! How did the training trip go?"

The Core shapers were sent on a long range expedition to soak up experience and farm cores away from the Colony. With the number of graduates coming out of the Academy and the demands of the soldiers, scouts and generals for experience, the call was made that there just wasn't enough to go around.

"Sorry we're late," Bella said, "when we got out there, we found a whole lot more than we expected and were reluctant to leave without taking everything we could."

I shrug.

"It's fine. You did what was asked of you and there's still a long way to go in this war. I hope the results are enough. Are your pets going to give a good show of themselves?"

Bella chomps her mandibles aggressively,

"They are ready to go! Our Skills have improved a lot, and so have theirs! We also have a few new types we've developed in the mix. They'll make the Colony proud."

"Good. It won't be long before they'll be put to the test. Make sure your people get enough rest and then slot into the defence. It's going to get wild around here."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 628: Differing views

"What will we do with them?" Morrelia's voice was subdued.

Titus stared unblinking at the five bodies arranged before him.

"They will be returned to their families for burial. If their families do not claim them, or if they requested it themselves, they will be taken to the surface and buried in the Legion memorial in Tanna."

Morrelia turned her head to gaze up at her father.

"There's a Legion memorial?" she'd never heard of such a thing. She hesitated for a moment. "Is that where brother...?"

He nodded grimly.

"We don't bury our dead in the Dungeon. They deserve the light of the surface, not this cursed world below."

The commander stood with his full guard as watch for the fallen Legionaries. Found outside the camp, there had been little mourning, or even surprise when their comrades had been found. Death was part of war and the Abyssal Legion was always at war.

Alberton approached from one side.

"Interesting that they were not eaten," he observed, "most monsters won't pass up the opportunity for Biomass, especially social insects."

Morrelia was shocked by the man's callous attitude but Titus merely nodded.

"This was the abomination's work," he said.

"You are likely to be right," the loremaster agreed. "Either it wanted to send a message, or wasn't ready to feast on its former species."

As someone who had spent a considerable amount of time with that 'abomination', Morrelia felt sick at the idea of Anthony being responsible for what she saw in front of her.

"How can you be sure it was the... reincarnator?" She protested, "all of the ants are smart, couldn't it have been any of them?"

Alberton shook his head. The commander's daughter was a fierce warrior, but she was still too green as a Legionary.

"There would be no reason for a regular monster not to eat the bodies," he pointed out, "it's sad to say, but most Legionaries who fall within the Dungeon do not get buried. No, your father and I believe it was a lingering sense of humanity within the abomination that caused it to act this way."

She tried to digest the thought, but struggled to accept it. Ever since the campaign had begun, she had been trying to understand what the right thing to do was. The Colony was peaceful, she knew that, yet the Legion insisted that they be wiped out before they became a greater threat. The ants were peaceful for now, but what about in the future? What if Anthony died, and the Colony were left without the leader that held them back? What then?

"I still don't understand why you refer to them as 'abominations'", she said, "aren't they just people? Humans, like us? They didn't choose to come back this way, right? The Dungeon did that to them."

Titus and the loremaster shared a look.

"Don't think of those who have been reborn in this world as monsters as people," he warned her, "they may have been something like a human in their past life, but each and every one of them is twisted, broken. The records tell of numerous occasions where we encountered such beings. In every case they were eventually put down at great cost. The Dungeon chooses the souls it does with good reason, each of them is chosen to further its purpose. That is just another reason why they should be killed as swiftly as we can manage."

The commander backed him up.

"The moment they were born inside a monster, that is what they were. Not human, monster. Truth be told, the abominations are the most dangerous of all monsters. All the drive, experience and intelligence of a sapient packed into an evolving killing machine."

"Why do you think it decided to strike now?" Alberton thought out loud.

"Revenge," Titus grunted, "that's the easiest to understand. We pushed hard into the ants and killed many, so it decided to strike back. In a way, this is my fault. We could have predicted this and doubled the size of the scout teams."

Morrelia felt sick. The thought of the dead Colony members weighed heavily on her, and the thought of Anthony, filled with a thirst for revenge fighting and killing her fellow Legionaries was awful. Who was right? Who was wrong? She wasn't sure what she should do in this moment. Should she confront her father and tell him the Colony was peaceful? After what had been said today, she didn't think it would matter. Alberton and Titus would simply say that they would turn against the Sapient eventually, better to put the ants down now before they became too large a threat.

She wasn't sure that she believed that, but she was far from as experienced with these things as her elders were. What if she was wrong? The idea of the Colony turning itself against humans the way Garralosh had done seemed absurd, but the damage they could do if they chose to... As devastating as the beast had been to the frontier kingdoms, she knew that Anthony's family would be capable of far more.

She snapped out of her thoughts to realise that her father and the loremaster were still speaking.

"... from the fortress?" Alberton asked.

"It'll be a few days at the least. The Legion is deployed in a lot of places putting out fires after the last wave, we're stretched thin."

"What about calling people up from below?"

Titus grunted.

"If things are rough in the upper stratum, what do you think it's going to be like down there? Besides, we can't afford the time it would take to acclimate them to the thinner mana. No, we'll have to make do with what we have for now. It's going to take longer than I'd like, but we need to push forward slow and steady."

"Will the golgari be happy about that?"

"You think I care?"

Far above.

It had been many years since the one who called himself 'Grey' had walked the surface of this world, and he couldn't do so for long, but what he had seen was not what he expected. Ants cooperating and working alongside humans who... *revered* them in return. It wasn't like anything he'd ever seen before.

His visit to the 'conquered' territory of Rylleh had been much the same. When an underground city fell to the monsters, it was expected it would become a wasteland, the people consumed for Biomass and

destroyed. What he found instead was a city that went on much as it had before. The people chafed at the seizure of the gates, cutting them off from the rest of society, but the Colony had gone to great lengths to ensure they were supplied with essentials.

What the large ant had told him had proven to be true. Even moving through the territory of the ants had been remarkably safe, the Dungeon patrolled better than most Sapient controlled territories. It was almost enough for him to forgive being made to listen to Vibrant for an hour. He'd spoken only three words in those sixty minutes, two of which were 'hello' and 'goodbye'.

"What do you think, White?" he spoke to his apprentice without looking at her, "what is it that we have stumbled into here?"

There was no sound as response, instead, her voice rang within his mind.

[This species has gone against their nature to a high degree, teacher] she replied, [it is hard to think of them as monsters at all.]

"Yet that is what they are," he reminded her, "in the eyes of the System, they are designated monsters and so that is what they shall be seen as."

[Not to the Folk,] came the firm reply.

"Indeed. I sense that you have made a determination already, apprentice. Normally I would not be so quick to pass judgement, but given the circumstances this colony finds themselves in, I must choose haste."

The two continued to walk in silence through the tunnels, moving back toward the nest. Ants passed by them frequently, rushing to achieve whatever task their family needed of them in this time of war. Though Grey suspected they moved with the same sense of urgency no matter the overall circumstances.

[I am sensing the resonance of the Bruanchii, teacher. I feel that they will be here soon.]

"So quickly?" Grey asked, a flash of surprise flickered in his eyes. "Curious."

Things were moving faster than normal, the currents of time felt turbulent around him. A storm was brewing for certain, unusual for a place so high in the Dungeon. What role would the Folk have to play? He would need to meditate on this.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 629: The Cavalry Arrives

Hironus Balta bared his blade and executed the 'blooming flower' technique, six consecutive slashes that unleashed a barrage of light so quickly that they each flew out like the petals of a single rose. The ants before him were unable to withstand the power of his sword and were driven back or cut through directly. He stepped over the fallen bodies of the insects, allowing those behind him to drive their blades through the carapace and claim the experience.

As a member of the noble circle, he was entitled to take it, but the gain from tier four monsters, or worse, tier three, was beneath his notice. All along the line the battle still raged, but having broken

through in the centre, it was only a matter of time until the ants were forced to disengage, lest they be collapsed on and slaughtered.

With no opponents in front of him, Balta took a long breath and centred himself. He'd been placed in the centre for three consecutive battles now, having to re-establish his reputation after the disastrous loss in the earlier battle. To his left and right, the fight raged on, ants covering the floor and ceiling battling to hold off the golgari who pushed forward step by step, their coordinated shield wall holding strong.

Just as he prepared to charge to his right and begin collapsing the line, he noticed something subtle. Though chaos reigned around him, the sound of clashing blades and snapping mandibles filling the air yet still, he could feel something. It took a moment for him to realise what it was, the ground beneath his feet had begun to tremble.

The current battle was taking place in a wide tunnel with a low ceiling, perfect for the ants to utilise their roof clinging skills to double their battleline. This particular area also sloped upwards towards the surface. Filled with a worrying premonition, Balta lashed out once more with his weapon, clearing space around him and charged forward, deeper into the ant's territory. The farther he dashed the more he could see of the slope and soon he was seeing something that caused rage to flare up within his heart.

The armoured ants! They hadn't been seen in the front line since his inglorious defeat, something that had caused the low-blade no small amount of ire. Once more they appeared before him, they charged in unison, a gleaming line of massive insects covered in steel.

Balta set his feet and began channelling his energy through the Living Stone blade in his hands. With his next strike, he would skewer the lead ant straight through its head! The blade soaked up his intent as he primed the skill, shining bright and brighter each moment. This was his chance, delivered by The Path itself to help him establish himself once again.

The ants hurtled forward, much as they had the first time, their legs a blur as they ran towards danger. The blade grew brighter and brighter as the distance between the two closed. The golgari exulted in his heart as the moment to unleash his skill drew closer. So elated was he, that he failed to notice something rather crucial.

"ROOOOAAAAARRRR!"

An earth shattering roar shattered the air throughout the battlefield, blasting away the noise and for a brief moment, both sides were smothered in complete silence. Shocked, Balta felt the threads of his Skill unravel as he finally took his focus off the hated armoured ants. There he saw something that didn't quite register at first. A titanic bear, eyes ablaze with dark flame and jaws open to reveal enormous curved fangs.

Only then did Balta realise that the ants were arranged in a v formation, the largest armoured figure in the centre, with the gargantuan bear nestled between them. More than that, the bear itself was also covered in thick plates of armour that crackled with mana. With the metal and sheer mass of the monsters rushing toward him Balta felt as if a mountain was about to collapse on him.

He abandoned all attempts to charge his Skill and turned to rush back towards the safety of his own lines.

"BRACE!" He bellowed. "BRACE THE LINE! SHIELDS UP!"

Despite not being assigned a position of leadership for this assault, his commanding presence was enough for the golgari in the centre of the line to instantly respond. The shield bearers rushed forward, their eyes firm as they slammed their shields into the ground and activated their defensive Skills in synch. A wall of golden light erupted at once as the powerful Warriors anchored themselves and each other. Mages stepped forward to weave barriers and attempt to modify the terrain, anything to slow and disrupt the charge that was coming. Immediately they felt themselves be contested by a swarm of minds seeking to firm the ground and prevent their efforts.

"There's more coming!" Someone shouted.

Balta looked up to see it was true. Behind the armoured wave of monsters, a scurrying flood of insects followed, hundreds, maybe thousands of monsters charging along all surfaces of the tunnel made a horrifying sight.

"Stones," Balta cursed under his breath.

It was clear the ants had planned for the centre of their line to collapse in this battle. Now their reinforcements were coming to shove the golgari back in and smash their opponents in the middle of the line. He had confidence though, after the first battle where the armoured ants had shown the strength of their charge, they had taken steps to ensure it wouldn't happen again. The only thing that made him nervous was the fearsome bear. Could this be something the ants prepared for such a situation?

Back amongst his fellow Warriors, Balta felt emboldened and snapped out slashes of blade along with those around him, only to see the armoured figures fight to amongst themselves to accept the strikes. Armour was dented, ants stumbled, but the charge did not falter. The bear seemed to be growing larger and larger as it came closer, its eyes leaving a trailing streak of flames as it ran.

Balta focused his eyes and realised the monster's body was wreathed in a red aura that grew stronger the closer it came.

"It's berserking!" He realised in a flash.

"ROOOOOOAAAAAAAAARRRR!"

Another deafening roar echoed from the monster's mouth, the sheer volume making many Warriors flinch back. This monster wasn't a tier four ant, something they didn't fear, but at least tier five, possibly tier six. Clearly it was powerful.

"HOLD!" Balta yelled as he set his body alongside those around him, helping to brace the shield line.

In the final moment, the ants accelerated across the last few metres in an instant, smashing their bodies against the golgari line heedless of any risk to themselves. There was a thunderous impact, but at first it seemed as if the shields would hold. Then came the bear, bellowing with rage it leapt over the armoured ants and collided with the barrier like a collapsing building.

Surrounded with a blood red aura of rage and madness, the bear shattered the shields and landed amongst the golgari who had only a moment to gather themselves before they were under attack. Claws

and teeth snapped and flashed before Balta's face as he wove a defensive pattern of light with his blade. A few seconds later, the second wave of ants crashed amongst their lines and the fight was on for real.

Chrysalis

Chapter 630: Elemental Soup

Wind blade! Tornado! Wind speed! Wind blast! GAH! I'm exhausted. Every inch of my mind is devoted towards creating gas mana and whipping it into spells. The target for the spells is naturally the stupid armoured forces, the Legionaries, I suppose.

The experience notifications finally unveiled just who this enemy is. I can only assume this is the Abyssal Legion that Morrelia and others have spoken about. Her father was a prominent member as I recall, which probably explains why she's here. What a mess she's gotten herself into, sent to kill the Colony. Traitor! Well, I haven't seen her on the battlefield since that first encounter in which she actually saved my life, so I won't be so fast to judge. Let Morrelia worry about Morrelia, she can handle herself, we ants have enough on our plate at the moment!

PA! PA!

My barrage of wind spells is little more than an irritation to the oncoming Legion. Their powerful armour and mages are more than enough to deflect my efforts. I mean, I could be throwing rocks, fire, spears of ice or even blobs of lava at them right now! Instead, I continue to attack them with a stiff breeze. And why, do you ask? Because I only need one more level! One more measly level!

Sitting there in my status menu: [Gas Magic Affinity (IV) Level 39], it's taunting me! I've been spamming these damn wind spells until my mind is an aching mess. All of my minds! An enormous amount of brain matter has been dedicated to blowing wind at these invaders, all for the sake of this precious rank up. And it's so close!

The Legion advances at a steady pace, as they always do. Their front rank of shields an impenetrable barrier to our attacks, even the barrage of acid failing to eat away at them. At least we haven't seen that axe wielding demon again for the time being. Even without that freakin' superhuman, they've been managing to push us back on all fronts. They've spread out, creating a wider and wider front, attempting to corral us back to our nests.

Still, time is being bought, the war of attrition continues! You think you can be more determined than ants?! You're out of your mind! Every day our numbers increase and our Skills improve! Except for this damn Gas magic!

Come on!

POW! POW! POW!

More blades, more balls of concentrated wind, more spinning dervishes of blade wind. My brains are on fire. Only the regeneration provided by the whispering vestibule has sustained me to this point. Without it, I'd be a quivering mess on the ground, unable to think or function from sheer mental fatigue.

I'm not even finding the many whispers of the Colony inside me much of a burden right now, since they want me to be doing basically what I'm doing already. Namely, throw everything and the kitchen sink at

the invaders who dare to encroach on our territory. Mind you, if I listened to them totally, I'd be charging forward to rip into the enemy with my bare mandibles and most likely die in the process.

It seems more than a few ants in the Colony still harbour a secret desire to end themselves in glorious sacrifice. Apparently some 're-education' is necessary, the academy hasn't done enough to stamp out this heresy.

Still on the Legion marches, several hundred of them in tight formation. They are methodical to an absurd degree when it comes to Dungeon combat, yet try to counter us at every turn. Once they push us out of a tunnel, they defend it to the hilt, even to the point of monitoring the surrounding earth for any digging attempts. When we try to tunnel behind them, they detect it early and try to close our tunnels around us. We almost lost many ants that way.

"COME ON YOU STUPID TIN CANS!" I yell at the approaching wall of armour, "at the very least, give me my damn level!"

[Gas magic (IV) has reached level 40, rank up available.]

AT LAST! AT LAST!

My time has arrived, my suffering is finally over! I've been grinding away at this damn fusion for so long I can't even bear to think of it! At that moment, the approaching Legion break their ranks and begin to charge, weapons ablaze with light.

"Fall back!"

We have never intended to defend this position to the death. For the moment, our strategy isn't to engage these Legionaries in close combat, rather to try and wear them down as we give ground. I hear the fighting is far more fierce on the other front. At some point we'll have to engage here too, but for now retreat is the order of the day.

[Let's get out of here, gang.]

Following the order, my pets and I turn along with the rest of the Colony and make our way back down the tunnel. I'm more than happy to follow, I have a Skill fusion to explore.

First, I purchase Advanced Gas magic (V), which sets me back one Skill point, not a big deal. The tickling feeling of knowledge spreading through my mind begins immediately, sinking in and becoming a part of my magical repertoire.

As desperate as I am to fuse immediately, I wait. Only when I've retreated to a safe location will I dare to engage in that fusion. There's a chance that the fusion might soak up my attention and render me immobile for an extended period of time.

"Eldest, how did the defence go?" Vibrant pops up next to me.

"Gah! Vibrant, sheesh. You need to let people know you're creeping up before you start talking."

"What are you saying? You can see in every direction! Although I do move fast, was I moving too fast? I'm superfast. On the other mandible, I'm not fast enough! More speed is better, don't you think? I know I think so. When I evolve again, I'm considering more legs. Would that be weird? It'd be weird. Six legs is

best. More muscle would be better. Speed muscle! That gave me an idea! I'm gonna go think about it! Bye-bye!"

Zoom! She's off!

That hurts my head sometimes.

"I am interested in hearing how the defence went, Eldest."

I spy two other council members approaching, Ellie and Bella. I shrug.

"Pretty typical, I have to say. We shot at them, tried to slow them down, they pushed forward and we left. I think your caste is in there now, harassing and being annoying as much as possible until the next time they push forward."

The core shapers are perfect for the task, able to risk their pets in ways we would rather not do with our own members. They harass from range and make probing attacks whenever they get a chance, constantly pushing to prevent the Legion from being able to settle.

"Alright, I need to back off the front for a bit, not sure how long. Keep things steady for the next few hours, alright?" I say.

The two core shapers look a little confused, but readily agree to my request. Full of glee, I scurry away with my pets in tow, keen to put some distance between me and the front. After ten minutes of sprinting, I'm both tired and way too impatient to wait any longer.

FUSION!

[Do you want to fuse the Skills: Advanced Blue Fire Magic Affinity (V) Level 2; Advanced Stone Magic Affinity (V) Level 1; Advanced Gas Magic Affinity (V) Level 1 and Advanced Ice Magic Affinity (V) Level 2? This will cost fifteen Skill points.]

Fifteen!? Whatever, who cares? Paid.

Immediately, my brain comes alive with a trickling sensation that soaks into every crevice until I can't feel anything else.