

Chrysalis 641

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Chapter 641: Monkey Business

The Storm rages in the sky

The Madness lurks in the dark

The Eye watches all

Whilst

Their Master sleeps

Until The Day

When All Become One in Him.

- Prayer of the Faithful

With reluctance I let the construct dissolve away and give my brains a chance to rest as the battle draws nearer. I'm still not proficient enough with it to employ the thing in battle, better to give my all to pump out a gravity bomb and then do what I can to support the ants around me. No matter how sneaky I get, the bombs haven't managed to inflict any casualties after the first, but if I stop throwing them then perhaps the Legion would start to spread their numbers thinner and push us harder on a wider front, something I don't want. So every fight starts with a bang, so to speak, as long as I'm around, just to keep them on their toes.

"Are you ready, Eldest?" Wills asks as my pets and I push our way to the front.

"Rested as I've ever been," I lie, "how about you? Manage to get a bit of torpor in between battles?"

My antennae poke forward in an accusatory manner as I ask my pointed question. The scout backs up defensively.

"There wasn't time, Eldest! I swear!" she continues to retreat as I move forward. "I'll get some rest after this one, I promise! Two hours!"

I raise an antenna.

"Fine! Four hours! That's all I can spare!"

I lower the appendage.

"I'm not trying to bully you," I tell the scout, "but you have to remember that rest is a weapon. We need our decision makers to be sharp and thinking clearly, not fatigued and run off their feet. If we make mistakes, our family pays the price, don't forget it."

I'll conveniently skip the fact that I just spent my allocated rest time practicing a fiendishly difficult mental construct and burned through my mental reserves just before showing up to a fight. Thankfully, I have the Vestibule in my back pocket, which means I'll be able to recover to nearly peak condition soon enough, even if the emotional fatigue is starting to weigh on me.

"I know, Eldest, it's just hard to find the time, there's a ton of stuff to do..."

"As if every member of the Colony isn't saying the same thing since the day they were born?" I ask sceptically. "Find some scouts you can trust to help cover you for a few hours, it's not that hard. Get some damn rest!"

Perhaps sensing the incoming 'THWACK!' the scout dashes away to help organise the artillery as the front line of ants begins to take shape around the defences. The closer we get to the nest, the more thorough and elaborate the preparations the carvers have been able to make. Where once were simple tunnels, walls and ambush points are now pit fall traps, rock falls, hardened rock stakes, reinforced compacted stone barricades and more. I can only imagine how irritating it is for the enemy to clear one set of walls after a tough fight, only to find an even more elaborate set of walls waiting a kilometre further up the tunnel.

Still, it hasn't been enough to stop them. Even as the ants form themselves into silent ranks, layer on layer of ferocious insect ready to fight, the Legion has begun to form up opposite us. Similar to us, they are strangely quiet as they arrange themselves in rows of heavily armed soldiers, their faces hidden behind the steel plating of their helmets.

Won't be long now.

I start pouring my gravity mana out to form the gravity bomb, not even bothering to try and hide what I'm doing. I've positioned myself at the front of the line and they clearly see me, so I don't see what would be the point. After almost ten of these conflicts over the last few days, the process has become somewhat routine. Indeed, things begin to follow the expected pattern. Recognising my presence, the Legion soldiers begin their measured approach in the face of a hail of spells and acid, their barriers holding tight against the offensive.

When the gravity bomb is ready, I unleash it upon them, the horrifying darkness and screaming of the air driving away all thought of anything else the moment it appears. The enemy responds smoothly to the appearance of the magic, doing everything they can to weaken it from the second I unleash it. Even with Invidia helping to distract them by unleashing all the magic he can, the soldiers stand firm and manage to disperse the spell by combining their efforts. Still, I can see the toll it takes on them. Several mages are forced to retire to the rear of the Legion forces, totally spent by the mental effort of resisting the bomb.

With the main threat dealt with, the advance begins anew, steady and slow as the Colony continues to fling everything they have at them. After a few moments to rest, I whip together an ice construct and start hurling spears at the approaching wall as fast as I can. This much is totally standard by this time, things are proceeding as expected. If it continues along the usual lines, I expect that we'll see a charge from them soon, followed by the full on melee until we eventually retreat.

Except there's something that isn't going as expected. Rather than his usual restless moping during this part of the battle, Tiny is agitated, thumping his chest and bellowing his rage at the encroaching Legion soldiers. The great ape's eyes have turned a deep red and lightning has already begun to crackle and jump in the air around him.

[Hey Tiny, you alright buddy?] I ask him, concerned.

He doesn't respond, instead raising himself higher to shake his fists at the enemy and blast them with arcing bolts of electricity. When his blows fail to leave much of an impact, his anger grows even stronger, his snarls and bellows reaching a deafening crescendo.

[Whoa there big guy, don't do anythi-]

Too late.

Gripped by his fury and desire for battle, the massive ape unfurls his dark wings and leaps forward from the wall, hurtling himself toward the Legion in a spectacularly Leeroy-like course of action.

[What are you doing you idiot!?] I mentally roar at him but he isn't listening.

[Invidia! Get after him!]

[Yesssss.]

[What will we do, Master?]

[We'll have to go after him!] I reply to Crinis grimly as I stand and climb over the wall.

I don't know what in the name of heck has possessed the moron but he's gone right over the deep end. Perhaps the simple fact he hasn't had a satisfying fight in over a week of battles has been enough to drive him over the edge? Having to retreat and fall back constantly isn't exactly the sort of thing Tiny is built to do, after all. Regardless the reason, I need to try and save that idiot before he gets himself killed!

It happens so quickly that I don't have time to speak to the confused ants around me before I'm over the wall and dashing forward, desperate to catch up to the bounding bat-gorilla. With those dark wings of his, he can really cover the ground quickly with a combination of leaps and flaps.

Come on. DASH!

My legs strain as I rush forward, still flinging ice spells at the enemy with desperate energy as I try to close the distance. Behind me I can see the Colony scurrying to change their plans as wave after wave of soldiers, generals, scouts and the shadow pets of the shapers pour over the top of the wall and charge across the open ground.

I swear to god Tiny, if this goes bad I'll THWACK you until you're nothing but a gorilla shaped outline on the wall!

Completely ignorant of the rising tide of my indignation, Tiny continues to bellow with a mix of pure rage and joy as he bounds faster and faster toward the Legion. When he's still thirty metres away, he hurls himself into the air, wings spread to their limit as he explodes with electricity, channelling the energy into his giant fists. Those great hands shine so bright with the concentrated lightning mana that they're blinding and I almost stumble in my charge across the uneven ground.

Even the Legion is forced to block their eyes as they raise their shields, maintaining their strong barriers as they do so. Without me ordering him to, I see Invidia weaving the mana around Tiny with incredible skill, creating shield after shield to protect the stupid monkey from his own offense. In a moment of inspiration, I hastily weave together a few gravity bolts and fire them at Tiny when he reaches the peak of his jump, increasing his weight.

He falls like a collapsing star, smashing into the gathered shields of the Legion and shattering them with a deafening thunder clap.

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Chapter 642: Fists of fury

I don't know what shocked me more, the fact that Tiny managed to land without getting himself killed, or that he actually managed to break through the layered shields and barriers of the Legion. Since he actually managed the impossible, I'm not about to let the chance slip by.

"GOGOGOGOGOGOGO!" I flood the tunnel with a wave of commanding pheromones that batter into the antennae of the ants behind me, driving them forward in a frenzied wave of insects.

[Crisis, I need you to go big on this one, alright? Keep your losses below fifty percent though.]

[I'll do my best, Master.]

Crisis acknowledges my order and I feel her gathering mana a moment before she slips off my carapace and into the shadows of the tunnel, vanishing without a trace.

[Go hard, Invidia! Keep Tiny alive if it's at all possible!]

[*Hissss sssuffering will be mine!*]

[Good boy.]

As Tiny's huge body slams down into the ranks of the Legion, dust and debris flies in a wide circle, obscuring the scene from my eyes. I can hear a ton of shouting, screaming and the omnipresent ring of steel. But all of those sounds are driven away by the piercing scream that detonates inside the tunnel. It's Tiny! The dumb ape has unleashed his primal scream in an effort to stun the Legionaries. Even more powerful than before, the waves of sound are enough to blow my antennae back into my carapace. I swear I can feel my eyes being pressed back into my head! What it feels like standing right next to him I have no idea, but it sure can't be pleasant.

Well, that's for the Legion to worry about, not me.

Desperately hoping that the scream was enough to keep my first pet alive long enough, I drive my legs even harder to arrive that split second faster, my minds weaving mana at a dizzying pace.

POW! POW! POW! POW! POW! POW!

An endless stream of acid blasts fly from the back zone, the hungry acid falling in a rain on the massed Legion soldiers as I charge. Every little thing that can help is going to be needed now. Just as I approach the front line the dust begins to clear and I see the wall of shields braced right in my face.

Awww hell.

BAM!

I slam face first into the Legion lines and the resistance is fierce, but my momentum is just too much to be stopped. I crash through the shields in front of me, sending soldiers flying as my legs scramble and I lose my balance, collapsing in a heap in the tight ranks of the enemy. Not good! Gravity Domain!

My sub-brains force out the sphere of dark purple mana, making all around me heavier. It probably won't help much against the powerful soldiers around me, but I'll take anything I can get. Once that job is done, I continue flinging ice magic as I pick myself up to my feet and start chomping like a mad thing. Surrounded by stupid armoured soldiers, how the heck am I supposed to miss?

CHOMP!

Despite only just getting back to my feet, I can already feel the blows beginning to rain down on my diamond carapace. If they are given a few more seconds, the Legionaries will begin to coordinate their attacks and rip into my precious exo-skeleton. Fortunately, they don't get that much time.

"FOR THE COLONY!"

The horde of ants slams into the disordered Legion force and washes over them like a wave. The front row of ants batters into the shields of their foes and the ants behind simply climb over the top of them and throw themselves into the fray, followed by the ants behind them, then the ants behind them, until the entire melee is a carpet of soldiers biting and gnawing at every bit of metal they get their mandibles on.

[TINY! Where the hell are you?!] I call mentally to my pet.

[FIGHT!] comes the roar back at me.

[OBVIOUSLY YOU IDIOT! BUT WHERE?!]

Forget asking him, I'll just have to find him. The battlefield is now a tangle of ants, Legionaries and shadow beast pets embroiled in a grand melee. I can't see anything in any direction. All around, the crush of bodies presses against me, buffeting me from side to side and it's hard to make headway.

[Crisis, any idea which way I need to go to find my way to Tiny?]

[Yes, Master! Head towards your left!]

[Great! ... Which way is left? Wait, I think I got it.]

I feel bad about distracting Crisis when she's about to make her entrance, but I really can't tell where the heck I am. Once I think I work it out, I orient myself and just start shoving, chomping whenever I see a flash of metal. After a few moments, I see the darkness around me begin to deepen as the light drains away. From out of the deepest patches of black snake long, barbed limbs that coil around any Legion soldier unfortunate enough to take their notice. Once they take hold, the tentacles begin to contort and twist and the sound of shrieking metal fills the air as Crisis begins to try and cut her way through the Legionary armour.

I manage to blast through enough of the melee that I meet up with Tiny once more and the sight is something to behold. The great ape is bloody, cuts all over his body staining his fur and making him look like some form of nightmare creature. Despite his numerous wounds, a fierce grin is plastered across his bat face as he swings his massive fists in a dizzying display of speed and power. Lightning surges across his body and darts down his hands whenever he strikes, blasting those foolish enough to get in his way with electrical discharges that smoke straight through their armour. Even so, the number of strikes directed towards Tiny is ridiculous and even Invidia isn't able to block them all.

Come on!

Gritting my mandibles, I throw my body forward and use my own frame to shield my friend from the barrage directed towards him. At the same time I trigger my regeneration gland and allow the liquid to flush through my system, helping to restore my HP even as I lose it.

[Come on, Tiny! Time to fight our way out!]

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Chapter 643: The Prize

Tiny's fists are a sight to behold. Tireless and dauntless, his hands flash out faster than the ant eye can see, each strike accompanied by a flash of light as fists of pure energy materialise and crash into his targets like trucks. As I watch he winds up and unleashes a devastating uppercut that starts at his feet and finishes above his head. An arc of light materialises from the fist and rises underneath a legionary soldier and lifts them with tremendous force to crash into the ceiling.

Holy heck! That had to hurt.

Despite the spectacular success of that swing, Tiny received numerous cuts and strikes during the wind up and recovery. He can't afford to take much more damage! Get back you tin-cans! Get back!

Doom Chomp!

The intimidating jaws of dark energy gnash and bite at the swirling melee around us. It's hard to penetrate the powerful armour of the Legion, but I know I manage to get a few good bites in here and there as I use my body as a living shield for Tiny. Invidia is doing all he can to distract the enemy and keep his ape charge standing, healing and shielding Tiny in a dizzying display of magical prowess. So far, it's just enough to keep the big guy swinging, along with my own impressive diamond carapace absorbing it's fair share of blows.

In fact, would it be fair to say that they are targeting me more than Tiny right now?!

A barrage of weapon strikes flash out of the darkness at me, carving gouges in my carapace and knocking my weight around. My nerves allow me to make precision, last second dodges that keep my legs attached to my body and protect my eyes from being punctured. The battlefield truly has descended into a complete mess, with fanatical ants literally throwing their bodies at the enemy, crawling over the roof and dropping onto the Legion from above.

More and more ants join the fray until the entire tunnel is just a seething mass of ants. Once the numbers get high enough, Tiny and I can finally relax, since there aren't enough soldiers with a clear shot at us to cause significant issues. Once they realise they can't claim the major prize, the enemy begin a fighting retreat. When they manage to group together, the Legion soldiers are adept at layering their shields and combining their strikes to sweep away a number of ants at once, giving themselves breathing room to try and free more of their allies.

I push forward hard in an attempt to stay on the front lines in order to protect my siblings, but there's so darn many of them that I'd have to crush them in order to get through. After ten minutes of shoving and snapping whenever I can, I suddenly find myself alone in the field.

Did... did we win?

"FOR THE COLONY!"

"CHARGE!"

"GET 'EM!"

The Colony has clearly not had enough of chomping on the Legion. The ants surge forward, hungry to extract their full measure of vengeance now that they finally have the upper mandible.

[Crisis! Block them! Don't let the Colony pursue them!]

The Legion has been diligent in seizing our strongholds and bringing their line forward in unison. I've no doubt that if we chase them down the tunnel we'll run into traps and reinforcements. If we aren't careful, they'll flip this victory into a defeat before we can blink!

The horde of ants rushes forward but the shadows deepen beyond black in front of them and a forest of tentacles rises from the floors. In the blink of an eye a forest of dark, writhing limbs have risen in front of them, blocking the path of the charge.

"Get back!" I call, "get back to our walls!"

With persistent calls and the odd THWACK! I manage to get the Colony turned around. I get that they're excited but I sure as heck don't want to lose any more of them. Indeed, the battlefield is littered with wounded and fallen ants. They may have managed to pile on and get within biting range of the Legion for a change, but that doesn't change the fact that those armoured soldiers pack a ridiculous punch in a small package.

The healers are already out in full force, gathering up the wounded and providing emergency treatment. Nutritious Biomass is delivered to those in most need to help kick start the natural healing process and get them back on their feet faster. I ask Invidia to help out where he can as I wearily survey the battlefield. It was a short and sharp conflict, but I'm completely exhausted. I might actually need some torpor after that one.

I wander around and find Tiny slumped against the wall with a satisfied smile on his face and his body covered in wounds. I almost call Invidia back to take care of the ape but I stop myself when I realise that most of the injuries are already closed. Even so, he must have come close to losing all of his HP multiple times in that fight. I swear at one point I saw him with one arm barely hanging on. Even with Invidia in his back pocket, he still isn't protected enough to make it out of engagements like this in one piece.

[You dumb gorilla,] I sigh at him, [fighting is good and all, but you need to make it out alive or it doesn't count.]

[Harr,] he scoffs and then winces as his wounds flare up.

[You deserve that. Rest you big lug, I'll try and get some food for you.]

Predictably, his eyes light up at the mention of food and he nods at me with vigour. Predictable.

"Quite the unexpected fight, Eldest."

Gah! I didn't even notice Wills creep up on me, I was so preoccupied.

"Don't blame me," I say, "I had nothing to do with it. Tiny decided he wanted to fight today."

"Turns out it was a good thing that he did," she says, "the real question I have though, is what we're going to do with all of that."

With a flick of her antennae, the scout indicates the two dozen or so suits of armour being dragged away towards our own walls.

"I can think of an ant who might want to take a look at those..."

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Chapter 644: RnD

The hammer of anvils and the searing heat of metal surrounded Smithant on all sides and she couldn't be happier.

"How do I manage this part?" another carver scuttled up to her and asked.

"Ah, the folding? It's like this..." she explained the process with care and demonstrated some of the techniques on her own workbench as the other ant watched with laser-like focus.

"I understand," the carver nodded, "I'll make an attempt and return to see what you think."

So saying the ant ran off to her own workspace and soon another anvil was ringing in chorus along with the others. It felt so nice to have helpers! It was only weeks ago when she was labouring on these projects by herself! Only weeks? It seemed like a lifetime ago. After breaking through with her Skills and forging the first suit of enchanted ant armour for Leeroy, she'd managed to receive the blessing of the Eldest and, suffice to say, the word of the most important ant in the Colony went a long way toward getting approval.

With more resources at her disposal, and the help to make use of them, the armour workshop of the Colony was now a small thriving community of armoursmiths, dedicated to their profession with the sort of unflinching fanaticism that came so naturally to the ants.

Filled with pleasant feelings and eager to return to her own work, Smithant was more than a little irritated to hear a clamour and rush and a horde of ants descended into the workshop, taking up space and hauling what appeared to be heavy sacks filled with the unmistakable tinkle of metal on metal. At least they were interrupting her for something worthwhile, she grumbled. As long as there was metal involved, she was interested.

"What has got you lot so riled up?" she demanded as the cavalcade of ants flooded into her workspace, covering every inch of the walls and ceiling, taking up defensive positions.

"Sorry for the trouble," came a recognised scent, "the generals are a little nervous about this stuff and wanted a full security detail. Forget that the largest soldiers won't even fit in the workshop area."

"Tungstant?"

The carver council member skittered into the room, poking and prodding at the bags on the ground with her front legs. It was quite rare for the council members to show up here, especially right now.

"I thought you were working on the defences of the three nests... What are you doing here?"

The council member shook her antennae and kept prodding at the bags.

"Because of this stuff, obviously. I've been told what we have here, but I haven't actually *seen* it. Come on over here and let's have a look, I'm so curious to have a look."

"What could they possibly bring in that would need this kind of attention?" As curious as she was, Smithant kind of resented having so many of her siblings crowded into her private work area. Nobody had bothered to come in here before, why were they so desperate to jump in now?!

Still, the lure of the bags drew her in. What could it be? A new mineral or type of metal? It was possible that scouts and miners had turned up something new and unexpected in their explorations. The Colony refused to abandon expansion and search efforts during the conflict after all.

Interest stirred within the carapace of the crafter and she found herself drawn to the sharply angled lumps hidden with the bags. Where the heck did the Colony even get bags from anyway? Tungstant noticed her unspoken question.

"We've started making them to help carry stuff. One ant, even a carver, can carry a heck of a lot in two bags slung over the carapace. Now help me get these things open."

It took a few moments for the two to recognise the bottom of the unfamiliar container and upend it to send the precious contents tumbling out onto the floor. The moment the gleaming plates of enchantment encrusted armour hit the floor, something magical happened, something remarkable, unexplainable and unfathomable. It was a lightning strike, an earthquake, an eruption and an implosion all at once, and it took place directly in the centre of Smithant's heart.

In that instant, she fell in love.

"What... what have you..."

Her pheromones trailed away to nothing as she drew ever closer to the gleaming plates of armour. Her antennae swept forward to caress the curved metal with an almost tender softness as her mandibles clacked together rhythmically. If she noticed this strange behaviour, Tungstant didn't seem to pay it any mind. Indeed, she'd been around the carvers long enough to know what could happen to them around the objects of their obsession. This level of strangeness didn't even approach the kind of things that stupid sculpture inspired ant had done since she'd started working.

"These are full sets of Legion armour that we seized from the battlefield, one set in each of these bags. The mages have swept over and analysed them to the best of their ability in order to check if there are hazardous enchantments on them, but if there is it's far beyond our ability to detect it."

"I see."

Tungstant wasn't confident that she'd been heard, but she continued anyway.

"If fact, from what I've been told from those who've taken a look at this, the technology on display is far beyond anything we have at our disposal. The mages weren't even able to identify the materials used to make these suits. We can't even speculate on it, to be honest. Naturally, as the foremost expert on the subject, we decided to bring this to you. Learn whatever you can from them, but be careful, we don't know what this armour can do if you start melting it down."

"Melt it down?!" Smithant cried, coming back to her senses, "sacrilege! Who would possibly of destroying such perfection?"

She snatched up one of the pauldrons in her mandibles as an antenna drooped down to pet the curved metal.

"Noone will hurt you my darling. My gem... *My preciousss.*"

"Great! I'll leave you to it then," Tungstant said and turned around to hurry back to her own work.

The many guards and sentries remained in place, but Smithant didn't see them, couldn't possibly imagine they existed. All of the material things in creation were only herself, and the armour. All else was dust.

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Chapter 645: Heart of Glass

She knew she would have to break it. It was obvious. How on Pangera was she supposed to learn the secrets of this incredible armour without hitting it, breaking it open, melting it? She couldn't! She knew she couldn't. And yet... she struggled to bring herself to do it. She'd examined the armour in intricate detail. Every sense she could bring to bear had been utilised with laser-like focus on every curve and fold of the suits she could access. Her antennae were intimately familiar with every square inch. Her eyes had examined each marking and rune, the entire network of which (that was visible) she had copied onto sheets of metal that adorned the walls of her forge.

Several of the watchful scouts had been yelled at for allowing their legs to pollute those surfaces as they shifted around the room, disturbing her thoughts for seemingly no good reason. What were they supposed to protect her from?! The scouts fobbed her off, with generic statements about 'dangerous enemy technology', as they'd been ordered to. The fact that Tungstant had placed them there to protect Smithant in the event something went very wrong, they wouldn't say. The Colony was not about to lose their foremost armour expert so soon after she had demonstrated her worth! Not even for Legion armour would that be worthwhile.

So they carefully watched as the carver interacted with the armour, their cores in their jaws each time she dropped something or started gnawing on the armour with her mandibles, worried that something would explode before they had the chance to throw themselves on top of it.

Eventually, she was forced to weigh her affection for the incredible craftsmanship of the Legion pieces that had fallen into her claws against her own Skills and knowledge (and by extension, the Colony's). Of course, her own Skills won out. How much more precious would equally stunning works be, if they had come from her own forge? The very thought sent her into a catatonic state of joy for several long minutes.

The decision made, she wasted no time in getting to work. The ants had developed many ant-specific tools for manipulating armour in order for them to manage the process of detailing and enchanting. With the straps undone and the joints snipped, Smithant used her front two claws to lift and mount the armour on the frames she'd constructed and started the painful process of deconstructing the suits.

It took long hours of arduous (and tearful) toil. The armour was tough. Really tough. The materials were totally alien to her experience and far more durable than anything she'd worked with to date. Not only was the stuff harder to break, snap, pierce or shatter, it was lighter, responded to mana better and held enchantments more than three times as efficiently! The strange stone was a wonder in and of itself. It could *detect* mana sources around it and actively tried to consume that mana. She nearly had a few cores drained dry when they were placed too close to the stuff. When she tested it on herself (the watching scouts came *this* close to leaping off the roof in a massive pile-on) she found that even through her carapace and flesh, the stone was able to siphon away a portion of the mana in her core.

The only logical conclusion was that the mineral was, in some sense, living. The number of experiments she would need to conduct on the stuff to test it was immeasurable and would likely take years. Reluctant as she was to part with it, she had little choice but to pass responsibility for that investigation over to the mages. She had armour to make and precious little time to take on a task that could instead be done by a dozen teams of mage-ants.

The metal was a more familiar material. She wasn't sure what she'd expected to find after the encounter with the strange stone, but the steel was (as far as she could tell) inert. A relief. If the Legion had managed to find some sort of living metal and learned to shape it, she might have despaired of the Colony ever catching up to their craftsmanship.

The material was unknown to her, that much made sense. She could work at identifying and categorizing the qualities of the metal, but it was unlikely she would be able to do more until they found an unprocessed sample of the stuff for herself. Where her interest truly lay, and where she stood to gain the most from this investigation, was the *techniques* used rather than the materials.

And those techniques were, quite literally, next level. She was able to see what had been achieved but couldn't picture *how* for the life of her. In reality, this metal wasn't *too* much better than that the Colony had access to, at least the raw material. Smithant theorised that the processing and treatment applied to the ore was what resulted in the higher level of tensile strength and lighter weight. Which took what was a relatively small advantage in raw components and widened it significantly. This led the carver to further believe that there were far better suits of armour out there. She refused to believe that a force as old and established as this Legion didn't have access to ore that far surpassed this.

The other key advantage was in the way their smiths had worked the final metal. Although she couldn't completely reverse engineer the techniques that had been used in the forging, she was able to analyse the final *result*. Then she could try and make educated guesses as to the process that had been used. If she were successful in her work, she might be rewarded with a significant amount of experience towards her smithing Skill. At the very least, it was going to be a great benefit to the Colony to gain some insight into how some of the best out there made their armour.

In terms of unlocking the benefits to their enchanting methods, she was even further behind in that department. Although she worked hard on her enchanting Skills, it was her secondary profession, she

wasn't the highest level in the Colony by a long shot. She'd have to bring in a few experts to help break down *that* tangled web.

But all of that wouldn't require the use of this many suits. The Colony had seized over ten full sets of this superb stuff, it would be a waste for it to collect dust in her collection (though she longed for it, she couldn't condone the inefficiency). She couldn't replicate these materials, or their techniques, but what she *could* do was hack these suits apart and then cobble them back together to the best of her ability. It would be a pretty nasty piece of patchwork, and splicing together the enchantments would be an absolute nightmare, but she was fairly confident she could get it to work. The only question was, who out there was in need of the worst best armour the Colony had to offer?

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Chapter 646: Suiting up

The giant gorilla shifted uncomfortably as Smithant crawled over him, taking measurements with her antennae and trying to work out the best way she could cobble the armour she had onto his massive frame.

Tiny, for his part, suffered through it as best he could. Naturally, his preference would be to smash the stupid sword people's faces in, but he'd been ordered to come all the way up to the nest by his Master and so he had no choice but to do so. In his own opinion, the previous fight had been a magnificent success. Much face was smashed, many blows landed upon the enemy. Tiny had punched until his fists bled and wrists cracked, the rage within him all but spent. Yet the Master was more concerned with 'near fatal wounds' and 'catastrophic loss of blood', things that Tiny didn't deem nearly as important. Still, the master had heard that there might be a powerful set of armour on offer and so now here he was.

Antennae tippy-tap on his arm and he dutifully raises it to allow the ant to measure his arms and shoulders.

It's a good thing the Colony managed to haul so many suits back from the battlefield, Smithant reflected, since there were only so many pieces that would be useable in this reconstruction and she had a heck of a lot of surface area to cover. The rest of the ants in attendance watched from the sidelines, slightly anxious for the outcome. The pets raised by the Eldest had achieved a strange sort of status amongst the Colony. They weren't ants, obviously, but they were still accepted as part of the family. In a sense they were an extension of the Eldest, and therefore deserving of some measure of the respect reserved for that august individual.

So the Colony stepped carefully and deferentially around Tiny as he sat and sulked during the extended measuring session. In truth, it took hours to complete since Smithant constantly moved back and forth, fetching sections of armour from her workshop and using her mandibles to hold them against Tiny to check their fit.

Gradually, the shape of what she would need to make began to take shape in the mind of the carver. It wasn't going to be pretty, and it certainly wasn't going to be something like a full suit of armour, but it was going to provide a lot more protection than fur and skin. With the rough outline complete, she got to work.

Back in her workshop, watched over by the ever paranoid eyes of the scouts clinging to the roof, she began the arduous task of making the cuts necessary to separate the armour into the pieces she would need. Hours of painful, slow and careful work followed. She had to cut the armour without weakening it as much as possible, easier said than done. She also had to keep in mind the chunks of enchanted runes inscribed in the armour and what she would need to change and modify to create a working network of her own.

Several of her helpers came to hold pieces and manoeuvre the sections for her, which helped speed things along remarkably. As the hours progressed, more and more of her team piled into her workspace to assist on the project. Eventually they were forced to take a wall down to accommodate them all as they worked in a frenzy. Sections were cut, compared, recut, straps added, bindings tied and pieces layered over each other in a thousand different combinations. After a few hours, a trio of high level enchanters arrived to study the armour and within a minute had been swept into the project. Along with Smithant, they studied the intricate rune script engraved on the armour, large sections of which they couldn't interpret.

The process of snipping, rewriting and editing the runes was a mammoth one and the ants set to it with gusto, forming a separate team working alongside the first. It was hectic work, but the ants felt their Skill levels rising rapidly as they continued, not stopping until the final product began to take shape.

As pure ant artisans and crafters, it hurt their sensibilities to send out something as rough as what they finally made. It was crude, a hodgepodge of bits and pieces taken from far finer work, but it functioned. The enchantment matrix might spark a little bit (metaphorically) but it did the job. Despite how rough it was, due to the excellence of the source materials, there was little question that it was the best armour the Colony had produced to date.

When Tiny put it on, Smithant couldn't help but think he looked that much more... eager.

The armour was spotty in places, but it did a good job of covering his chest, shoulders and belly. It was a mismatch of stone and metal plating strapped together and heavily padded underneath with cloth and leather. For the most part, they hadn't been able to cover his arms and legs, aside from some plating covering the front of his legs.

The hardest piece of work by far had been the helmet. In order to make it, they'd been forced to break apart nearly fifteen of the human head protectors and splice them together in order to fit over Tiny's much, much, much, much thicker skull. The final result was enormously heavy and far from the best fit, but it added much needed protection to the face zone.

When the armour was finally assembled and strapped on, Tiny rolled his shoulders and swung his arms a few times before grunting in satisfaction. It was uncomfortable and weighed him down, but there was a satisfying heft to the slabs of metal and stone that he found quite satisfying. More than that, with his task of getting armour completed, he was free to re-join his master once again. His greatest hope was that his new equipment would prevent him from being sent away from the fighting again. He'd lost so much smashing time.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 647: The Sound of the Beast

Myrrin continued to push hard alongside her brothers and sisters of steel. The grim men and women of the Legion battled hard with little rest against endless waves of insects. She pulled her helmet off for a moment and sat, leaning her back against the rough tunnel wall. Without the aid of her helmet, the oppressive darkness of the second strata swept over her once more. She'd had her helmet on for so long she'd almost forgotten how dark it was, she could barely see her own hand in front of her face.

"Myrrin, got any space on that wall for a weary mage?" came the tired voice of Donnelan.

The young Legionary snorted in derision.

"A tired mage? How would it be possible to see such a thing? Standing at the back and waving your hands around can't be that tiring can it?"

"Leave off," came the grumbled reply as Donnelan leaned back into the wall and slid down to a seated position. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to contest the minds of these stupid ants? There's no end to them."

She felt her curiosity piqued.

"I can't really. What's it like?"

Her friend shuddered.

"I imagine it's similar to what it feels like on the front. You push forward and immediately get jumped by a dozen opponents that swarm over you in seconds. After that it's just a desperate wrestle until they give up or someone else comes along and saves you."

She nodded.

"Sounds about right," she said quietly.

She fell silent for a moment before she barked out a humourless laugh.

"What's so funny?" Donnelan asked.

She smiled in the dark.

"You remember during the wave, under Liria, when we fought for days on end against the monsters? We swore we'd never see anything that bad ever again."

He couldn't help but chuckle at how naïve they'd been.

"I suppose this is kind of similar. Endless waves of monsters to fight. Days without sleep. The commander pushing us forward like a slave driver."

"It's not the same," Myrrin refuted, "not the same at all."

"How do you figure?"

"During the wave we fought so many monsters, but they were mindless, in a frenzy. The moment they saw us, they charged forward and didn't stop until they were cut to bits. These ants... "

She trailed away and Donnelan sighed.

"Are too cunning," he finished the thought for her and she nodded.

The traps, the secret tunnels, the ambush attempts, the constant probing on the flanks, sneak attacks trying to cut off their supplies, attempted tunnel collapses, mental assaults, barrages of spells, reinforced stone walls bristling with spikes. It was brutal, draining and *constant*. At any moment there could be four or five tunneling attempts going on in different locations throughout the area of Dungeon they'd captured. Not a single one had ever succeeded, but the ants didn't stop trying. At first Myrrin had thought they were just being stupid, but she'd seen how draining it had been for the mages and auxiliaries to haul their detecting equipment around, setting it up all over again every time the front moved. They even had to staff the thing in rotating shifts, not for a single moment allowing the array to be unattended.

If their vigilance ever slipped, even for a period of minutes, the ants would be behind them, filling the tunnels in an instant and crawling over every wall and ceiling as they sought to inflict any damage they could.

"You're right," Donnelan said, "this is so much worse. I'd much rather throw fireballs until I passed out than engage in these mental battles. They just feel so *alien*."

"You should see them from the front," Myrrin said softly, "they're so desperate to bite us they crawl on top of each other to reach us. It's like watching a living wall of monsters come rushing towards us rather than a charge. I swear I can feel their rage, even though their eyes are so cold."

The mage shrugged.

"We came here to kill them all," he yawned, "I'm not surprised they're a little cheesed off. How much longer until the next push?"

"Only a few minutes," she sighed and pulled on her helmet. "I'm getting a break after this one. You?"

"No," he said, "unlike *some people*, I have a solemn duty to perform and I won't be caught shirking."

"Except you would if you could," she smiled.

"Hells yes."

The two friends lapsed into a comfortable silence as they drank in this rare opportunity for a break. It didn't last long. With her helmet back on, Myrrin could see her fellow Legionaries hurrying forward as they prepared for the next push. The centurions huddled together not far away, pouring over scout reports and discussing the overall strategy. Things had changed since the incident a few days ago when one of the attack groups had their shield line broken. The defensive line had been reinforced further for every push. It only mattered when that huge ant and its disgusting pets showed up to the battlefield, but it couldn't be predicted where it would show.

Myrrin herself had seen it in the field a few days ago. The magic it had cast was horrifying. For a moment it had almost looked as if the layered shield in front of her would break and she would be consumed by that *void*. It had held, of course, and the rest of the fight had gone according to expectations, but when she saw that creature across the field from her, she couldn't help but worry. The giant ape pet that had reportedly been a key factor in the retreat hadn't been seen since that battle. She could only hope it had been killed. The last thing she wanted was to face up to something like that.

"FALL IN!" came the call and Donnelan sighed.

"Back at it," he said as he hauled himself to his feet. "I hear we expect to reach their nest before too long, so hopefully we've reached the tail end of this campaign."

Myrrin barked a humourless laugh.

"You really think fighting in the nest is going to be the easy part of this? It'll take longer to break through there than it's taken to get to this point, mark my words."

"We have auxiliaries and more Legionaries coming," the mage pointed out, "that's going to help take the pressure off."

"I hope so..."

The two parted ways as they made their way back to their respective squads. The actions required before every attack had become so routine that the scout could complete them without thinking, but she had been warned against the temptation to mindlessly perform her maintenance. She made sure that she focused on every minute detail as she completed her equipment check alongside her comrades as their centurion watched on like a hawk. She checked every strap and buckle, tested each enchantment and examined all of her weapons before turning and doing the same to the Legionary on her left as they performed the same inspection on her. When all was confirmed ready, they reported to their centurion, a grizzled veteran from the wars on the third strata, who nodded and led them in a brisk march through the lines.

The sentries nodded to them and gave short words of encouragement as they scanned the darkness for ants and before long they had arrived at the staging ground. Row upon row of disciplined Legionaries formed up and Myrrin was proud to take her place amongst them. They weren't in the front for this assault, something she was secretly grateful for, but rather toward the middle. She cast her eyes forward but it was hard to make out what was ahead of her through the darkness.

After a few minutes of nervous waiting, the order came to advance. Eyes up, she marched forward in time with her comrades, her hand gripped around her bow. The shape of the ant defence gradually took shape in the gloom, the walls already bristling with innumerable insects that clicked and clacked softly in the darkness. Just when she had begun to relax, she saw it.

In the centre of the wall, surrounded by the thickest number of insects, that huge hulking figure loomed. Even in the dim light, its carapace glittered and sparkled, at least around its eyes. Myrrin suppressed a shudder. She swore she could feel the malice and rage emanating from it across the tunnel. Just above it flittered the small shape of the demon pet that appeared alongside it, the green light of its eye a tiny point of light in the dark. Looks like she was going to experience another battle in the presence of that creature, the most powerful ant in the Colony. She drew a deep breath. At least it didn't have that....

"ROOOOOOAAAAARRRRR!!!!"

A mindless scream of rage and bloodlust boomed out from behind the ant wall, so powerful it shook the air and rattled the stone. Trickle of soil shaken loose from the ceiling fell on the heads of the Legion as they advanced.

What the hell was that?

From behind the wall a giant hand appeared on the lip, followed by another. Over the next few seconds an enormous, hulking brute lifted itself up over the edge, its eyes glowing red with fury. As she drew closer, Myrrin felt a ripple of anger from the silent Legionaries around them, a few curse words were shoved passed gritted teeth and soon she saw why.

The ape was covered in the armour of the fallen soldiers. The ants had desecrated their Abyssal armour and turned it to their own purposes. Behind the thick visor over the ape's head, she swore she saw the beast recognise their anger... and grin.

Chrysalis

Chapter 648: Armoured Kong

The various Strata of the Dungeon are as different from one another as can be, each holding unique characteristics that can only be found in those places. There is some discussion around whether the environment of that Strata is the cause of the predominant mana attributes in those places, or does the mana that gives shape to the environment?

Since no scholar was present as the various layers of the Dungeon took shape, it's impossible for us to know for certain. What we can do, as researchers, delvers and academics, is to study the current state of the various layers and hypothesise as to their formation. In the following pages I will provide a detailed breakdown of the layers known to the Magio Scholars of the Imperial College and give my own thoughts as to their purpose and origins.

(Inquisitor Note: Details of the lower strata are NOT for distribution on pain of death. Do not disseminate, discuss or pass on this information without the express clearance of the Inquisitorium.)

First Strata: The Layer of Beasts, as it is commonly referred is the weakest and least dangerous. The mana here is of a low concentration and is unable to support the more advanced monster types that can be found deeper.

Second Strata: The Shadow Sea, due to its nature, is far more threatening than the first layer, despite being only slightly deeper into the Dungeon. The darkness, cold and high concentration of death mana can create many unique monster types that can prove fatal to the unprepared. It has been noted by many that this layer holds special affinity to stealth Skills and types, proving the perfect hunting and training ground for those who specialise in such builds.

Third Strata: The Red Plateau. The world of the Demons and the playground of Arconidem's subjects. The mana here behaves in such peculiar ways that it isn't easy to assign a single affinity to the entire layer, but fire is certainly a persistent, and violent affinity that is found here. The Demon society, such that it is, is one that has adapted to this environment (or perhaps created it?) and certainly those monsters themselves are by far the greatest danger. Those that rule over that place are worse tyrants than any that has sat on a throne on the surface.

Fourth Strata: Mythic Realm. It is in the fourth layer that what mages like to class as the 'higher mana' affinities begin to appear, those that are beyond the basic elemental types. The monsters here draw power from many sources and are as varied as the environments that can be found. It is certainly worth noting that this layer is home to the highest concentration of many rare minerals that are prized highly by the Sapient races, making territory here among the most fiercely sought after.

Fifth Strata: Fields of Decay. A troublesome place to say the least, the fifth strata is almost inhospitable to life. Filled with mana of decay, decomposition and rot, few powers seek to fight for control over these lands and contest against the almost indestructible monsters that roam through it. According to the earliest records the Tower has access to, the first Delves to reach this place found remnants of a different environment and traces of mana with attributes that no longer exist there. It is theorized by many that Theorazzn somehow tainted this entire layer upon his ascent, changing it into what it has now become.

(Inquisitor Note: Information of the lower strata is strictly forbidden. The remaining pages are sealed to the scroll.)

Gaining Invidia helped Tiny tremendously in terms of his survivability in combat. The numerous shields, which only get stronger as the little demon improved his Skills, with the constant flowing of sweet, sweet healing mana had done wonders in allowing the big ape to unleash his inner glass cannon. When I'd heard there was an opportunity to kit him out in some hacked together Legion armour... I have to say, I'd been a bit sceptical it would make much of a difference. However, after watching the ape nearly get himself killed diving headlong into the Legion, I knew that *something* had to be done. To be honest, I took this chance just to get Tiny away from the front for a few days in order to prevent him diving into bristling Legion formations for a bit. Perhaps that would be enough to cool him off.

Turns out I was wrong on many fronts. Not only did the slight visit *not* calm Tiny down, it appears to have bottled his rage even further, compressing it into a neutron star of fury that has apparently exploded. The moment he saw the Legion gathering to assault our position he began to roar and bellow non-stop, slamming his fists into his shiny new armoured chest and throwing punches at the distant foe. To be fair to him, the Legion didn't seem all that happy to see him, either. Once they were able to see him, I saw a crack in their usual cast-iron discipline. A visible ripple moved through the ranks and it became immediately clear that Tiny was their primary target once they drew closer. The amount of firepower directed his way was extraordinary! Sword light, spells and a few kitchen sinks flew up at him well before the distance had closed to the point that such things could hurt him.

When the battle lines closed, that was when all hell broke loose. I'd forced Tiny to remain on the wall by giving a strict, clear order using only small words which I'd repeated fourteen times. That didn't stop him from bathing the approaching Legion with Lightning the moment he could. If I hadn't ordered him to stop, he might have run out of juice before he even got to throw a punch!

When the fighting started in earnest as the Legionaries battered our walls and the ants started to apply the mandibles, that's when Tiny's new outfit got its first *real* test. Holy moly did they want to make him holy. That they failed is a testimonial about the effectiveness of their own craftsmanship, I suppose. With Invidia helping to blunt the damage and the armour in place to protect his vitals, the giant ape was gleefully throwing fists well past the point I thought he would need to retire from the fight. Eventually I had to dive in front of him and nearly get killed in order to force him to retreat, but even after all that, the armour held up fine. If he were to repeat his action from earlier and dive into the middle of the Legion assault, he'd fare way better than before, but I'm sure as heck not going to let him do that until we have to go for broke out the front of the gates of the nest.

It's too risky now anyway. After the last time Tiny was on the field and he broke through the enemy shield wall, the Legion has thickened their numbers and beefed up their defences when they advance on

us. Not even super-mad Tiny would break through that nonsense now. I can't be mad though, having to commit greater numbers to each push means they've had to slow down a bit, and every hour gained helps.

It certainly helps me. Being in combat with these high level opponents is doing *wonders* for my Skills! I've got some nice improvements that I need to examine, as well as spend some time perusing the System menu for new unlocks. My biggest achievement over the last few days though has to be my stabilisation of the omni-elemental array! Now I'll be able to use the thing in battle and start levelling that Skill! Very excited.

As we retreat from the ruins of our last defensive outpost, I share a few words with Tiny.

[How did you find the new armour?] I ask.

The big ape looks at me for a moment before shrugging as we run side by side.

[Really?] I'm surprised by his lack of enthusiasm. [You've held up well under the barrage in that battle. You'd have been shredded to bits before!]

He shrugs again and waves his fist vaguely in the air before returning to running.

[You don't really care because it doesn't help you hit harder?]

He nods and grins.

THIS IDIOT.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 649: The Hunger

wSarah took a deep breath and felt the frigid air of the second strata fill her lungs where she held it for a few long seconds before she exhaled, the wind of her breath so strong it nearly knocked over an ant who had been walking in front of her. She paid no mind, or rather, she didn't notice at all, her attention was focused inward, all external distractions shoved away.

She took another deep, slow breath. In. Hold. Out. Wait. In. Hold. Out. Wait.

This was a cycle she remembered learning as a human on Earth, something her psychologist had told her would help her be calm. Cyclical breathing. That was the name of the technique. It had helped her, in her past life. Most of the time. She flinched away from the memories of her previous existence and once more focused on her breathing. Each stage five seconds long.

In. Hold. Out. Wait. In. Hold. Out. Wait.

Even though she wasn't conscious of it, a team of ants crawled over the enormous bear as she lay sprawled on her belly. The great warrior Sarah had contributed much to the defence of the Colony and her unselfish fight had made the ants well disposed towards her. As she rested, they tended to her fur, cleaning it meticulously and ensuring there were no small wounds or barbs that may cause issues later. It was the same level of care with which they tended to each other before and after a battle, Sarah deserved that much. Also, they had noticed that she breathed easier when they were active around her, the aura of violence and malevolence that suffused the air around her abated when they drew close.

From this they surmised that they were providing some sort of emotional comfort, another thing they were pleased to do.

From the wall of the tunnel, Jim watched silently as his companion battled her nature. He had created a burrow within the tunnel wall and only his head emerged, protruding into the open space. From the moment Sarah had joined the front lines, he had been here also. Not to fight, he wasn't much use for that, but to try and support his friend. He could feel her now, sense the internal struggle with his mind as she battled against the violent nature that had lain dormant so long within her.

[Sarah...] he eventually asked, [are you alright over there?]

The great bear opened one eye and for a terrifying instant an overwhelming pressure of violence pressed into the consciousness of the worm, filling his mind with a hunger for battle. He wanted to rip, to tear, to do all sorts of non-worm like things. How would he even tear? Then Sarah released a great huff, knocked over another ant and the aura was gone, restrained once more in the depths of her mind.

[I'm fine,] she replied, [it's alright. I've got it under control.]

She pushed her feet underneath herself and forced herself to standing, sending the cleaning crew on her back to scatter quickly. She turned to face her friend in the wall.

[See? No problem.]

The worm wiggled derisively.

[Sarah, you're the worst liar I ever met. Putting that aside, I can still feel the malevolence inside you. I have very sensitive mental faculties, remember? You can't conceal this from me.]

Sarah just sighed and shrugged her massive bear shoulders.

[What do you want me to do about it? It's not like I can just stop fighting.]

[Why not?] Jim asked indignantly, [you've done more than enough! How long do you expect to throw yourself against the golgari to defend a place that isn't yours? You don't owe ...]

[Don't I?] she cut in. [Are you sure that I don't owe anything, Jim? If it weren't for the Colony, if it weren't for Anthony, where would I be now?]

[Then what about what you owe me?] the worm demanded. [Have I been useless? Have I not supported you and helped you escape? Huh? Don't I deserve a little gratitude?]

The two looked at each other for a long moment.

[So. What? You want me to pay you back by betraying the Colony? Is that it?] Sarah asked, her mental voice low and soft.

Jim recoiled as if struck.

[What? No! I mean...]

At that moment the two friends were interrupted as Coolant arrived.

[Hello to you both,] the ant said once the mind bridges had stabilised. [I hope I find you well.]

[O-of course,] Sarah replied. [And you?]

The ant paused for a moment.

[I am also well. I am still not used to your human style greetings, I hope I was accurate.]

Sarah briefly wondered how the ants greeted each other and once the thought was in her head, she couldn't shake it. She had to ask. In response, the mage ant turned to the nearby traffic. There was no visible response, but first the passing ant's antennae began to twitch, followed by Coolant's.

[I told them to work hard,] the ant explained, [and they told me to stop slacking off.]

Sarah and Jim both stared at her.

[We usually encourage each other to work when we see others of the Colony. If we see them not working, we tell them to get to work. If we see them working hard, we tell them to keep it up.]

[Don't you ever tell them to rest?] Jim wondered.

Coolant looked nervous for a second.

[No,] the ant muttered as she turned her body this way and that, as if searching for something, [we don't say that.]

[Why do you look so nervous?] Sarah asked, confused by the transformation.

[I haven't gone into torpor for a few days,] came the distracted reply, [I'd forgot about it until just now.]

[You haven't slept? Why is that so worrying?]

[It's nothing,] once again the mage was cool and composed, [I've been sent to let you know our plan for the upcoming defence.]

[Okay] said Sarah, [I'm ready to fight anytime.]

She pointedly ignored the bristling worm in the wall.

[That is good. We are retreating.]

[Whe- wait... what?!]

[Retreating,] Coolant emphasised. She gestured with one leg toward the procession of ants making their way past. [As you can see the process has already begun. The generals have decided to cede the final stretch of defences in order to consolidate around the gates. Let the enemy extend themselves across the distance as we recuperate.]

Sarah was confused.

[I thought you wanted to fight for every inch of ground,] she protested, [wear the golgari down, has that changed?]

[We have worn them down,] Coolant told her, [in no small part thanks to you, we have been able to force them to pay a high price for advancing. There are many circumstances that led to this decision being made.]

[Like what?] having been so ready to throw herself back into the fight, Sarah was keen to understand the change.

[The mana is rising in the tunnels,] Coolant said, [the spawn rates of the shadow creatures is rising. Extending our supply lines outside the nest is becoming more difficult and it is necessary to withdraw soldiers to defend the young. And if it is difficult for the Colony, with all our numbers, to hold off the beasts...]

[It's worse for the golgari...]

[Just so. We anticipate there will be another wave before too long. Though exactly when is not something we can guess. If we are able to repel the enemy at the gates, then our hope is that they will be forced to retreat when the Dungeon becomes too dangerous.]

Slowly, Sarah and Jim began to understand what this meant to the ants.

[The time for the final stand is fast approaching,] Coolant confirmed, [we will live or die based on the events of the next few days. Keep in mind Sarah and Jim, you are friends of the Colony but you are not compelled to fight. The battle will be fierce at the gates, so think carefully whether you want to fight. None will think less of you if you choose to sit out.]

The ant spoke to both of them, but all present understood it was to the great bear that her message was intended. Sarah wanted to reply immediately, but felt her thoughts constrict unexpectedly. Before she could force herself to agree, Coolant had vanished. Had she been less distracted she would have noticed the council member being dragged away quickly and silently by a team of ants as she struggled for freedom. With the liaison gone, she had little choice but to join the trail as they made their way back to the nest.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 650: Under the Sea

When the order came to pull back to the nest, I honestly couldn't say if I was unhappy or relieved. We'd battled these stupid Legion punks for every inch of ground. Thousands of Colony members had died in the defence. Now we were just supposed to hand over the last five kilometres of tunnel for free? As a gift? Were we rolling out the red carpet for these killers?

Of course I know that's not the intention, but it still rankles me. On the other hand, I'm freakin' tired. Exhausted even. I haven't enjoyed proper torpor in so long I swear I've sensed Protectant and her gang grouping up to try and drag me away. My body might feel young and sprightly, filled to bursting with the energy of the Colony supplied, but my mind is spongy and bruised. I need sleep! I need release from this endless war of attrition.

So it's with these mixed feelings that I finally make my return to the main nest. Each of the three nests are expected to be hit in the upcoming siege, but this is still the centre of the Colony's strength and despite not being asked to, I want to position myself here where the fighting is going to be hottest. As the massive trail of tens of thousands of ants winds toward home, it's hard not to take notice of how freaking cold it is. Ants aren't the best when it comes to dealing with low temperatures and I can see the soldiers around me are struggling somewhat to deal with it. The sea of shadows has grown thicker over

the last few days, the oppressive darkness and freezing cold are pressing down on us ever more viciously.

It's obvious another wave is coming. Possibly worse than the first. This deep down we're sure to run into significant numbers of third strata monsters as they rise, possibly even the fourth. Where the last wave turned into an opportunity for us, this one may be a great trial for the Colony. If we survive our current predicament, we'll be thrust right into a fresh onslaught. Even so, I find it hard to believe the Colony will falter. My new family has never let me down yet.

Plenty of time to worry about the future when it happens, right now I need to take a comprehensive look at my situation. Fighting against the Legion is certainly good for Skills, I can't complain about that much. I've experienced growth in a lot of areas, particularly in those I've been using repeatedly. My mental Skills along with my targeting have grown by leaps and bounds along with solid improvements in my magic. My stockpile of Biomass hasn't grown by as much as I would like, opportunities for hunting have been nil for a long time, after all. The Colony did keep us well fed over the course of the battles, but not enough to significantly increase what I'd stashed away before the Legion arrived. Still, there'll be room for a few final mutations before the last battle heats up.

As I busy myself pouring through my Skill list and wondering which of my organs and body parts I should mutate next, the convoy rolls ever forward until finally we reach the gates of the nest.

If I thought things were ostentatious and overdone before, the carvers have taken things to an entirely new level now. The entire tunnel bristles like a porcupine on a bad hair day with reinforced steel spikes. I can see ambush and firing tunnels every few metres, peppering the roof of the tunnel. Even the slope moving toward the gate has been changed to a steep downward grade, forcing the enemy to march uphill to reach the gates. The massive steel doors themselves are now packed so full of enchantments and cores that I can practically feel them vibrate in place. This is just the outer gate! The inner one is surely even more ridiculous.

It was.

The carvers have not been slacking whilst the other castes have been fighting. I'm impressed as hell. The vats full of acid ready to tip on the enemy are the cherry on top of a spectacularly deadly cake. If the Legion tries to approach through the front door, they're in for a very bad time. Hopefully the Colony has considered what to do in the event that the enemy decides to try and tunnel around our defences. Magically condensed stone is wonderful and all that, but it can be beaten. We've done it ourselves after all.

Just as I make my way into the nest proper I spy a few unexpected faces before I can slither away to work on my mutations.

[Enid,] I say, [imagine seeing you here. And in such good company...]

I pointedly try to avoid looking at the thirty robed figures who crashed down to their knees the moment I appeared. The mayor rolls her eyes discreetly and replies.

[I think you're going to be more than a little surprised when you realise just what's happened up there. I don't think even you could have predicted this.]

[Predicted what?] I ask.

Rather than answer me, Enid just smiles and gestures towards the foremost robed figure, one conspicuously missing an arm. Dammit. Somehow I know this is going to be annoying.

[Beyn, if you yell at me I swear I will banish you from the Colony for all time. Try to keep it down and tell me what is going on here.]

The threat works a treat and I see the naked fear take root in the priest's eyes. For once, he actually hesitates before blasting my mind with his thoughts.

[Great One. A new miracle has occurred. My fellow faithful have been blessed with a unique Class by the System that will allow the people of the surface to fight alongside their saviours. So we have come -]

[Hell no.]

He stares at me. I stare unblinking back at him.

[Do you have any idea what the Legion would do to you people? It'll be a massacre. No way.]

I turn to Enid.

[Tell him how stupid this is Enid. Unless this new Class of theirs allows them to shoot beams of pure destruction from their butts or something, there's no chance they'll be able to stand against the Legion.]

Enid blinks rapidly.

[Why the butt?] she wonders.

[I was born shooting acid from back there, alright? Don't judge me. Now explain to this moronic priest why he's such a moron.]

The elderly woman sighs.

[It's not that simple. It's a buff Class that works on sapients and ants so long as you are together. You could use a buff, could you not?]

As much as I want to say no, we are heavily outmatched by our opponents this time. Sensing my hesitation, Enid breaks into my thoughts.

[We've already spoken to Sloan and Victor and they've approved our involvement provided you agree. A lot of people from Renewal have come to help defend the nests. We feel that we have a chance to repay our debt.]

I scoff.

[Come on Enid. How many people would be dumb enough to run into the Dungeon to try and defend a colony of monstrous ants? They'd have to be completely and irrevocably insane.]

Before I even finish my rant, they have begun to arrive in the chamber. People. Hundreds of them. Farmers, merchants, craftsmen and women, each and every one of them a refugee from the devastation of Garralosh. Word of my arrival must have spread quickly, because they run towards me in waves,

more of them appearing every moment. When the first arrive behind the priests, they immediately join them, falling to their knees and raising their hands in prayer towards me.

More come, then more, still more, until I stand with my pets and the great gate of the Colony behind me, and thousands of humans kneeling in a great arc before me.

[Just about every person of fighting age came,] Enid says gently. [Almost the entire town.]

I can't even shake my head.

[What is wrong with you people?]