

Chrysalis 651

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Chapter 651: One Day More

Deep within the main nest of the young race of ants that he had come to know as 'The Colony', the sage who had named himself Grey sat in deep meditation. Nearby, his apprentice, White, sat and watched patiently as her master performed those feats of the mind she was not yet capable of. For though he sat still, not a single muscle moving across his entire frame, his mind roamed wide, seeking and communing. After several hours of stillness, he finally opened his eyes and breathed a deep sigh, relaxing the tension that had seized him.

"What were you able to find, Teacher?" White asked him.

In response he only shook his head. A moment later she felt his mind nudge against her own.

[You know better than to speak out loud in this place,] he admonished her. [The Colony are not our enemies, but they are not Folk.]

The fox-girl ducked her head to acknowledge the reprimand.

[I understand. I feared you would be tired after your Seeking and did not wish to tax you.]

Her concern warmed his old heart, but he did not allow it to show on his face.

[I am stronger than you give me credit for, youngling. I have no need of your coddling.]

[Putting that aside, were you able to contact the Bruan'chii?]

[Impatient as ever, my disciple. Yes. The Grove Keeper has awoken and begun to tend to her children. The Grove has grown so quickly, I fear that the anger of the Mother Tree has been roused.]

[Isn't that rare? I had read that the Mother Tree was a lover of peace.]

Grey leaned back and rubbed his legs secretly, trying to keep the motion out of his young charge's eyes.

[The Mother Tree is, before anything else, a tree. She can be vicious when it comes to matters that touch on her survival, or that of her children. From what I could glean, she has felt the presence of the Abyssal Legion in this place and she has no love for them, putting it mildly.]

White nodded. Knowledge of the war between the young races and the old was important history to their people. The conflict between the Legion and Bruan'chii had been particularly fierce, at the height of which the Mother Tree herself had been under siege, even wounded, by the Legionaries. Had the alliance not been brokered in time, it's possible that the Legion would have been successful in their attempts to cull this new race from Pangera.

[Do you believe that they will intervene?] she asked her teacher.

[I do. I'm not sure if they will risk open conflict at this stage, but I think a show of force will be the least we can expect from them.]

[And our people?]

The wolf-man heaved a deep breath and shook his head.

[It is never so easy to reach a consensus amongst the Folk, you know that, White. The decision to accept the Colony as a young race and allow them to join the alliance will take years, and many honour battles, to settle. The tribes are fractious at the best of times. Unless they are threatened, they will not unify quickly.]

[Surely your words carry weight there, Master. You could push them to act quickly.]

Grey turned his eyes directly on his disciple and stared hard at her. She sat still, hands folded in her lap as she looked back at him steadily. Her eyes were clear and focused, unpolluted by selfishness and greed.

[You have come to admire The Colony, haven't you child? You desire our people to reach forth their hand and shelter them?]

[I do,] she acknowledged, not attempting to deny it. [I do not believe you should extinguish an entire race on the premise that they may one day do evil. I do not see evil here, but good.]

[A simple view of the world,] he told her. [There are always currents, variables and uncertainties. The nature of 'good' and 'evil' are not so clear. Do you think the Legion to be evil? I do not. They simply do what they think is right, as do we all. It is rare indeed to find the individual who walks on a path that they know to be wrong.]

[I have heard these words before,] his normally demure student told him, her mind firm, [but they do not answer my question. Will you act?]

Grey closed his eyes once more and regulated his breathing, sinking once more into meditation. He ignored the irritated huff White released when she saw his actions and instead pondered the answer to her question. Was he willing to act? Usually so confident in his decisions, this time he wasn't sure. The branching paths of fate spread so far and wide from this point it was impossible to predict the consequences of any action. Who could walk boldly on such paths?

Deeper in the Dungeon.

The Grove Keeper was newly awakened, but already his body was flexible and lithe, filled with the power of the Mother. His memory still shifted and drifted, not yet settled in his new form, but he didn't mind. Here in the Grove, so close to the tendril of the Origin Tree, he knew no harm could come to him. So long as the Mother watched over them, they would be safe and act to carry out her will. In this moment, her will was clear. Anger and indignation rang throughout the Grove until every branch and leaf quivered with it. The hated enemy had been found attempting to extinguish new light, just as they had attempted on the Keeper's own people. It would not stand.

Around the tendril, a vast garden had formed, filled to bursting with life and greenery that drank in the dark mana of the Second Strata without pause, transforming it into nutrition that further powered the growth of each vine, flower, tree and shrub. To the outside eye, it appeared as if a flourishing ecosystem of plants had sprung to life here in the most harsh of environments, a miracle of nature. The Keeper roamed amongst the plants, caressing each in turn as he encouraged their growth and felt their energy flow into him in return.

The truth was more simple, of course. This was not a plethora of plants, but one entity. All was the Mother Tree, each and every lifeform in the grove just another expression of her careful design to draw in the power of the Dungeon and transform it to fuel her people. That energy was already being put to good use. The Keeper turned back to the tendril, the filament that extended from one of his mother's roots and saw the dozens of shapes beginning to emerge.

A smile creased the wooden face of the Keeper as he saw these new children of the Mother being born. It wouldn't be long now until they emerged, fully formed and ready to become the vessels of her anger. He raised one hand and blessed their growth, feeling the natural energies flow out from him and infuse the growing forms. The Bruan'chii were coming.

In the Legion camp.

Titus leaned against the table and examined the various scout reports laid out atop it.

"An enchanted gate made of steel?" he asked.

"That's right," Aurillia replied.

"Twenty tons?"

"At least."

"The same at the other nests identified?"

"Yes."

He raised one hand to pinch his brow.

"They've developed so fast..."

"Good thing we're here then."

He leaned back and thought for a moment.

"With the irregulars who've arrived we should be able to succeed on a full frontal assault of the gate but I'm worried about the no doubt hundreds of traps they've woven into the place."

"Ants are industrious, who'd have thought?"

Titus only grunted, too focused to even make a pretence of laughing.

"Has the siege team had any luck identifying weak points in the stone?" he asked.

The report from the earth magic specialists was already on the table in front of him and he'd read it twice but he asked anyway.

"None of it is especially hard, but none of it is soft either. We could tunnel through easily enough, but the diggers are reluctant to try and drill into an ant nest. They'll know it's happening immediately and move to counter us."

Titus frowned. The fact that this colony of ants was already capable of causing even a slight headache to his admittedly fresh Legion was a problem. If they were given a year? Or five? It would take a hefty

mobilisation of forces and the number of casualties would be high. Better to strike decisively now, nip the problem in the bud.

"Looks like I'll have to frontline myself," Titus said.

"You've explored every other avenue, commander."

The Abyssal Legion did not like to let their high level members take centre stage when they didn't have to. Whereas some armies would let level seventy elites shepherd and protect rookies through hard battles, the Legion preferred to trust their training and equipment and push the new Legionaries into combat. Expecting that Titus would step in and solve every issue, fight every battle when it got hard, would only stifle the growth of the soldiers and let them embrace a security blanket that wouldn't always be there. They wanted smart, powerful Legionaries, not cowards.

Given the pressure they were under in this conflict, both timewise and in a lack of personnel, it was permitted that Titus take the field. To prevent the numerous casualties it would take to assault the gate, it was more than acceptable that he take on the responsibility of destroying it himself.

The commander stood from the table and rolled his shoulders as he took a deep breath. The mana was rising steadily. There wasn't much time left until the wave, another reason why he needed to act fast. He felt the mana stir in his bones as he breathed in again. How long had it been since he'd needed to fight hard? Not since Garralosh had gotten away from him and even then he'd been hampered by the lack of mana in the first strata. The current level of ambient mana was just enough for him to really cut loose.

It was almost enough to make him smile. His last campaign in the sixth layer was so long ago now. Did he even still have the moves?

In the golgari camp.

Kooranon Balta knelt in the stone, his blade standing straight before him, the tip balanced perfectly on the flat ground. As he had been taught so long ago, he focused his entire being on the sword, his mind and soul, seeking resonance with the blade. It was believed amongst the Blades in the golgari that the precious weapons they wielded, formed and shaped from the Living Stone to fit their wielders over a period of years, were living creatures. The stone itself was alive, certainly, but more than that, the swords could develop and grow a personality of their own.

It was to connect with that gestalt being that the High Blade now sought to do, but it was elusive. Sometimes for a fleeting moment he would sense a response from the weapon as it reached back toward him, but then it would be gone, lost as if it had never been.

After another hour he relaxed his stance, stepped forward and withdrew the blade from the ground before he cleaned it meticulously. As he nourished it with mana he felt the blade quiver in delight as it fed before it once more became inert. Kooranon was not discouraged, he knew of High Blades who had sought and nourished their blades for hundreds of years who had only received fleeting acknowledgement from their weapons. Even so, the pursuit of oneness with the blade was well worth the price.

After a moment to centre himself, he sheathed the blade with care and turned to find his attendant waiting in the same place as when he had begun his communion.

"Prepare the camp," he ordered, "it's time."

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Chapter 652: What does it take to get Biomass around here?

Turns out food gets scarce during a siege. I know for a *fact* that the Colony created a massive stockpile in preparation for this. Like, a mountain of Biomass, packed up and ready to go. Problem is that almost all of that is going to be delivered to the Queens in order to ensure that the Colony's brood production doesn't flinch from the daily maximum even during a period when we can't easily hunt. I get it. I do. The brood comes before all, obviously. We're ants after all. But dammit, I'm hungry!

I feel a nudge at the edge of my attention and I turn to see Tiny staring at me with wide, pitiful eyes.

I slowly shift my head side to side and two huge tears begin to well up within the ape's eyes.

[I know buddy. It's going to be rough for a little while, but we can survive. We're going to get through this together.]

Tiny reaches out to me with one shaking hand and places it against my carapace as if trying to draw strength through it.

[In times like this, we can only depend on each other. We've been together through the times of plenty, we can fight it out together in the lean times as well. If you don't believe in yourself, Tiny, believe in the me who believes in you. There is power in you yet. Your race is not yet run. Conquer the hunger!]

Chomp

What... What was that?

I look up at Tiny once again to find his hand has now grasped my leg which he has raised up to his mouth.

[Did you just try and bite me?]

Silence.

[Tiny,] I focus on him dangerously as he begins to sweat through his fur, [if you are attempting to eat me right now, I'm going to hand you over to Crinis for punishment. Now take my leg out of your mouth.]

He does.

[Ah! You got slobber all over it dammit! I can't believe I have to say this, but from this point forward you are ordered to never eat me!]

Stupid ape!

"Eldest, how are your preparations going?"

AH!

"Nothing weird is happening here, Advant! Nothing! My dignity hasn't been impacted in the slightest! And if you ask your baby-sitter squad, they'll tell you the same!"

When saying the last part I raise my abdomen high to threaten the ceiling of our chamber with a judicious acid spray to ensure that Protectant and her squad get the message. Imagine the Colony finding out that one of my own pets tried to eat me as I comforted them for a lack of food. The shame of it.

"Of course, Eldest," Advant brushes it off, "I was just wondering how you were doing making your final preparations. The council meets in a few hours and we need you to be there."

Another meeting? The enemy is at the gates! How many of these damn meetings are they planning on having?!

"I will definitely be there," I lie, "just give me some time to finish my mutations up."

"Of course, Eldest."

The soldier turns to leave me in peace for the time being and I immediately bring up my menu in order to rush through the mutation process. If I get it done quickly enough, I can vanish somewhere before the meeting starts. They're the council, dammit! I don't even technically have a seat, at least, that's my view and I'm sticking to it. Alright now, how much Biomass do I have to work with?

A quick perusal tells me that I have a grand total of two hundred and fifty one. More than I thought I might have at this point. Nice! So what lucky body part is going to get the upgrade this time? I can probably afford two here. Personally, I think it's time for legs. Legs are needed! My legs are absorbing all the mana I need. Especially down here in the second strata. Only heavy duty spell slinging can drain me. Especially once I get to draining mana using external mana manipulation. It may become a problem in the future, but for now, I'm solid. In the +20 upgrade I wanted to improve their ability to absorb damage, resulting in the Tough Rapid Absorption Legs +20. It must be noted that not having my legs cut off has been a welcome experience.

Because the Legion for sure targets our legs. The carapace is hard and tough to deal with, but if you take off an ant's legs, what the heck are they going to do to you? Even insects on Earth know this much. When ants fight each other, they're always going for the legs, with a few notable exceptions. With my potent reflexes and foresight, I'm almost always able to move my legs out of harm's way, but sometimes it just isn't possible. During the grand melee after Tiny smashed the Legion shield I had absolutely no room to dodge and had to rely on natural toughness. Which is why I'm going straight to Hardened Rapid Absorption Legs +25! Which is going to set me back a cool 115 Biomass. I have enough left to take one more body part from 20 to 25. Only question is, what shall it be?

I still need to upgrade a few things, but perhaps the one I'm leaning towards the most is my musculature. So far I've poured all of my mutations into increasing the speed at which my muscles can fire, which has given me the superhuman reflexes of a radioactive spider, but I'm not certain that I want to keep pushing down this road exclusively. My reflexes are already super fast, especially when connected to my limited pre-cognition. My nervous system can probably carry the load of increasing my reflexes further, what I need from my muscles is more power! I need some OOMPH! Tiny's mutations

focus almost exclusively on the amount of strength he can punch out and although I don't feel like I need to match him in that department, I'd love to get myself a little slice of that.

Of course, my need for power is pretty isolated in terms of where it needs to be applied. It's all about the face-hands. I need to be able to bite harder. Mandibles are great, everyone should have them, but I need to be biting harder if I want to crack open the real tough nuts out there. Even the dedicated tier four soldiers haven't been able to get through the Legion armour, and all of their stats and mutations are directed to the purpose of tanking and biting. Even if I have the benefit of special evolutions and bonus stats, I can't get through either. There has to be some mutation here that can give me that edge!

I start pouring through the menu, going through the hundreds of options until I find something that catches my eye. Lock Musculature. From the description, it acts in a way that is similar to the famous trap-jaw ant from Earth. It allows the muscles to be 'set' in a certain position, poised to fire almost like a bow string. When the tension is released it can occur with tremendous power! The trap-jaw has, pound for pound, one of the strongest bites on the planet!

This also has synergy with my existing muscle mutations, since they can fire so quickly! Using this, I'll be able to pull my mandibles back and 'lock' them, stretching the muscles in my head and then releasing that pent up power all at once. Of course, with only one mutation the elasticity of the muscles isn't going to be much, but it'll help!

Lock Hyper-Twitch Musculature +25 here we come!

That's 230 Biomass gone. Yeesh, easy come, easy go these days. Lock those choices in, Gandalf! I've got a meeting to dodge!

Although I feel like I've forgotten something...

...

CHADANGADANGALOOZA!

THIS *freakin'* ITCH!

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Chapter 653: Daughter's fear

The Legion war machine had swung into motion. Warriors of the Abyss, the Legion had been in a constant state of war for over a thousand years. The struggle against the Dungeon did not end with the Cataclysm, it had merely changed, and over all that time they had become *very* good at what they did. That machinery was now within Titus' hands and he directed with precision and confidence towards meeting his ends. From his side, Morrelia watched with mounting dread as her father drew the noose tighter around the neck of the Colony. In her heart, a storm had been brewing as the conflict had drawn on and she felt her emotions boiling to the bursting point without having any solid idea of what would happen after.

She had finally reconnected with her Father, with her *Mother*. The pain and hurt she had felt after the death of her brother had finally begun to heal. Even as she had rebelled against her family and the Legion, she had hoped for this feeling of resolution. She had the answers she'd wanted all along. Slipping back into her place amongst the family she had grown up with, not just her parents but the army that

they served, had felt like such a homecoming. She felt whole once more, no longer angry at the world with nowhere to direct her rage.

But now that comfort had been stripped away by harsh reality. Where once she had been convinced that killing monsters was always the correct decision, she was no longer so sure. The Colony had done no harm in her eyes, yet had done so much good. They had protected the lives of the Liria refugees when the Legion itself had failed. Not only had they saved those people, they had assisted them, helped them to thrive where normal monsters would have only killed and eaten. It was something that had fundamentally challenged her understanding of monsters and the Dungeon forever, yet now she stood on the brink of participating in an assault to kill those very saviours.

It wasn't right. It *couldn't* be right. The only question that was left to answer was if she was willing to throw away what she had regained in order to stand up for it. She didn't have an answer to that question yet, but she was running out of time. The pressure had built within her to a point where she feared to move, lest she explode and lash out at those she cared about. So it was a subdued Morrelia who checked over her armour, once more surrendering to the familiar routine. The Legion camp had been moved forward over the previous day with the help of the reinforcements that had arrived. Not an hours march away, the great nest of the Colony awaited them. Titus had ordered the assault and informed his guard that he would participate on the frontline, personally. There was nothing left for her to do but prepare to take the field. Desperate to avoid her traitorous thoughts, she was all too happy to engage in a mindless task.

Her check complete, she began to put the armour on. Piece by piece she strapped it over the thick padding she already wore, ensuring that each section clicked into place, locked in with its neighbours. Her two weapons found their sheaths and she placed her helmet on her head. She was ready. For what, she wasn't sure, but she was ready.

She left her tent to find the camp alive with activity. All around her Legionaries rushed to complete the final preparations for what was sure to be a difficult battle. Orders were being relayed, scout reports continued to flow in constantly, necessitating last minute changes in strategy. Centurions argued loudly in corners as soldiers assembled their armour and honed their weapons in groups. Despite the frenetic action, the mood was subdued, grim. The faces she saw were focused and ready, determined and unflinching. Many of the Legionaries in the camp were fairly green, much as she was, yet over such a short time they had become inured to the grind of war.

She found her father in his customary place, in the command tent surrounded by the tribunes and other senior officers of their Legion. The new addition, the leader of the auxiliary force was a seven foot giant of a man covered in thick reptilian scales. His name was Charles, apparently. A former convict sent to the Legion and force fed Biomass in order to turn him into a serviceable weapon. He had served with distinction and risen to command his own company which had been attached to Titus' force for this mission. She herself felt slightly uncomfortable in the man's presence. He was a living reminder of just how far the Legion was willing to push in order to see the spawn of the Dungeon die. When she arrived, her father spotted her almost instantly and waved the officers away as he strode out of the tent to meet her.

"Don't you have work to do?" she asked him.

"Indeed. Making sure my daughter survives is my most important duty."

She rolled her eyes.

"You're laying it on a bit thick, commander."

Titus' expression didn't change in the slightest, his seriousness carved into the planes of his face as if sculpted from stone.

"I don't joke, child. Your mother gave me official orders to ensure that you didn't die during this extermination."

Morrelia stumbled.

"You're kidding!" Would her mother really bend the rules to issue an order like that?!

"Sign and sealed," Titus nodded, "I never kid about orders."

The berserker felt lucky she had put her helmet on already since nobody could tell her face had flushed bright red. The Consul of the Legion issuing official orders to keep her child alive! It was a scandal! It was nepotism! It was... very like her.

"Come on now," her father patted her on the shoulder, "let's get moving. It's time."

Only then did she realise her father had already suited up, his massive, bulky armour appeared to weigh a ton, yet he moved as if he didn't notice he was wearing it. Even his great axe was already strapped into position on his shoulder. Morrelia fell into place with her fellow guards and marched in precise order, her mind once more falling into chaos. What was the right thing to do? How was she supposed to save this situation?!

That long march toward the nest was special hell for Titus' daughter. With every step she thought about talking to the commander, yet every other step she reminded herself it would do no good. She felt confident that even if the Colony *had* done miraculous things, the Legion would still want them dead. They were monsters and that was enough. If she spoke up, all she would accomplish would be to disgrace her family and get locked up in the camp as a traitor to the Legion her parent's had served their entire lives. The Legion her brother had died attempting to serve. She couldn't do it.

Suddenly, she noticed her father had stopped marching and she stilled her feet, looking about it confusion. They stood at the head of the Legion column and behind her the thousands of soldiers ground to a halt as they waited. What had stopped them? She strained her neck to try and see. What she saw caused her heart to leap into her throat.

"Welcome, fellow humans," Enid called to them. "Welcome to the nest of the Colony."

In the centre of the tunnel stood a lone, old woman, garbed in simple robes and bearing a solid stick of oak to assist her walking. There was no fear on her face, in fact, she was smiling at them. From Enid's point of view the approaching Legion was almost entirely shrouded in darkness, the thick mana of the second strata meant that all but the first few rows of soldiers were blurred to nothing in her eyes. Old age probably played its own part in that.

"I see you, commander Titus. I have never met you, but I've heard many stories of the man who came to Liria to raise his family. Would you be willing to speak with me?"

Titus turned back to the rest of them.

"Wait here," he said and strode forward.

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Chapter 654: Diplomacy with the damned

The Colony had been clever with its strategy so far, if a little naive. The inexperience in fighting sapient enemies was likely the reason for their relatively direct approach. If they were allowed to grow, that would change. Yet another reason to excise this problem before it grew too severe. Still, Titus felt compelled to keep his eyes wide open as he approached the elderly woman who stood alone in the tunnel before him.

"I am Titus," he confirmed, "commander of the Legionem Abyssis. I have to say I did not expect to find a Lirian in this place. May I know your name?"

The old soldier stood straight and tall, not bothering to try and appear unthreatening. How could he? He was wearing a full set of heavy Abyssal armour with a demonic axe on his back. In truth, he *was* threatening. Not that Enid seemed to mind.

"My name is Enid Ruther, commander. You might have known my husband."

Titus frowned.

"Derrion? The mercenary?"

The mayor smiled, pleased to see her dearest husband was still remembered.

"That's right," she nodded, "he spoke highly of you."

"He was one of the good ones. The dark blade of Arranyss. I seldom have respect for mercs, but your husband was very capable and stuck to the rules. I was saddened to hear of his death."

"He had no time for union politics. He always saw the Dungeon as his place of work and had no interest in jostling for control."

The commander grunted.

"Good thing too. As much as I would like to take the time to pay the proper respect to your husband, Ms Ruther, I am sure you are aware of what is happening in this place and that my time is limited. I can guess why you are here, but I'm prepared to listen to what you have to say."

"I agree. It's unpleasant that we find ourselves in this position." Enid smoothed her skirt as she gathered her courage. "I don't know what happened in the Dungeon during the wave, commander, but I imagine it wasn't easy for you. I presume you were occupied when Garralosh rose to the surface."

"We held the line and prevented the lower monsters surging into Liria. We couldn't predict that Garralosh would be able to do what it did."

She only shook her head.

"I don't blame you, or the Legion, for what happened during the wave. None of us could have known that a beast like that would be able to survive on the surface. But I must inform you that the beast Garralosh you once fought, was defeated by the Colony you now seek to destroy."

Titus only shrugged.

"Monsters kill monsters all the time. I deeply regret I wasn't able to finish the vile creature when I had the chance, but I do not intend to spare these monsters because they rid the world of an evil."

"They did more than just that," she insisted, "they saved us. They scoured the countryside and dug survivors out of the ruins. They built us homes, irrigated our fields, fed us, defended us and brought us together. It is no exaggeration to say that without the support of these monsters, there likely would be no survivors of Liria or the frontier kingdoms at all. We owe the ants our lives and have lived in harmony with them for months. You seek to destroy them simply because they are monsters and were created by the Dungeon. We have decided that this is wrong."

"You intend to defend these creatures against my Legionaries? There are many in my ranks to were born in Liria. Are you really willing to fight against your own people?"

"I can say the same to you, commander," Enid's eyes hardened. "You have brought war and destruction down on this Colony who has done nothing but help me and my people. How can you be seen as anything but an enemy?"

"And what of the people of Rylleh?" Titus demanded. "The city was overrun weeks ago, have they too been spared the creatures hunger?"

"There a number of people from that city amongst our ranks today," Enid returned, "it seems that many consider the arrival of the Colony a liberation, rather than a death sentence. That city has not been harmed by the Colony, far from it."

The commander frowned. It was beyond his expectations that this colony would act in such a way, but it wasn't totally unheard of. The abomination had clearly influenced the ants not to predate on the human population, but for how long would that last? If that creature born of another world were to perish, how long before the ants would revert to their true nature? For that matter, how long until the abomination itself would lose its sense of self and sink into the murderous carnage that claimed them all in the end?

This changed nothing in the end. The hard lines of Titus' face didn't budge.

"The Legion has given its orders and I do not intend to debate the righteousness of them here. We will destroy these creatures and stamp them from the Dungeon so that not a single one remains. If you choose to take the field against us then I must warn you that we will not show mercy to those who side with the creatures of the Dungeon against their own kind. I will give you four hours to talk to your people and inform them of our position. During that time, should anyone approach our lines, they will be let through and given safe passage to wherever they want to go. Should they remain, they will die alongside the insects."

So saying, the commander snapped out a crisp salute and turned back towards his people. Enid only sighed. This was the outcome she expected, but it still lay heavy on her heart. To the Legion, the people

of Renewal were now traitors who had abandoned the Sapient races to side with the ancient enemy. It was inevitable once they had made the decision to stand with the Colony.

"Would you think we did the right thing, Derrion?" she wondered out loud.

The discussions were over. She turned and began the walk back to the nest where an open gate awaited her. She had much to discuss with her people.

Titus gave orders to have the Legion pull back and widen the tunnel to allow for a temporary camp to be created. The Legionaries rested and conversed in quiet voices as Titus and the tribunes moved from group to group and informed them of what awaited them in the battle ahead. Some expressed sadness, others anger, most felt a level of disbelief that their own people would stand against them on the side of monsters, but none were unwilling to fight. They made war on the Dungeon. Always.

Enid moved amongst the people inside the gate. Farmers, traders, crafters and town guards before the last wave, now they stood firm in their resolution to defend those that had saved their lives and given them hope. Some were dismayed to find that their own kind would fail to see the goodness of the Colony (let alone its holiness), but their resolve was unflinching. When the four hours had elapsed, not a single person had abandoned the Colony.

Disappointed, but not surprised, Titus once more formed up the Legion and they once again began their simultaneous approaches toward the gates of the nest. It wasn't long until they were able to look up and see the huge metal gates ahead of them. The giant ant head carved into the centre stared down at them indifferently, projecting an alien aura that seemed to say what lay beyond did not belong to human kind. But it would soon, Titus promised himself.

The mighty Legionary gripped the haft of his axe tight in both hands as he stoked the demon within. The gate loomed large in his eyes. Come what may, he would crush that thing beneath his boot before the day was done.

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Chapter 655: The Siege pt 1

Gweheheheh. I have succeeded in dodging the meeting! Once my mutation was complete, I used all of my guile and cunning to slip away. Of course, I needed to find a place to wait out the time before the battle started where the council wouldn't disturb me, so I naturally made straight for the gates in order to while away the time with the ants and humans stationed there.

When I poked my head out of the tunnels and the great outer gate of the nest loomed before me, I was more than a little surprised to find the entire council gathered and waiting for me.

"Ah, the Eldest has arrived at last," Advant observed with a perfectly flat scent, "now we can start the meeting."

You smug little...

"How did you even know which gate I would go to?" I demanded. "I could've gone to the other side of the nest for all you knew!"

"The assault is expected to be concentrated on this side of the nest," the soldier responds without acknowledging my question, "how are our preparations looking at this point?"

Defeated, I had no choice but to sit in and listen to the council go over many of the details we had already expected. We were cut off from the other nests who had dug themselves in to the greatest possible extent in preparation. The Legion and golgari had loosely cooperated to form a wide net that locked us off from the Dungeon and had since established defensive positions at every exit. The Colony had effectively become boxed inside three separate cages. From our scouting we'd determined that the enemy had concentrated their forces here, at the main nest. Clearly they intend to deal as powerful a blow against the Colony as possible in the time they have. Makes sense, considering the rising threat of a wave. If they can cripple us enough, then they may not even have to lift a finger to destroy the rest of us as the other nests may be too weakened to survive the wave on their own.

Meanwhile, the Legion and golgari could just clean this nest out, re-establish the gates and wait out the storm. I've no doubt they would be able to manage their own defence against the monsters that will come.

By the end of the meeting, I almost fell into torpor. It's important stuff, obviously, but there really isn't anything to go over that we didn't already know, or didn't suspect would happen. All that was left to do was hold the gates. If we could do that, we would survive, if not, not. When the discussion finally wraps up, someone pokes me back to my senses and I notice Propellant shaking Vibrant out of torpor. Then it's off to the gates to prepare.

Once there I learn that things are already well under way. Enid steps out for our agreed on appeal for sanity, only for it to unsurprisingly fall on deaf ears. The Legion was never likely to back down, but I kind of hoped they would. To my surprise, not a single one of the villagers or folks from Rylleh decide to cross the fence, despite making it perfectly clear they could if they wanted to. The humans give off a determined and solid air, as if they are enduring a trial that they cannot contemplate failing. At least, that's the sort of thing Beyn has been shouting for the last hour. The man is a preaching machine and has put his Skills on full display here today. It's a while before the battle is expected to begin, and he's out here pumping people up with fiery words and blazing passion. How he keeps going without tearing his throat apart, I have no idea, but he does. The people are loving it and their energy is quickly raised to fever pitch even as more sensible people like Enid and Isaac look on from the side, bemused.

The ants, for their part, pay no mind to the spectacle at all. Instead, the thousands of members of the Colony stationed here spend their time making last second preparations, checking every tunnel, every trap, every mechanism for the umpteenth time to ensure that it will perform as expected.

When the time finally comes, I make my way up the gate along with a smattering of humans and ants. My pets come along for the ride also. Sally ports are a fairly standard feature of a defensive wall or gate, a small opening that a group can exit from without having to open the gate proper. In constructing the great gates of the nest the carvers were sure to include these smaller doors but in a very ant way. The sally ports on our gates are all attached to the roof. So it is that Tiny, Crinis, Invidia and my very own honour guard exit through the hatch at the top of the gate and position ourselves to meet the enemy as they approach. At first glance it may seem as if this is an exposed location and a suicidal place to be, nothing could be further from the truth. The walls around us bristle with tunnels filled to the brim with

ants. The whole point of the gate is so that we can harass and attack the enemy from relative safety, in order to do that we need to poke our noses out from behind it.

Normally this would involve soldiers standing on top of a wall in which the gate was placed, but the Colony didn't want a wall. Ants can crawl straight up the things, so why bother? Instead, the gate covers the entire tunnel, a barrier between the inside and out. May it stand forever!

We don't have long to position our battle line before the sound of fighting begins to make its way up the tunnel towards us. The crash and boom of spells, the crunch of stone and the acrid sting of acid fill the air and echo off the stone walls before us. After a few more minutes I can feel the ebb and flow of the magical warfare that's taking place as the ants try to collapse boulders onto the heads of the Legion, throw fireballs, ice shards and everything else as the enemy deflects, disrupts and shields in order to push forward. Indeed, the Legion mages have become more ruthless and cunning over time as they reach out with their minds to attempt to crush the tunnels around the ants, forcing the Colony's mages to enter a defensive battle to maintain the shape of the stone around them.

A running force of scouts keeps far ahead of the closest soldiers as they unleash a continuous barrage of acid. The specialised artillery ants are a sight to behold as they unleash litres and litres of sizzling acid with every blast, literally making it rain flesh dissolving liquid on the tightly packed ranks of our foes. As the legionaries advance towards us, they retreat a little more, never ceasing in their firing patterns.

Before long, the first ranks of the enemy come into sight and I can only sigh at the appearance of the hulking brute in the lead. That dreadful axe is already gleaming with energy, ready to unleash death upon us at any moment. In fact, behind the armoured demon I can even see an old friend, Morrelia. Despite wearing her helmet, I can tell from the colour and shape of the armour that it's her inside there. I'd dearly love to ask her a question or two about this whole situation, but I sincerely doubt I'm likely to get a chance. After the time we spent together, I can't say it doesn't hurt to see her appear on the field of battle against us. Though she did save us the last time I saw her so ...

Who knows?

At any rate, it's time to get this show on the road.

"Anyone else think our guests look thirsty?" I ask nobody in particular. "Let's give them a drink."

A moment of silence.

"Should we release the acid?" comes a hesitant scent from behind the ceiling above me.

"Yes. That's what I meant when I said give them a drink. I don't mean for them to actually drink the acid, but rather insinuating... never mind. Just tip it out."

"Got it, Eldest," comes the reply.

I thought that whole process was going to be so much cooler than it turned out. I had the line prepared and everything.

At this stage the Legion are only a hundred metres from the gate itself, still engaged in the slowly moving running battle as they advance step by step toward our gate. Packed ranks of hundreds of Legionaries make a hell of a turtle formation, their defensive Skills overlapping to form an impregnable

barrier. Sure would be hard to crack through that. I can't even imagine how much acid it would take to chew through their stamina.

From the holes in the ceiling I hear the screech of metal as a large mechanism is pulled to one side, followed quickly by the slosh, then the roar, of a massive amount of fluid.

Maybe twenty million litres will do the job?

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 656: The Siege pt 2

Turns out that acid that can propagate itself almost infinitely can pile up if you give it enough time. After I chose and began to use the multiplicative acid mutation, more than a few of the scouts took a solid look at it and liked what they saw. If I were to try and produce twenty mega-litres on my own it would take far too long. The acid is able to replicate itself, sure, but with only one mutation dedicated to the effect, it isn't *that* powerful yet. A hundred ants working together was required to build up this tidal wave of delight.

The moment the flood begins I can no longer see the reaction of the Legion forces which only a moment ago had dominated the approach to the gate. The downward sloping tunnel works perfectly to direct the absurd rush of acid as if foams and froths before my eyes and pours toward the approaching army. The sound is horrendous as the acid crashes into the hard stone of the tunnel and reaches out from there, hungry for flesh and metal. It might be unfortunate for them, but the Legion provides both.

There isn't much I can do to further enhance the damage of this particular strike, so I prepare for the next stage as we wait to see how effective this tactic is. My inner minds focus as I bring forth the power of the gravitation mana, crunching it down and compressing it in on itself again and again as I mould a tiny ball of screaming death within myself. Even though I shouldn't be distracted whilst attempting to do this, I can't help but extend my main mind forward to get some sense of what is happening.

What I detect immediately is the titanic battle taking place between the Legion mages and the spell weavers of the Colony. Hundreds of minds warring against each other as they attempt to seize control of the ground around them. The flow of mana is hectic in my eyes, swirls, gusts and ripples have been replaced by tears, whirlpools and hurricanes as each side tries to wrench the flow into their control. The Legion has drawn on their mastery of earth to modify the shape of the tunnel, blunting the force of the river of acid and diverting it to the sides, though my siblings have resisted their efforts at every turn. In enacting these changes however, the mages of the enemy have been forced to abandon their efforts to stymie the ants attempting to collapse the roof down on their heads. Even as the torrent of acid slides down the side of their barriers, eating into their shields of light as it continues to propagate itself, the battle of minds surges overhead.

If the humans falter even for a moment, they'll be in for a nasty surprise. There are metal spikes that weigh tons each lodged into the stone up there. If they are allowed to fall it's going to be a bad day for whoever gets hit.

This is the strategy of the Colony when it comes to this defence. One attack isn't going to be enough to divert the power of these soldiers, they're too strong, too experienced and more than we can deal with at our current level of strength. Since one strike won't defeat them, we'll hit them a hundred times. A

hundred times a hundred. However many it takes until they fall. So we strike from multiple directions at once, the acid tanks, the mages in the stone and more.

Never the kind of creatures to let something go to waste, I know that the acid is going to be collected in special holding tanks carved out of the stone deep below the tunnel. The Legion may never have noticed the holes in the stone beneath their feet when they began their ascent towards the gate, but they are certainly there. A hundred metres below the tanks await, from which the acid can be pumped back to the top of the tunnel. An ingenious system that hundreds of carvers spent a week carving out. Sadly, it'll take hours to refill so we can only deploy the acid again if we manage to repel this first approach from our enemies.

"How did it go, Eldest?"

It's Ellie, hiding in a chamber on the other side of the wall to my right.

"I think we got their feet wet at the least, but it hasn't stopped them. On the plus side, they aren't coming any closer right now."

It took over a minute for the tanks to fully empty themselves, dumping out acid at a shocking pace. As the deafening roar fades away I can finally hear myself think and more than one ant clicks their mandibles in shock at the ferocious display.

"In other words, they're right in position?"

"Yep. Think you're pets are going to be up to the task?"

"They'll make you proud, Eldest."

"Let's see it."

[Is it possible that I can join them, Master?] Crinis asks me.

[No, Crinis. We've gone over this. I need you here with me. Let's watch and see how they do.]

The blob attached to my carapace wiggles in a mix of frustration and happiness as I turn my attention back to the ever hungry ball of mana spiralling in power within my mind. The bomb is reaching the critical point of overload and I need to devote all of my attention to it but I can't help but keep my eyes peeled for the attack of the core shapers.

The moment the Legion becomes visible again behind the haze of acid mist in the air it's clear to see how they were able to survive. Deep gouges have been carved into the ground on either side of their formation. From the ruined appearance of the tunnel floor, it looks as if a combination of magic and sheer physical strength was used to create these gashes, which means they must have directed weapon strikes at the stone to help break it up. More than that, their soldiers have tightly packed together in a narrow column, shields pressed against each other with their defensive abilities activated. From my position near the gate they present a layered wall of golden light which patches of acid still cling too, sizzling away.

It might be a pain, but I can't help but be impressed that they survived. Sorry Morrelia, but that's not the only trick we have up our sleeves.

It only takes seconds for the order to slip down the chain and I see something that most people would rather not see in their lifetimes. The furious acid has burned away the thin coating that once covered the floor to reveal a narrow gap in the tunnel walls, close to the floor. If I weren't looking for it, there's almost no chance I could see it at all, it's so narrow. From that narrow gap on both sides a darkness wells up and then begins to pour out onto the floor. All the way up and down on both sides of the Legion column a tide of pure black is massing. From out of the shadows, slowly at first but quickly gathering speed, extends a forest of tentacles, hundreds, thousands of them, as the darkness moulds itself to reveal its true form.

Centipedes.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 657: The Siege pt 3

The hated foe, the reviled enemy. My hatred of the centipede knows almost no bounds! Long did they torment me in my youth, only for me to turn the tables on them and use the foul creatures as fuel for my own growth. Once the table flipped, I refuse to allow it to flip back again, no matter how much the Dungeon seems to like the putrid things. Naturally my own predisposition against the centipedes was passed onto the Colony which led to an aggressive campaign to delete them from the Dungeon. Wherever the Colony has been, war against the many-legs has been waged. Their nests have been expunged, their spawn points camped until the mana dissipated and no more of them appeared. It's safe to say that whilst we ants have left most spawn points alone in order to have monsters to hunt, the centipede no longer exists within our territory. They have been deleted.

As a result of this extensive activity, a tremendous number of centipede cores has flooded into the claws of the core shapers. Interestingly enough, it was found that the centipede core is a remarkably mouldable one. It's as if the 'genetic' code of the many-legs is so basic and primitive that the shapers had great success utilising the Sophos' 'folding' technique, fusing the centipede together with other creatures. After experimenting with various forms of the omni-present shadow beasts, this variant was created.

The Centi-sludge!

At least, that's what I call them. I think that Ellie told me their name but I forget already.

Utilising advanced shadow flesh technology, these centi-sludges are able to mould themselves into a goop-like state in much the same way that Crinis does. Similarly, they have the ability to extend a tendril of dark flesh filled with the same potent toxin that filled the centipede stingers. A devious creation that represents the dedication and hard work of the Colony Core Shaper caste, the centi-sludge is a nasty little package on its own, but when multiplied by thousands can create all sorts of problems.

The Legion doesn't hold back and displays the rapid response expected from soldiers with such high levels of discipline and training. The moment the tendrils start to reach for them the flash of blade light explodes as hundreds of swords and axes strike out, cutting swathes into the slithering pile of centipedes reaching for them. From where I hang on the roof, packing more and more gravity mana into my bomb I can see the light carve into the centipedes, bisecting many of them, but even so they don't stop moving.

In truth, these pets have almost no defensive capabilities. The strikes cut straight through them without resistance, splitting hundreds of them apart at a time. But that just doesn't do the job. The pieces of the monsters that have been cut away return to goop which is then claimed by any of the centi-sludges nearby, claiming the precious shadow flesh as part of their own body. Unless the core itself is damaged, or the Legion is able to cut away at them fast enough that they don't get a chance to reform themselves before the flesh is dissolved into the Dungeon, they won't stop coming!

Gweheheheh.

Although, to pay for this roach-like level of survivability, not only did the centi-sludges lack in toughness, but their offense was low. The purpose of this tactic is not to defeat the Legion, but rather to wear them down. If some of them get poisoned while we are at it, all the better! As the Legion engages with the pets, turning their attention from one crisis to the next, a sortie of ants emerge from the gate. A mixed force of mages and scouts, they begin to rain down ranged firepower toward the leading Legion figures in order to amp up the pressure. The Legion's shields have formed a wall of light that now flickers and flashes with each new impact as the Colony ups their offense, trying to batter through the attacker's stamina.

We don't need to win, we only need to hold. As long as we make the Legion go back to their camp and try again another day, that's a victory.

With a mental command I send Invidia to join in the barrage, lighting up the tunnel with his detonations. I warn him not to go too hard yet. Our part in this defence is not yet done. I don't have the spare mental energy to reach out and keep an eye on the ongoing mental warfare taking place in the tunnel but I wager it's ramped up another notch. Attacking the mages by putting them under constant pressure to defend their comrades is a lynchpin of our strategy. Even if the individual Legionaries prove to be indefatigable monsters, the minds of the spellcasters can't be. Even if they have hundreds of super wizards in their ranks, the Colony is able to throw literally thousands of ant mages at them until they crack.

Compress, compress, compress!

In the final stages of preparation, the only thing that exists in my consciousness is the gravity bomb. It grows darker and darker as the crushing force begins to take on a life of its own. Even so I continue to force more of the purple gravity mana into it until the pressure of holding the sphere of pure magic together starts to push back against my mind. Working with mana in this way is always headache inducing and each of my four brains is pounding by the time I cut off the supply of mana and prepare the spell for launch.

"I'm ready to throw out the bomb. Clear the deck!" I call out a warning to the ants in the area.

The word is passed along rapidly and the core shapers coordinate to clear their centipedes out of the danger zone as quickly as possible.

[Invidia, are you clear?]

[Yessssss.]

Nice.

"Black hole in the hole!"

HHHHOOOOOOOOOOWWWWLLLLLL!!!

As ever, the gravity bomb announces its presence in spectacular fashion, causing a storm of wind and filling the tunnel with the now familiar shriek the moment I release it. The sound is deafening, as if the air itself were screaming as the near black sphere devoured it. It's a terror inducing effect that's only magnified by the spell swallowing all light as it travels. The ants around me know what's coming and dig their claws into the walls of the tunnel even as I do the same. The Legion too is familiar with this scene now and their response hasn't changed, only grown stronger over time.

Shields and barriers spring to life by the dozens the moment I unleash the spell and a host of minds reach out to rip the gravity bomb apart before it can land. At the same time the ants launch a new offensive, hundreds of mages that had remained hidden until now throw their Will into the contest. Once again the battle to control the rock of the tunnel is pushed to the brink as the Colony attempts to drop tons of stone and pointed slabs of pure iron onto the heads of the attackers. Invidia himself goes to work battling away the mages who try to unmake the gravity bomb, pitting his own considerable prowess against the Legion in an attempt to preserve the power I packed into the spell.

The bomb strikes home as it always does, flickering into its final form, the slowly rotating sphere of pure destruction. The pull is immediate and dreadful. Hanging from the roof, I dig in as hard as I can to resist being a victim of my own spell. It's a risk, casting this spell whilst hanging here, since my weight is so much higher than my grip has been able to sustain, but where there is a Will, there is a way and I hold on fiercely as the bomb ravages all it can touch.

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 658: The Siege pt 4

Bwahahahaha! Behold my power! I have to say, watching the devastation unleashed by the gravity bomb never fails to elicit an exaggerated sense of achievement in me. Look at what I have wrought! In reality, the bomb is structurally the simplest piece of magic I've ever attempted on Pangera, a blob of pure gravitational mana crushed into itself as hard as I can manage before being flung out into the world. Far more than Cunning, Will is the stat that determines the strength of this spell since my ability to force and compact mana is dependent on my willpower. The current rendition of my most destructive spell can only be called an unqualified success by my own standards. The potent drag of the expanded gravity bomb threatens to pull me from my perch on the ceiling and I see many ants fighting to maintain their position on the walls.

What it feels like closer to the epicentre, I can only imagine. Unpleasant, I'm sure. Although all of my brains are exhausted so soon after releasing the gravity mana, I extend my senses out towards the Legion in order to get a sense of how the struggle is going. Thankfully, they're struggling. Although they have expertly layered their defensive abilities with magical shields and ripped away at my spell, they've not been able to do the work that they have previously to mitigate the spell before it was able to land. The many pronged attack of the Colony has done its work in forcing our opponents into having to make difficult decisions. Do they try and hold the ceiling together and strike back at the ants positioned in the tunnels there? Do they fend off the limitless poisoned tentacles of the centi-sludge, or do they commit everything to limiting the impact of the gravity bomb?

It feels as if they chose to do all of the above and as a result they've lost some ground on each front. Sections of the tunnel roof are starting to slip even as the shadow pets begin to close on their lines, reaching out to spread their toxic blessing and the bomb is shattering the protections they put in place just as quickly as they put them up. It's clear that the Legion didn't expect us to be able to bring the number of mages to bear that we have, expecting that they would retain their comfortable superiority in this regard. The fools!

From my perspective, all action in the tunnel has come to a stop as the screaming sphere of black death slowly rotates in place as it consumes everything that falls into its maw. The air, the dirt, the light, nothing is safe from its insatiable hunger and all we can do is hold on until it peters out. After hurling this spell into the teeth of the Legion so many times without breaking through, it's almost a shock when a notification from Gandalf comes through,

[You have defeated level 53 Abyssal Legion Scout]

[You have gained XP]

[You achieved Level 63, One skill point awarded]

Holy moly! I actually got one? Take that! Wait... it wasn't Morrelia was it? Ugh, can I really afford to worry about that right now? I force all thoughts of the dark haired berserker from my mind and focus on the task at hand. The Legion is under extreme pressure right now and if we're going to win we can't allow it to stop. The second the spell runs out of power it flickers and then fades to nothing. The silence and stillness that hangs in the air is profound after the cacophony of shrieking wind that had felt so oppressive just a moment ago. The Legion is still there, ranked up together with shields to the front, but it's clear that those in the vanguard have suffered under the effects of my spell. Many are showing injuries, some have collapsed to the ground, one knee in the dirt as they breathe heavily. Tanking the brunt of my strike for their fellows has cost these Legionaries dearly and for many of them they will have no further part in this battle. I notice Morrelia is not among the wounded which gives me mixed feelings. On the other hand, I know how to feel about the hulking, axe wielding form in front of the column. That massive chap appears almost totally unharmed, with barely a scuff in his armour. Judging by the positioning of the other soldiers, it appears as if the nearby Legionaries stepped forward to protect their leader from the worst of it, taking the wrath of the gravity bomb onto their own shoulders. An action that caused one of them to pay the ultimate price.

Unwilling to let this chance slip, the ants dash forward to renew their bombardment, with Tiny, Invidia and Crinis joining in from a safe distance. Wearing down the opponent before the final clash is still the name of the game and I refuse to let Tiny leap into the ranks of the enemy and get himself filleted by the axe guy before he manages to land a single punch. Instead, I have him throwing boulders using his considerable arm strength and blasting out with lightning when he gets a chance. Just as the long range strike begins once more, the Legion appears to make a decisive move, advancing rapidly toward the wall. I can see the wounded and exhausted warriors being picked up and moved to the rear of the column which flows around them like water even as the axe wielding hulk bullies his way forward at their head. The imposing soldier batters aside the projectiles directed at him, or just plain ignores them, allowing the acid and spells to smack into his crackling armour as if uncaring of his own safety. With each step, he gathers momentum and I begin to sense an ominous energy building within the head of the axe. Wild, brutal and hungry for violence, that's the sense I get. An unrestrained thirst for blood and

vengeance emanates from the weapon and many ants within range of the baleful aura react with insectile rage. The energy contained within the weapon grows and grows as the figure draws closer, climbing to unbelievable heights but even so the strike isn't unleashed. What the heck are they aiming for?

Then it hits me.

[He's going for the gate!] I roar at Invidia, [Shield now!]

The demon has nothing if not a quick mind and before I even finish the thought the flow of mana around the gate behind me has begun to swirl and shift and the little eyeball shapes it into barriers.

"He's going to try and bring down the gate! Hit him! Defend the Nest!" I blast the entire tunnel with pheromones, snapping every ant within range to attention.

"FOR THE COLONY!" they roar as they rush into battle.

This guy wants to bring down the gates himself? He's either mad or far more powerful than we expected and I'm terrified that it's the latter. Even so, what can we do? If we must fall to preserve the Colony, then that's exactly what we are going to do. Filled with this resolution, I drop from the tunnel roof and position myself between the lone Legionary and the gate, putting my exquisite diamond form in the firing line. Come on then you stupid spectre of death. Let's see if you can charge into the mandibles of the Colony and walk away unscathed!

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 659: The Siege pt 5

I regret my choices. Many of them. How did this situation wind up with me facing down this inhuman axe-maniac whilst he charged his weapon with what feels like enough energy to cut a mountain in half? The things that people do for their families, that's all I can say. I can feel the Colony and Invidia working overtime to establish all the shields they can as quickly as possible, layering the protections across the already potent enchantments of the gate. Hopefully it's going to be enough.

[Crisis, get off me.]

[NO!]

[IT'S AN ORDER! GET OUT OF THE WAY!]

I refuse to let her get caught up in the fallout here. Her Skills and mutations are totally unsuited to facing down this kind of situation, all that will happen is she'll get herself killed for nothing. That's an outcome I won't allow. I barely register as my loyal friend peels herself off my carapace and disappears into the shadows along the side of the tunnel, all of my focus is on that dreaded axe. My minds churn as I try to think of anything I can do to help mitigate this attack. Sinking into the depths of meditation, time almost seems to slow as I process everything as fast as I can. Do I have enough time to whip together a spell? Probably not, judging by the speed the axe strike is gathering energy, it's almost ready to go. Can I create a physical barrier somehow? Digging maybe? Unlikely to help. This guy is trying to cut down solid steel gates with an axe. If I put a few rocks in the way it isn't going to make a difference.

There has to be something, think!

As I try to come up with ideas, the lone Legionary continues to sprint forward under the combined bombardment of everything the Colony can throw at him. Tiny is blasting with lightning. Acid is raining from the openings in the gate and walls. Spells fall like rain as the mages spit out fireballs, ice shards and everything else they can muster. Maybe I can use a little gravity magic? I don't need to spin a construct for it and I'm well practiced at the basic forms, my main mind doesn't even need to get involved.

Quick as a thought, my sub-brains begin to form and throw out basic gravity bolts at the onrushing juggernaut in the hopes that it does *something*. All I can really do beyond that is try and get up in this guy's face. I dig my claws in the stone to get a firm grip and take a moment to steady my nerves.

DASH!

As fast as I can, dash!

Right into the jaws of death!

Because that's exactly what it feels like. My senses are going crazy at the sheer amount of energy pouring off that demonic weapon, so much that the very air itself seems to warp with it. An aura of bloodlust and violence permeates the air around the charging figure, leaking from the axe itself, saturating the minds of everyone who draws too close. Even sunk into meditation with all of my emotions pushed to one side I can feel it. A rage that seems to bubble up from within and eat away at my thoughts. I don't let it. Even the cold logical thoughts of my own brain, severed from my emotions, tell me that this course of action is illogical. I don't listen. Even the Vestibule, the gateway through which the Will of the Colony leaks into my being is begging me to turn aside and allow others to go in my place. But I won't.

I don't know why. I can't explain it, but something deep within my carapace is telling me that this is a pivotal moment. He *cannot* be allowed to sunder the gate. I won't let him.

The figure looms large in my vision as we close on one another at hectic speeds. My mandibles stretch open wide, the dark energy of the doom chomp manifesting around me as I approach. More and more gravity bolts fly forward, peppering the figure all over without slowing his seemingly unstoppable momentum. Just before I reach him my mandibles begin to snap shut as every cell in my body screams for me to flee this danger, to get out of the way and preserve myself because this is something that is way out of my league.

I don't listen.

I was never very good at being what other people expected of me. Not in this life, or the last.

With a shout that *impacts* the air, the lone Legionary stretches back his arms that tiny bit more, like an elastic band stretched right to the breaking point, before unleashing his strike. It's so fast I don't even see the axe move. One minute it's over his shoulder, the gauntlets gripped tight around the haft, the next the axe is buried in the stone at his feet, all the way up to those same gauntlets. My mandibles strain for a final second as the world flickers before me and I feel a tidal wave of energy explode in the air in front of my face. It's a blade of axe light like none I've ever seen before. Instead of the normal soft glow of white light, this arc of power is blood red. Rather than the size of a blade, it stretches from the ceiling to the floor in a vertical line of pure destruction.

Too late to prevent the strike from being unleashed, I try to pull myself to one side but in a flash the strike is upon me. Then it's gone. One of my sub-brains triggers my healing gland without my conscious thought and a feeling of almost puzzlement flutters in me. Why do that? But then the pain comes. Searing agony explodes down the right side of my body as I struggle to comprehend what just happened.

[Master! I'm here!]

My thoughts are sluggish, what's going on?

The darkness around me is pitch black and a forest of tentacles explode around me, enveloping my entire body in their embrace. Before my eyes are covered, I can see the sole Legionary in front of me on one knee, his weapon still buried in the ground as he draws deep, shuddering breaths. Despite being so vulnerable, no attacks fall on him. Why isn't the Colony attacking?

I feel myself sink and I can't even process the sensation as Crinis pulls me into the shadow, dragging my body through the darkness and out the other side. Where am I? The pain is intense.

"Healing! The Eldest needs healing!"

"Move aside!"

As the tentacles unwrap from around me I realise where I am. Crinis has brought me right in front of the gate, the gigantic steel barriers tower above me as my siblings swarm around me, desperate to heal my injuries. I don't have eyes for them. Instead, my addled mind tries to take in the jagged rent that has been carved into the left gate. The metal is twisted and warped where that horrific axe blow impacted and then cut through. It's strange, why would he only target one side of the gate? Come to think of it, why can't I see out of my right eye?

Or feel my right legs?

Ah. I think I get it. With the healing energies of my regeneration gland flooding through my body, Invidia's healing magic and the ministrations of the Colony, I can feel my flesh knitting itself back together and regrowing the part of my body that has been sheared completely off. Who needed a right side of the body anyway? Unfortunately it doesn't seem as if I'm going to get much time to pull myself together (heh).

Further down the tunnel, the Legion leader has managed to stand and his soldiers have surged forward to encompass him within their ranks once more. Having secured their leader, they've resumed their purposeful march toward the now damaged gates and the Colony is scrambling to resume the defence. No chance you punks are getting through this damn gate today!

"Get me back on my feet dammit," I manage to say, "we aren't done here yet."

[Chrysalis](#)

Chapter 660: The Siege pt 6

The Legion advances to where I lie convalescent, still recovering from my grievous injuries. The only blessing I can see is that the one man army who cut through half of the gate is no longer in the frontlines, replaced by a wall of armoured bodies that hold their weapons and shields with perfect

discipline. Once Crinis has pulled me clear, the Colony continues their barrage and a horde of my siblings sally forth from the gate to surround me.

"Get me back behind the gate," I squeeze out, "we didn't plan to take a stand here."

The ants around me don't respond at all and I wonder if they smelled what I had to say at all.

"H-hello? You need to either move me behind the gate or leave me here. What the heck are you doing?"

"Eldest, I mean this with all my respect, but please shut your pheromone hole. We're trying to heal you and you need to stop moving."

Who was that?! Mendant?! Where the heck do you get the nerve to speak to me like that?! The healer looks completely unperturbed, as if an enemy army wasn't closing on her position with each passing moment. Are these ants crazy or what? We can't fight here, we'll get slaughtered! If I can't be moved, then just retreat to safety, I'll fight my way out! This won't be the last you see of me! Before I get the chance to insist, the ants have already formed ranks around me, hundreds turning into thousands in mere seconds. I quickly realise that they aren't going to give me up.

[Crisin! Can you move me again? Through the shadows?]

[I can't master, I'm sorry. It took almost all of my shadow mana to get you this far,] she sounds panicked.

[It's going to be fine,] I reassure her, [my face is almost back together, see? I'll be in biting shape again in no time.]

She doesn't seem to be encouraged by my words. I see her twisting herself into mind bending, non-Euclidian shapes that I'm certain are formed of more dimensions than there should be in her anxiety.

[Invidia, get the buffs onto Tiny. I get the feeling there's going to be a scrap in here shortly! Tiny, you are NOT allowed to die! That's an order!]

I can't see much now, the ants are swarming over me as the healers continue to administer their healing fluid to help regenerate my flesh, but I can sense something I never expected and moments later, I see one. What the hell are the humans doing out here?!?!? Led by that manic priest, at least a hundred humans have marched forth from the gate to squeeze in amongst the much larger bodies of the soldiers and scouts in the front ranks between me and the Legion. The priest himself has a short spear gripped in his one good hand which he waves back and forth with frantic energy as he bellows words I can't quite make out to the gathered humans. His voice rolls like thunder with the power of a war drum as he urges his fellows to battle.

When the Antmancers activate their Skill, their bodies ignite and begin to spread an aura that envelops every ant and human within reach. Even I can feel it, giving strength to the limbs I still possess and filling my heart with courage. It doesn't help that the Vestibule continues to whisper of the ant's desire for battle, to make the enemy pay for the damage they've done. It's difficult for me to ignore them in the heat of the battle. I feel the urge to scurry forward on my three remaining legs and try to stab the Legionaries to death with my one remaining mandible.

I don't think that will go too well.

"Can I be moved yet?" I whine to Mendant.

Her antennae twitch and I swear by my Mother that she almost thwacked me.

"Any other member of the Colony would be dead right now. No, you can't be moved," she tells me as she continues to work.

Dammit. This is going to get ugly.

From where I lie, I only get flashes of vision from the front lines, but I can tell the two forces are closing together as the Colony and its allies press forward to allow more room between the fighting and me. Are you kidding me?! The battle right in front of the gates and I'm not even going to be able to participate?! This must be some sort of joke. I'm tempted to ask if I can move yet but there's something in Mendant's eye that causes me to hesitate.

[Crisis, go support the Colony,] I ask her, [they're going to need your help.]

[You are heavily injured, Master. You need me here to protect you!]

[I need you to protect my family more. Go on, Crisis. Do this for me.]

The amorphous blob of immitigable darkness shudders once before lashing out with tentacles that drag her deep into the shadows of the tunnel roof. Before long she has vanished from sight as she slithers closer to the enemy. All I can do now is lie still and wait for the healing to complete as the sounds and vibrations of battle rise to a fever pitch moments before the two armies crash. Even now reinforcements pour out from behind the gate, piling up on top of each other until the tunnel is almost filled to capacity from bottom to top with a writhing mass of furious monsters, with me buried somewhere at the bottom.

With a colossal THUD that rumbles through the stone on which I lie the two opposing armies clash for the first time. There is little yelling or talking (with the exception of Beyn), the ants communicating in perfect silence whilst the Legion are too disciplined for random noise, yet the sound is still deafening. The clash of steel on carapace, the vibration and detonation of activated Skills and spells fill the air until I can't tell what is happening anymore. All the while my antennae are battered with a flood of pheromones from my siblings.

"FOR THE COLONY!"

"FOR THE ELDEST!"

"STRIKE FOR THE BROOD!"

"FORWARD SISTERS!"

"FOR THE COLONY!"

Infused with aura of the antmancers and their own generals, the soldiers, scouts, mages and every other caste in the fighting are driven to the peak of their fighting abilities as they throw themselves against the Legion army in an endless tide of fury. A deafening screech erupts from a distance away, piercing through the sounds like a knife and I know that Tiny has entered the fray, using his scream to distract and stun to buy enough time for his fists to come to bear. On the edges of my mana sense I can feel the centi-sludges and other pets creeping out from gaps in the wall, pressuring the Legion line all the way back down the tunnel in an attempt to sow chaos in the enemy lines.

Shortly after I see the mad priest once more, standing upon a rock dislodged in the fighting, his face is a twisted mask of ecstasy and rage as he bellows, his words pounding into my ears like waves on rocks. How the man isn't dead yet stood up like he is, I have no idea, but there he remains, preaching with righteous fury as the battle rages around him. The knowledge that my siblings are fighting and dying so close and being unable to help them tears me apart inside. I have always wanted to fight for my family, but so often they are the ones who fight for me. Having them fight on my behalf is something so precious, I didn't even realise how much I needed it in my past life, but now that I have it I refuse to let it go. I will take hold of this family with my mandibles and they will never be able to dislodge me.

"Please," I beg Mendant, "let me go fight."

The healer looks down on me once more and this time I see no irritation or anger in her, only acceptance, patience and love.

"Don't worry, Eldest," she tells me, "we will protect you."